

“O filthy grandeur! O sublime disgrace!”:<sup>1</sup>

The Semiotics of Desire in the Works of  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and Marie Spartali

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DPhil Thesis

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*. Trans. James McGowan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.55.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the presentation of desire in the interdisciplinary, intertextual works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and Marie Spartali Stillman. It argues that, despite considerable differences in approach, all three artists express a profound desire for something that lies beyond the scope of their means. For Rossetti, erotic gratification becomes interchangeable with a search for divinity, his double works expressing cosmic revelation through orgasm. For Siddal and Spartali, othered subjectivities seek self-expression in a representational framework that disenfranchises them in both a real and a symbolic sense, necessitating oblique, ironic, and sometimes difficult presentations of consciousness that become defined by their own indeterminacy. Lateral allusion is utilised by all three, unifying lack and abundance, rupture and absorption, to reference an unrepresentable kernel of reality-adjacent knowledge which is detectable, highly evocative, and always just out of reach.

The first chapter examines each artist's use of the transgressive body. The second considers delimited physical and conceptual environments which contain that body. The third looks at the subject's oscillating position between intersecting states of 'in between' and their nullifying consequences on the psyche. The fourth considers the artists' attempts to transcend semiotic boundaries, adopting the philosophy of sublime aesthetics as a lens to consider how each obliquely signals an experience that sits outside of the known system of signs. Potential interrelations between the works of Rossetti and Siddal, and Rossetti and Spartali Stillman, are explored throughout, while

proposing an approach to the female artists that considers them talented and estimable artists in their own right.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Painters and Poets of Desire



Fig. 1 Marie Spartali Stillman, *The last sight of Fiammetta*. Watercolour, bodycolour and gum Arabic, 82 x 62cm. Private Collection (1876).

Crowned with a wreath of sumptuous roses, the vitality of red hair and pink blooms encoding the youth with a natural vibrancy, Marie Spartali Stillman's *The last sight of Fiammetta* envisages Boccaccio's flaming muse as a dextrous innocent. Suffused with the sensory delights of floral perfume and ambient music, absence reflexively references Fiammetta's substance – self-conscious, bright subjectivity detected but obfuscated, present but not wholly penetrable. She sits against the enclosing perimeter of a garden wall, an Edenic frontier she shares with the viewer, but her occupation of the threshold will be short lived. As foreshadowed in the work's title, the background's shadowy trees, and her black dress, Fiammetta is destined to die.

*The last sight of Fiammetta* has, like the rest of the artist's *oeuvre*, been largely overlooked for 150 years. William Michael Rossetti despaired that the Royal Academy “persist in supposing that she is ‘Miss M. S. Stillman’<sup>2</sup> and in hanging her handiwork at an invidious elevation”<sup>3</sup> when the piece was first exhibited in 1876. These slights would anticipate a dismissive attitude that proved pervasive; only in recent years, with an evolution in thinking surrounding the female contributors to the Pre-Raphaelite circle more broadly, has interest in Spartali's work gained some traction.

Yet her portraits are remarkable for their atmospheric sense of subjectivity. Each is imbued with an intuitive but elusive essence, which has long been associated with poetry. William Michael Rossetti noted that Fiammetta has a “face as frank and natural as it is glowing in youthful freshness; intense also, and poetical in character”<sup>4</sup> in his 1876 review for *The Academy*. He had previously commended Spartali's “keen perception of

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<sup>2</sup> She was ‘Miss Spartali’ until she married and became ‘Mrs Stillman’ in 1871. She is referred to as ‘Marie Spartali’ in this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> William Michael Rossetti, “FINE ART The Royal Academy” in *The Academy*. Vol.9., 3 June 1876, pp.541-542, p.541. <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.c2650222>> [Accessed 31 December 2023].

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

the poetry which resides both in beauty, and in the means of art for embodying beauty”,<sup>5</sup> a remark that co-curators Margaretta Frederick and Jan Marsh referenced when they titled the first (and to date, only) dedicated exhibition of Spartali’s works *Poetry in Beauty* in 2016.

In part, the sublimated lyricism of Spartali’s fresh-faced Fiammetta is a consequence of her intertextual foundation. The work jointly references a Boccaccio poem (also called ‘The last sight of Fiammetta’) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s translation of the same, while evoking the poet-painter’s idiosyncratic approach to portraiture; Rossetti’s sensuous, half-length paintings of single female subjects – similarly inspired by the art of the Italian Renaissance – were admired and emulated by Spartali. Fusing numerous intertemporal, interart references, Spartali’s Fiammetta draws on numerous connections from literature and art history while being wholly her own work. Glancing self-consciously away, the knowing subject seems to sense the viewer’s gaze, aware of her status as sign and her formation from a stratified series of aesthetic influences and modes.

Spartali’s portraits celebrate, perpetuate, and subtly critique Rossetti’s presentation of the desired female subject, an approach perhaps informed by Spartali’s experiences as artist and model within the artistic *milieu* of the Victorian *avant-garde*. At the heart of this tension between admiration and revolt, replication and revision, is a nuanced radicalism that queries a system of meaning-formation generated by hegemonic ideologies. Using a highly suggestive but ultimately obscure approach,

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<sup>5</sup> William Michael Rossetti, “Arthur Hughes-Windus-Miss Spartali-The Younger Madox-Browns” in *English Painters of the Present Day*. (London: Seeley, 1871), pp.43-49, p.48.

Spartali's portraits are poetic paintings that enter into a new relational exchange with the viewer, in which meaning is as evocative as it is indeterminate.



Fig. 2 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *A Vision of Fiammetta*. Oil on canvas. 91.4 x 139.7cm. Andrew Lloyd Webber Collection, London (1878).

Within a year of Spartali completing *The last sight of Fiammetta* Rossetti would begin work on *A Vision of Fiammetta*, one of his last major achievements. A riot of sumptuous signifiers that culminate in a vivid, erotic sensuousness, this Fiammetta is characteristic of Rossetti's decadent, erotic representations of female subjects in his so-called 'double works' of art – a paired painting and poem that form a single piece, with the verse often inscribed on the picture frame. What Rossetti sought to express in these idiosyncratic art-objects lies in the uneven terrain between text and image, surpassing the means of his representational tools.

Standing on the threshold between life and death, the mortal realm and the celestial, Rossetti's Fiammetta is conjured through the stylised appropriation of bodily motifs that culminate in a kaleidoscopic, ever-flexing externalisation of gynophilic desire. Confronting the psyche that generated her, her erotic potential perpetually renews, rejuvenating her allure and threatening consciousness with oblivion. The poem that accompanies the visual representation reveals that, on perceiving her, the viewer/reader's "spirit understands, / Life shaken and shower'd and flown, and Death drawn near",<sup>6</sup> exemplifying the process of encountering an unrepresentable knowledge which is signalled by its own aftershock – the 'shaking', 'showering' and 'flying' of life itself.

So Fiammetta, conjured in word and image, creates a method of access to something at the boundary of human cognition: hers is a liminal role, forming the frontier *through* which the desirer (an entity which jointly encompasses Boccaccio, the viewer/reader, and Rossetti) can fleetingly achieve a third state. Comparable to what

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<sup>6</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Fiammetta' in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis & White, 1881), p.329, ll.7-8.

Dante's *Paradiso* dubs 'trasumanar',<sup>7</sup> this revelation is a fleeting interaction with something beyond the finite that is characterised by loss of subjectivity. Within the symbolic, sexualised fantasia of this diversified artwork, complex, contradictory meanings propagate to a point of semiotic collapse, signalling the transcendental signified in a process that is closely associated with death; a momentary experience of the infinite epitomised by Rossetti as the fulfilment of a sexual encounter.

Gazing out of Fiammetta's canvas – an indirect admission of her influence on the work – is Marie Spartali, who modelled for the painting in November 1877. Writing to Jane Morris, then in Italy, Rossetti revealed that Spartali was "the only person who wd [sic] have in any degree suited me for ideal subjects"<sup>8</sup> in Morris's absence.

The following month Spartali brought *The last sight of Fiammetta* and a second, currently unlocated work on the same subject to Rossetti for his review.<sup>9</sup> Surviving letters reveal that the lost Spartali painting contains "apple-blossom... beautifully studied"<sup>10</sup> but, according to Rossetti, "not made to subserve pictorial needs sufficiently";<sup>11</sup> Jan Marsh speculates if *A Vision of Fiammetta* takes this detail from Spartali, too.<sup>12</sup> Despite privately admitting to Morris that he was underwhelmed by Spartali's paintings – "I am

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<sup>7</sup> A neologism commonly translated as 'transhumanisation'. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy. Paradiso*. Canto I, l.70. Petrocchi Edition. Trans. Allen Madenbaum, *Digital Dante*. <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/paradiso/paradiso-1/>> [Accessed 1 October 2018].

<sup>8</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to Jane Morris 2 December 1877, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: VII The Last Decade, 1873-1882. II. 1875-1877*. 77.159. Ed. William E. Fredeman. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), p.456.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.163, p.461.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Jan Marsh, "Catalogue Note for *The last sight of Fiammetta*." *Bonhams*.

<<https://www.bonhams.com/auction/27770/lot/50/marie-spartali-stillman-british-1844-1927-the-last-sight-of-fiammetta/>> [Accessed 30 December 2023].

sorry to say, I found them disappointing”<sup>13</sup> – Rossetti appears to have had no scruples about adopting ideas originated by his friend.



Fig. 3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beatrice meeting Dante at a marriage feast, denies him her salutation*. Watercolour and bodycolour. 35.1 x 42.5cm. Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (1852).

Spartali was not the first female artist and model with painterly talents and poetic instincts to collaborate with Rossetti. Emerging from Rossetti’s canvases as the face of Dante’s beloved Beatrice, Elizabeth Siddal’s profound and highly individual influence on Rossetti’s works is only now beginning to be unpicked, both in the reconsideration of the

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<sup>13</sup> D.G. Rossetti, letter to Jane Morris 19 December 1877, *Correspondence: VII The Last Decade, II. 1875-1877*. 77.175, p.470.

status of the model as an active (rather than passive) participant in art-making, and as a synergistic source of compositional ideas.

She lends her features to the Italian Renaissance muse in Rossetti's *Beatrice meeting Dante at a marriage feast, denies him her salutation*,<sup>14</sup> but the image hints at a deeper connection between the model and the watercolour. The angels in the mural behind Dante bear an uncanny resemblance to Siddal's pencil studies of flying angels (fig.4), in which a swirling mass of linear, winged bodies are depicted in experimental poses. These sketches are preserved in a series of photographs Rossetti had taken of Siddal's works after her death, and which he would refer back to for inspiration throughout the rest of his career.

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<sup>14</sup> Hereafter *Beatrice meeting Dante*.



Fig. 4 Elizabeth Siddal, *Flying Angels*. Pencil on paper. 24.4 x 13.3cm. Private Collection (c.1840-50s).

Siddal was both a poet and visual artist, exhibiting and selling her illustrations – albeit in a modest way – while keeping her verse wholly private. Even Algernon Swinburne, an intimate friend of Siddal’s with considerable poetic credentials, would only learn about her writing after her death.<sup>15</sup> Despite this clear separation of word and image, shared thematic preoccupations are evidenced across both her textual and

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<sup>15</sup> Anne Woolley, *The Poems of Elizabeth Siddal in Context*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), p.3.

visual works, demonstrating a disruptive approach to the presentation of desire and the intersection of body and mind.



Fig. 5 Unknown photographer after Elizabeth Siddal, glass plate negative of Study for *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1866).<sup>16</sup>

Throughout Siddal's works, subjects present a disorienting and difficult relationship with a material world. Unable to parse or articulate their experiences they retreat into an interior realm, discovering some sense of stability and autonomy through

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<sup>16</sup> This image is one of six that forms part of a photographic sheet, held as part of the Bryson Collection at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

disassociation. Toying with the flowing waters of a fountain, the female subject of *Study for La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is not John Keats' otherworldly seductress, but an impassive participant in a love-scene who tolerates her partner's fascination with her hair. Detached, her experience of the interaction is undertaken within the crucible of the mind, her engagement with the waters emitting from the stone angel referencing both metaphysical capacities and spiritual cleansing.

Adopting a poetics of hallucination, wherein reality-adjacent descriptors reference – but don't elucidate – subjective experience, Siddal's works present knowing, disenfranchised subjects that innovate discursive methods of expression within a paradigm that refuses them representational autonomy. Bodies become a site of resistance, their empirical faculties unreliable and destabilising; meanings proliferate unpredictably between asymmetrical signifiers, generating a disordered comprehension of the world; and love and desire, suppressed and controlled, begin to mutate into something deviant, and, in some cases, even monstrous.

Ironic, erotic, and profoundly destabilising, Siddal's subjects are dislocated from normative methods of representation and powerless to legitimise themselves either on an earthly or a cosmic scale. Only within the unseen horizons of the mind can some independent agency be known. There, intensity of emotion becomes an unrepresentable realm of experience that resists definition, wherein ambiguity and obscurity iterate a kind of disruptive sublime.

United by a deep affection for both poetry and painting, Siddal, Rossetti and Spartali all generate works of singular complexity that laterally signal their unrepresentable desires. For Rossetti, the tensions forged in the volatile space between

word and image offer a route to the transcendental signified and divinity, the erotic female subject becoming a cipher of desire that turns to confront, and nullify, their creator. Seditious is discovered in the eroticism of his works, his privilege evidenced as he uses joint sign-systems to interrogate the socially taboo (the carnal) and the transcendental (the divine), which he signals through loss of (male) subjectivity.

For Siddal and Spartali, the intersection between desire and signification forms part of a search for representation itself, exposed as they circumnavigate and lacerate semiotic conventions that are neither calibrated for, nor capable of, adequately representing subordinated subjectivities. Spartali's subtle revisionism questions the fitness of established models as representational tools even as she embraces them, while Siddal's subjects experience a state of semiotic crisis. In both cases, indeterminacy articulates a subjugated perspective and evidences its disenfranchised position, even if the subject is symbolically powerful.

For all three artists, signification and desire demarcate a fundamental lack, a yearning that will inevitably lead to collapse, inertia, or failure – but that, through absence, can gesture to something that exists beyond the known system of signs. This fusion of transcendence and transgression, euphoria and horror, cosmic precarity and sexual banality is summarised in Baudelaire's condemnation of female sensuality: "O filthy grandeur! O sublime disgrace!".<sup>17</sup> Where Rossetti's double works enjoy ascent through descent, deriving decadent physical and metaphysical pleasures from transgressive eroticism, Spartali and Siddal's othered subjectivities are deemed inherently subversive, occupying the space of the "queen of sins".<sup>18</sup> Rendered "blind,

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<sup>17</sup> Baudelaire, p.55.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

deaf machine[s]”<sup>19</sup> by the structures that limit them, they innovate new, disruptive modes of self-expression that test representational conventions and hierarchies.

In assessing the works of Rossetti, Spartali and Siddal in tandem this dissertation undertakes a comparative analysis that hasn’t been attempted before. It simultaneously expands on a body of “interart criticism”<sup>20</sup> that considers Pre-Raphaelitism’s interest in “transgress[ing] the conventional boundaries between art forms”<sup>21</sup> to generate “‘literary’ painting and ‘pictorial’ poetry”.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted, however, that this preoccupation with the intertextual, intervisual capacities of artworks – a commitment to Simonides of Ceos’ adage (passed down by Plutarch) that “painting is silent poetry, and poetry silent painting”<sup>23</sup> – is applicable to the *avant-garde* movement more broadly. To offer sufficient cause to interrogate the works of these three artists specifically, it is necessary to mine the commonalities discovered in their philosophy and approach – whether devised in relation to one another or rooted in individual concerns.

Exploring the semiotics of desire in the poetic, painterly works of Siddal, Rossetti and Spartali, the thesis is split into four chapters. The first, ‘Transgressive Bodies’, assesses the artists’ idiosyncratic presentation of the human form, exploring subversive approaches to corporeality. Reciprocity of ideas and collaboration between the artists will be assessed in tandem, alongside contemporary and modern responses to their works.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Antonia Losano, *The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature*. (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2008), p.5.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Introduction” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*. Ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.1-12, p.6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Plutarch, “Moralia. Where the Athenians More Famous in War or in Wisdom?” in *Plutarch, Moralia, Volume IV*. Trans. Frank Cole Babbitt. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p.500

The second chapter, 'Beyond the Bounds', considers delimited environments occupied by the transgressive body – the walled garden and, particularly in Siddal's works, the forest – to explore the intersection of the natural and unnatural, instinctive and aberrative. Siddal and Spartali's canvases are then examined as spaces to manifest female professional ambition, evidencing another kind of subversive desire in a nineteenth century context.

The third chapter, 'Rupture', interrogates the effects of desire on the psyche and the creation of hallucinatory, 'dream-analogous' representational modes that discursively reference the collapse or suppression of consciousness. States of liminality are considered in Rossetti and Siddal's works, while refracted fragments of consciousness are discovered in Rossetti and Spartali's presentation of female subjects.

The final chapter, 'Transcendence', looks into the space gesturally indicated as sign-systems fail, an expression of a phenomenon that exceeds each artists' representational capacities. Examining Rossetti's use of orgasm as transcendental signified; Siddal's awe-and-terror explorations of disenfranchised love; and Spartali (and Vernon Lee's) copy-and-original Aestheticist femininity, each artist presents a perspective that ruptures, referencing an indeterminate realm of experience that defies articulation.

Before embarking on analysis of the artists' works in earnest, the thesis addresses biographical and conceptual connections between these three individuals and sets out the approach adopted throughout.

## ARTISTIC PHILOSOPHY



Fig. 6 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Elizabeth Siddal*. Pencil. 31.8 x 18cm. Currently unlocated (1861).<sup>24</sup>

If one conceptualised the relationship between Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and Marie Spartali diagrammatically using only the critical record from the 1850s to 2010s, it would be tempting to generate a triangulated chart with Rossetti at its apex,

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<sup>24</sup> Inscribed 'Blackfriars'. Reproduced in Virginia Surtees, *Rossetti's Portraits of Elizabeth Siddal*, plate 32. (Aldershot: Scolar, 1991), p.42.

his colleagues occupying subjacent offshoots at opposite sides of the base. So demarcated, Rossetti would hold the principal position of artistic forefather, while his counterparts – united only by their existence at the periphery of Rossetti’s sphere and without any independent connection<sup>25</sup> – would be granted equivalent subordination as students and devotees.

The rationale would be straightforward. Rossetti was a celebrated and influential artistic innovator, his scintillating depictions of female subjects as famous as the salacious tales of his bohemian life. Siddal and Spartali were his unexceptional disciples, their skills honed and guided by his lodestar. As recently as the 1970s Siddal was deemed to have “no original creative power: she was as the moon to his sun, merely reflecting his light”,<sup>26</sup> while David B. Elliott’s 2006 biography of Spartali implies that her interest in Rossetti’s tutelage was primarily informed by the artist’s status as an “eligible widower”.<sup>27</sup> History had painted both as little more than maladroit groupies, enthusiastic hangers-on at the fringes of a countercultural movement. Separated in time and in their approach to art-creation, their only association appears to be Rossetti himself.

Reframing analysis to consider Siddal and Spartali as accomplished independent artists in their own right, and re-envisioning the exchange of ideas between Rossetti and Siddal and, later, Rossetti and Spartali as reciprocal and disruptive, this dissertation reconceives of the relationship between these three artists as a Venn diagram. With each artist granted an equivalent overlapping circle, four areas of interrogation become

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<sup>25</sup> Siddal’s death in February 1862 occurred two years before Spartali was introduced to Rossetti c.1864. See David B. Elliott, *A Pre-Raphaelite Marriage: The Lives and Works of Marie Spartali Stillman and William James Stillman*. (England: Antique Collector’s Club Limited, 2006), p.22.

<sup>26</sup> John Gere, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1973), p.14.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott, p.22.

delineated by the central triquetra, with remarkable points of comparison emerging as word and image, body and mind are explored in each case.

From this renewed approach emerges an overarching ethos that unites the output of all three – a complex ambient metanarrative that motivates and guides the creative practice of each and that suffuses their work. This commonality is first discovered in the close association each perceives between poetry and visual art, and is further exposed as they circumnavigate textual and visual signs, revealing an inherent anxiety about the limits of their representational tools.

Probing the semiotic boundaries of their respective artforms to establish a signifier's constraints as well as its potential, each artist developed sophisticated works shaped by a reciprocation of designs and concepts that flowed between collaborators. By deploying a mosaic of symbolism, challenging conventions, juxtaposing contradictory ideas, conjuring the esoteric, and questioning the authenticity of processes perpetuated by prevailing ideologies, all three laterally signal from within established systems that which exists beyond the system itself – that which the system is incapable of signifying.

## BIOGRAPHICAL & CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Adopting an approach first suggested by Griselda Pollock and Deborah Cherry in their 1984 paper “Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddall”<sup>28</sup> and further developed in Jan Marsh’s 1989 book *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal*,<sup>29</sup> the dissertation seeks to cast off romanticised notions of tragic, jilted damsels and troubled, oversexed heroes that emerged from the nineteenth century and attempts to establish an investigative framework for analysis that extrapolates meaning from the works themselves.

The extent to which the artists’ lived experience informed their art cannot be authoritatively measured, and so – adopting methodologies drawn from the work of Roland Barthes<sup>30</sup> – efforts will be undertaken to detach enquiry from an insistently biographical lens. Priority will instead be given to individual interpretation, and will reference current discourses not available in the Victorian era.

The thesis does, however, interrogate semiotic transmutation as ideas and aesthetics are devised, evolved and exchanged between the artists in a life-long, reciprocal collaboration. It is therefore necessary to establish how these three careers intersected, as it unquestionably impacted their work, and to remedy some of the mythologies surrounding their private lives. Developments in scholarship in respect of each artist will be reviewed in tandem, positioning the analysis in relation to the

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<sup>28</sup> Griselda Pollock and Deborah Cherry, “Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elizabeth Siddall” in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*. (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.128-162.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal*. (London: Quartet, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes’ 1967 essay “The Death of the Author” argues that the writer’s biography should not be used to inform a reader’s interpretation of a written work. See Laura Seymour, *An Analysis of Roland Barthes’s The Death of the Author*. (United Kingdom: Macat Library, 2017).

accumulation of knowledge to date and establishing the conventions utilised throughout.

Rossetti



Fig. 7 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. Oil on canvas, 83.2 x 65.4cm. Tate Gallery, London (1848).

Rossetti's life has been rigorously researched although not always reliably narrated. Much of what is known about his relationship with Elizabeth Siddal originates from the works of his brother who – while dedicated to the task of preserving his legacy by publishing letters and a biography – is not without complications of bias.<sup>31</sup>

Born in London in 1828 and christened Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti, the second of four Rossetti children (Maria Francesca was born in 1827, William Michael in 1829, and Christina Georgina in 1830),<sup>32</sup> the artist's early life was notable for its emphasis on intellectual pursuits superintended by his irascible father Gabriele, an Italian dissident exiled to the United Kingdom, and his well-educated, evangelical mother Frances Polidori.<sup>33</sup> The family enjoyed a modest middle-class existence in an unglamorous corner of central London,<sup>34</sup> supported initially by Gabriele's "Dantesque studies [which] saturated the household air with wafts and rumours of the mighty Alighieri".<sup>35</sup> So pervasive was the fourteenth century Italian poet in the Rossetti home that Gabriel would come to adopt "Dante" as his artistic moniker, and it is this professional name that will be used in the dissertation.

After studying at King's College School and the drawing school Sass's, and spending a brief spell in Boulogne,<sup>36</sup> Rossetti spent three years in the Antique School of the Royal Academy. He left in 1848, before he was due to complete his studies, to be tutored by Ford Madox Brown and form the countercultural group The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with William Michael Rossetti and five other confederates, including

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<sup>31</sup> William acknowledges his bias: "I have told what I choose to tell, and have left untold what I do not choose to tell". See William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters: With a Memoir* (London: AMS Press, 1895), p.xii.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.10-20.

<sup>34</sup> J.B. Bullen, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*. (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2011), p.17.

<sup>35</sup> W.M. Rossetti, *His Family-Letters*, p.63.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.

William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais.<sup>37</sup> His debut major work, entitled *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and signed with the monogram 'PRB', is recognised as the first of what Maryan Wynn Ainsworth would later dub "a kind of double work of art",<sup>38</sup> wherein painting and poem are presented in tandem as a single artwork. A fascination with the intersection of word and image – coupled with a demonstrable talent for both painting and poetry – is evident from these nascent steps into professional artistry, and would prove life-long.

For the next decade Rossetti's output would be notable for its preoccupation with medievalist subjects, undertaken at the height of his relationship with Elizabeth Siddal. It is in 1859, with the emergence of *Bocca Baciata* and its companion poem "The Song of The Bower" that Rossetti's practice turned towards the creation of numerous single portraits of erotic women, sometimes paired with equally sensual poetry – a series he continued to produce up to his death in 1882. Rossetti's voluptuous, interdisciplinary double works form the foundation of the following enquiry, probing into the poet-painter's enthrallment with the interrelation of textual and visual signifiers. Neither, it seems, could communicate the meaning Rossetti sought to impart in isolation.

In interrogating beauty, sex and mysticism within the double works the thesis builds on academic investigation from overlapping fields, drawing on the scholarship of art historians Elizabeth Prettejohn, Julian Treuherz, and Tim Barringer; the (primarily) literary commentators Jerome McGann and Brian Donnelly; and on the exploration undertaken by Dinah Roe into materiality and the interrelation between image, word, frame, and page. In its enquiry into desire and the erotic the analysis owes most to the

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.128.

<sup>38</sup> Maryan Wynn Ainsworth, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the double work of art*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p.1.

work of J.B. Bullen, building on the psychoanalytical interrogation of Rossetti's joint textual and visual sign systems in *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry and Criticism* (1998).

The influential thinking of William Blake, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Lacan will be interpolated into the exploration of desire and subjectivity, while efforts to counter the phallogentrism of both Rossetti's work and the analysis that surrounds it will see more recent developments in intersectional feminist and queer studies brought into consideration. Established critical perspectives will therefore be examined alongside very recent contributions to knowledge in the literature and art fields.

In recognition of the interpretive challenges of negotiating visual and textual signifiers when presented in tandem, the individual encountering the double works shall be referred to throughout as a "viewer/reader". References will be made to other paintings and poems in Rossetti's *oeuvre* in relation to the collusion between Rossetti and Siddal and Rossetti and Spartali, tracing the reciprocal oscillation of ideas between each pairing.

The term "erotic" signifies a "psychological quest"<sup>39</sup> which both "aims at sexual satisfaction on some level, [and] includes other aims of significance"<sup>40</sup> as opposed to that which "induces you... to ignore the representation so as to get to the represented";<sup>41</sup> that is, pornography.

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<sup>39</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p.11.

<sup>40</sup> Jerrold Levinson, "Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures" in *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 29 no. 1, 2005. *Project MUSE*. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/article/181928>>. pp. 228-240, p.229.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.234.

## Siddal



Fig. 8 Walter Howell Deverell, *Twelfth Night Act II, Scene IV*. Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 132.1cm. Private Collection (1850).

Academic and public perception of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal has been revolutionised in recent years, transforming her image from tragic, weak, near-psychotic model and muse to bold, ambitious and innately talented artist and poet. Jan Marsh held the first solo exhibition of her visual art at the Ruskin Gallery in Sheffield in 1991, and featured her work (as both artist and model) in the major 2019 National Portrait Gallery exhibition *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*. Tate Britain's 2023 exhibition *The Rossettis*, curated by Carol Jacobi and James Finch, subsequently displayed Siddal and Rossetti compositions side-by-side for the first time, considering the extent to which ideas were shared between the pair.

This renewed attention, undertaken with the feminist principles of the twenty-first century, has challenged mythologies surrounding Siddal developed and perpetuated by William Michael Rossetti's memoirs and Violet Hunt's sensationalist (and now largely discredited) 1932 biography *The Wife of Rossetti*.<sup>42</sup> Marsh's 2023 *Elizabeth Siddal: Her Story*,<sup>43</sup> published in tandem with the exhibition at Tate Britain, now represents the most complete and factual account of the artist's life.

Born to tradesman Charles Crookes Siddall and his wife Elizabeth Eleanor Evans in 1829<sup>44</sup> little is known of Siddal's life before the age of 20, although with seven young siblings in a working home it was likely an industrious upbringing. It is assumed that she received the customary home-schooling of a girl of her position<sup>45</sup> and she almost certainly had some skill as a craftswoman; in the many tales of her 'discovery', one consistency is her employment as a dressmaker or milliner.

Her interest in both poetry and painting developed in youth and predated her induction into the Pre-Raphaelite circle. She had discovered Tennyson in "a piece of paper which she brought home to her mother wrapped around a pat of butter",<sup>46</sup> and – according to an obituary by William Ibbitt published in Sheffield's regional papers in 1862<sup>47</sup> – she had presented a number of her "own designs"<sup>48</sup> to the Deverell family.

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<sup>42</sup> Violet Hunt, *The Wife of Rossetti Her Life and Death*. (Bungay: R. Clay & Sons, 1932).

<sup>43</sup> Jan Marsh, *Elizabeth Siddal: Her Story*. (London: Pallas Athene, 2023).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>46</sup> The anecdotal account originates from Arthur Hughes and is reported by George Birkbeck Hill in his notes accompanying letters between Rossetti and William Allingham. See Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 1854-1870*. Ed. George Birkbeck Hill (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1897), p.5.

<sup>47</sup> William Ibbitt, "Death of Mrs D.G. Rossetta [sic]" in *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*. 18 February 1862, p.18. The same obituary was printed in the *Sheffield Telegraph* on 28 February 1862. Jan Marsh points out that, as Ibbitt was a friend of Siddal's independent from the Pre-Raphaelite set, his information likely came from her. See Marsh, *Her Story*, p.7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Walter Deverell senior (not to be confused with his artist son, who would briefly share a studio with Rossetti in 1851)<sup>49</sup> was then the principal of London School of Design, and academics have speculated that Siddal wanted to enrol.

It is through the Deverells that Siddal commenced modelling in 1849, itself the greatest proof of early investment in art and art-making – it is hard to credit that a Victorian woman without considerable creative curiosity would forsake a reputable life for the indecorous world of *avant-garde* artistry, especially one who debuted in hose in Deverell's *Twelfth Night* (fig.8).

Sitting opposite Siddal's Cesario in the finished painting is Rossetti, modelling the fool Feste; it may have been how the pair met. An artistic and romantic partnership would emerge over the coming years, although the precise timeline is unclear as "it suited both... to be quite secretive".<sup>50</sup> By the end of 1852 Siddal would model exclusively for Rossetti,<sup>51</sup> and by the summer of 1854 the pair were holidaying in Hastings – an unorthodox arrangement for an unmarried couple – while producing numerous and often intimate drawings.

It is during this period that Siddal's first complete pictures emerge, including the 1853 drawing *The Lady of Shalott* signed by the artist as 'E.E. Siddal'. This spelling of the patronymic will be adopted in this thesis, understood as both her preference and, like "Dante" Rossetti, utilised to denote an artistic identity.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> W.M. Rossetti, *His Family-Letters*, p.169. Siddal would later tell William Ibbitt that Walter Deverell proposed to her.

<sup>50</sup> Marsh, *Her Story*, p.22.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>52</sup> Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock's suggestion that 'Siddal' indicated the symbolic, mythological figure and 'Siddall' should be used to denote the woman has been challenged by Jan Marsh, who points out the artist chose the name for herself. See Marsh, *Her Story*, p.30.

Providing studio space, art supplies, informal tuition, and a patron in John Ruskin in 1855, Rossetti supported and encouraged Siddal's exploits throughout these early years. An understanding of eventual marriage appears to have been reached, but there was good cause on both sides for delay: Rossetti was not yet earning enough to support a household, and Siddal likely wanted to enjoy some liberation before facing the dangers and relative isolation of motherhood.

The notion that marriage was deferred as Siddal was considered 'beneath' Rossetti has been debunked. As a respectable working family with wealthy connections in Derbyshire,<sup>53</sup> the Siddalls' social standing was not as incommensurate with the Rossettis as has been assumed. The Rossettis were a family of recent migrants who had to make sacrifices to maintain the trappings of middle-class life, particularly as Gabriele's health failed in the 1850s.<sup>54</sup>

Ruskin's £150 per year patronage was equally permissible because of Siddal's unmarried status, and it precipitated a period of independent travel for the artist. Her predisposition to a "consumptive taint"<sup>55</sup> is well documented (although unverified; it may have been a method to justify Ruskin and Rossetti's interference in her life), and Ruskin was keen for her to travel for her health.<sup>56</sup> From 1855 to 1857 she travelled to Oxford, Somerset, Paris, Le Havre, Nice, Menton, Bath, and Sheffield – all further evidence of an enterprising and inquisitive spirit.

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<sup>53</sup> Lucinda Hawksley, *Lizzie Siddall: The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel*. (London: André Deutsch, 2004), p.8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>55</sup> William Michael Rossetti. "Dante Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal" in *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1903, pp. 273–95, p.273. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/855671>> [Accessed 10 December 2023].

<sup>56</sup> Jan Marsh has pointed out that her ability to travel and work, compounded by the lack of reference to laudanum until 1860, suggests she may have been in better health than the record would suggest. See Jan Marsh, "Myth busting Elizabeth Siddal" in *The Rossettis*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2023), pp.76-92, p.82.

During these periods of separation Rossetti's artistic and romantic interests began to diversify. A brief reunion in Matlock at the end of 1857 and into 1858 saw an apparent rekindling of Siddal and Rossetti's connection (Rossetti was fresh from Oxford, where he had just met Jane Burden – later Jane Morris), but a schism appears to emerge in 1858. Other than a joint trip to Shakespeare's birthplace in December 1859,<sup>57</sup> little is known of Siddal's activities from 1858-60 – out of Rossetti's orbit, she evaporates from the archives.

Siddal's re-entry into the record is sudden, and significant. On 13 April 1860, Rossetti wrote to his family that the pair were in Hastings and due to wed. They married on 23 May and within weeks Siddal was pregnant, although the tragedy of a stillborn daughter followed in 1861. Medicated with laudanum, she died by overdose on 10 February 1862, aged 33.<sup>58</sup> Her death was ruled accidental by the coroner, although suicide has been suggested; had she taken her own life, the Rossettis would likely have concealed it to avoid disgrace. Lucy Madox Brown would later tell her children that her father was told that Siddal's unconscious body was discovered with a note, and that he had advised Rossetti to destroy it.<sup>59</sup>

Adopting Marsh's resolve to consider Siddal an "active and assertive"<sup>60</sup> visual artist who held her own account for supplies at a shop on Long Acre and diligently worked and re-worked her illustrations,<sup>61</sup> the thesis builds on the idea that Siddal was a resilient "New Woman" of the nineteenth-century, "a social and cultural phenomenon, who was

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<sup>57</sup> Norma Hampson, "Meet the Distinguished Visitors to Shakespeare's Birthplace". 10 January 2014. *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*. <<https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/meet-distinguished-visitors-shakespeares-birthplace/>> [Accessed 26 June 2024].

<sup>58</sup> Marsh, *Her Story*, p.137.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138.

<sup>60</sup> Marsh, "Myth busting", p.78

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

perceived as destabilising the status quo”.<sup>62</sup> It deepens and broadens current enquiry into the relationship between her paintings and poems, expanding on the comparatively modest interest in her poetry in recent years.

Serena Trowbridge’s 2018 collection of Siddal’s poetry *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall*<sup>63</sup> is utilised as the definitive source of her poetry, researched from manuscripts held at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Mark Samuels Lasner and Roger C. Lewis published the first dedicated collection of Siddal’s poetry in 1978,<sup>64</sup> using William Michael Rossetti’s versions of her work; Siddal had never prepared her work for publication,<sup>65</sup> and her brother-in-law’s editorial interference was considerable. In returning to the drafts the dissertation seeks to interrogate Siddal’s unvarnished (and often unfinished) originals. Accordingly, Trowbridge’s titling system – the first line of each poem – is used where Siddal did not grant a poem a title herself.

In its evaluation of Siddal’s collection of paintings and drawings the thesis builds on the considerable scholarship of Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, as well as the growing body of recent analysis that includes contributions from Nat Reeve and Glenda Youde. In approaching the artist’s surviving writing, the dissertation draws on ideas from the journal contributions of Emily Orlando, Beverly Taylor, and Constance Hassett, as well as Anne Woolley’s 2021 work *The poems of Elizabeth Siddal in context* – the first full-length academic book dedicated to Siddal’s poetry.

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<sup>62</sup> Gursimran Oberoi, “The Collective Self-Portrait: Drawing Elizabeth Siddal in the New Woman Sisterhood” in *The Rossettis*. (London: Tate Publishing, 2023), pp.136-145, p.140.

<sup>63</sup> Siddal’s use of punctuation is inconsistent; ‘Ladys’ is copied from her original. See Elizabeth Siddal, *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge, (Brighton: Victorian Secrets Limited, 2018).

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, *Poems and Drawings of Elizabeth Siddal*. Ed. Mark Samuels Lasner and Roger C. Lewis. (Wolfville: Wombat Press, 1978).

<sup>65</sup> Woolley, p.3.

Spartali



Fig. 9 Charles Fairfax Murray, *Marie Spartali Stillman*. Watercolour. 25.4 x 17.6cm. Private Collection (c.1880).<sup>66</sup>

While Siddal's star is rising, with academic and public enquiry gaining considerable momentum in recent years, interest in the life and works of Marie Spartali

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<sup>66</sup> Reproduced in Jan Marsh et al., *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*. Ed. Jan Marsh. (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019), p.98.

remains lukewarm. Like Rossetti, Spartali was born into an immigrant European family; her father Michael Spartali had been a baby when his family fled Smyrna<sup>67</sup> – then in the Ottoman Empire with a predominantly Greek population – for asylum in London, where he rose to considerable wealth and prominence as a merchant and, in 1866, as Greek Consul General. By the time Marie was born in 1844 the Spartali family was prosperous and well-connected, and Marie, her sister Christina and her brothers Demetrius and Eustratius enjoyed a comfortable, conservative, middle-class upbringing in Hornsey. Befitting their position, the Spartali daughters were educated at home to be fluent in French and German (in addition to English and Greek) and expert musicians.<sup>68</sup>

The Spartali sisters' introduction into the artistic *milieu* of 1860s London appears to have occurred organically through their connections within the Greek expat *diaspora*. Michael Spartali, himself a supporter of visual arts,<sup>69</sup> enjoyed a kinship with the *connoisseur* and art collector Alexander Constantine Ionides, a cousin by marriage.<sup>70</sup> Ionides' sons Alexander and Luke befriended a significant community of artists who gathered for creative *salons* at the family home at Tulse Hill, counting James Abbott McNeill Whistler, George du Maurier, Thomas Armstrong, Algernon Swinburne, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Dante Rossetti amongst their numbers.

Armstrong's 1912 memoir describes the 'discovery' of the Spartali sisters at such an event, which he alleges coincided with Rossetti's first appearance at the Ionides' home. Recalling that "a cab-load"<sup>71</sup> of painters had set off from Chelsea one "summer

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<sup>67</sup> Now Izmir in Turkey.

<sup>68</sup> Elliott, p.14.

<sup>69</sup> Margaretta Frederick and Jan Marsh, "Marie Spartali Stillman and her Cultural Milieu" in *Poetry in Beauty*. (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2016), pp.13-27, p.15.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Armstrong, *A Memoir, 1832-1911*. Ed. L.M. Lamont (London: Martin Secker, 1912), p.195.

Sunday”,<sup>72</sup> he describes the groups’ response to encountering the young women for the first time:

We were all à genoux before them, and of course every one of us burned with a desire to try and paint them. Very shortly afterwards Whistler got the younger one, Miss Christine Spartali, to sit for his large painting *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine*.<sup>73</sup>

Swinburne would meet Marie at Clapham Common at some point later, Armstrong explains, when he would declare her “so beautiful I could sit down and cry”.<sup>74</sup> Marie and her compatriots Aglaia Ionides (later Coronio) and Maria Cassavetti (later Zambaco) were together dubbed “the three graces”<sup>75</sup> and sought after as models.

Although he vividly recollects the anecdote, Armstrong’s memoir doesn’t provide a date for this inaugural meeting between Marie Spartali and the Pre-Raphaelite set. In interviews undertaken by Joseph and Elizabeth R. Pennell for their 1908 book *The Life of Whistler*, Marie confirms that the Spartali sisters met Whistler “at Mr. Ionides’ house”<sup>76</sup> but dates her sister’s attendance at his studio “through the winter of 1863-64”.<sup>77</sup> It is likely this is an error, however, made due to the interval of many years. George du Maurier and Armstrong’s letters, written and sent at the time, report that “Jim is painting... the smallest Miss Spartali”<sup>78</sup> as *La Princesse* in October 1864, putting the Spartali sisters in Tulse Hill in the summer of 1864 and at Whistler’s studio in the winter of 1864 to 1865, when Marie acted as chaperone for her sister’s visits.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p.196.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Elliot, p.17.

<sup>76</sup> E.R. & J Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, Vol.1. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1908), p.122.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>78</sup> George Du Maurier, *The Young George du Maurier: A Selection of his Letters, 1860-1867*. Ed. Daphne Du Maurier. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1952), p.243.

Frederick and Marsh have attributed Marie's determination to paint to her formative experience in Whistler's studio,<sup>79</sup> but the dates don't quite align. She was lobbying her father for lessons, and enlisting Luke Ionides' help to secure Rossetti as her tutor, the spring prior, around March 1864.<sup>80</sup> Her interest in Rossetti at that point appears to be based on reputation and artistic output only – a letter dated 4 April 1864 from Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown reveals Rossetti and Spartali had not yet met:

I hear that she is one and the same with a marvellous beauty of whom I have heard much talk. So box her up and don't let fellows see her, as I mean to have first shy at her in the way of sitting.<sup>81</sup>

This missive challenges Lawrence Peters' suggestion that Rossetti was discreetly "hired as a painting tutor by Marie's mother"<sup>82</sup> in the spring of 1860 while staying in Hampstead, when Marie was only eighteen. It seems unlikely that Rossetti would enter an arrangement so secret that he would later lie about it to his intimate friend, particularly during a period of considerable personal upheaval: he married and suffered the death of a child and his wife between March 1860 and February 1862.

Ford Madox Brown was ultimately nominated to become Spartali's tutor, and he taught her alongside his daughters Lucy and Cathy for six years. The friendship would prove lifelong, and Spartali would send designs to Brown for his thoughts long after the cessation of formal instruction.

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<sup>79</sup> Frederick and Marsh, "Cultural Milieu", p.16.

<sup>80</sup> Elliott, p.22.

<sup>81</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to Ford Madox Brown 29 April 1864, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: III The Chelsea Years. I. Prelude to Crisis 1863-1872*. 64.58 Ed. William E. Fredeman. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), p.144.

<sup>82</sup> Lawrence Peters, "Rossetti and Spartali Stillman Join Hands in 1862" in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*. Fall 2023, Issue 32, pp.54-66, p.58.

Rossetti and Spartali had met by July 1869, when she commenced sitting for him. Initially thinking she would serve as a hand model to complete his painting of Jane Morris as Beatrice,<sup>83</sup> Rossetti ended up making three chalk portraits of her – admitting privately that “her head [is] about the most difficult I ever drew”<sup>84</sup> – with one of the sketches used for a pall-bearer in *Dante’s Dream at the time of the death of Beatrice*.<sup>85</sup> These collaborations would galvanise a friendship that would last until Rossetti’s death, and their mutual admiration is evidenced in surviving correspondence,<sup>86</sup> revealing the trouble Rossetti took to facilitate her professional aspirations;<sup>87</sup> the feedback he provided on the works she sent for his review;<sup>88</sup> and the intimate connection he had with her family.

Michael Spartali wrote to Rossetti in 1871 following his daughter’s attachment to the American journalist William Stillman – a man he deemed an unsuitable son-in-law – divulging the extent of the regard for Rossetti on Marie’s side: “you are the only person on Earth that can save her & prevent it... She looks up to you (& rightly so) as a superior being and she so admired your character, your art and your poetry, that I dreamt once that you had thought her to be worthy to be your companion in life.”<sup>89</sup> Any suggestion of a romantic interest is speculation,<sup>90</sup> but there is sufficient evidence independent of the biographical to intimate considerable reciprocity in their art.

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<sup>83</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to Jane Morris, 21 July 1869, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: III The Chelsea Years. II. 1868-1872*. 69.91 Ed. William E. Fredeman. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), p.208. He adds, “models have such vile hands. I have an idea I may ask Mary Spartali to sit for them.”

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, D.G. Rossetti, letter to Jane Morris, 14 August 1869, 69.123, p.230.

<sup>85</sup> Hereafter *Dante’s Dream*.

<sup>86</sup> Spartali’s surviving letters are predominantly those retained by the Rossettis and the Browns.

<sup>87</sup> Rossetti intervened with his patron Leyland when Spartali’s father attempted to prevent Marie from selling her art, facilitating the sale. See Elliott, p.23.

<sup>88</sup> D.G. Rossetti, letter to Mrs William James Stillman, 5 December 1877, *Correspondence: VII The Last Decade. II. 1875-1877*, 77.163, p.461.

<sup>89</sup> Elliott, p.75.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Spartali may have been attempting to orchestrate a more acceptable nuptial arrangement for his daughter in his appeal to Rossetti, rather than revealing knowledge of romantic interest on Marie’s side.

If Rossetti acted on Michael Spartali's instruction the effort was in vain, and Marie married Stillman in Chelsea weeks later; it is perhaps this narrative of the wilful beauty who defies a patriarch that inspired Rossetti to draw her as Desdemona in 1879. With three stepchildren and three biological children, Spartali's life was doubtless full, but she continued to paint, exhibit and sell work with impressive determination throughout her life, and in many respects out of necessity. Her husband's income was limited, although it offered opportunity for travel – a foreign correspondent for *The Times*, William's work saw the family living in Florence and Rome for some years before the couple finally returned to England to retire. Spartali died in 1927, just days before her eighty-third birthday, outliving her husband by twenty-six years.

Pockets of insight into Spartali's life and works emerged in the decades following her death. Richard Ormond included her in a 1965 article for *Country Life*, and in 1989 she enjoyed a modest resurgence: Rowland Elzea curated a small exhibition of her works at Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington; John Christian and Mary Anne Stevens included a few of her pieces in the Barbican's *The Last Romantics* display; and Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn featured her in the book *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*. Nunn and Marsh went on to co-curate *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* at Manchester City Art Galleries in 1997, which displayed some Spartali paintings.

Scholarly responses to Spartali are thin on the ground. Kristen A. Shepherd wrote a Master's thesis on her in 1998, which included the first full record of her then-located works; David B. Elliott wrote double biography of Marie and her husband William in 2006, which remains the only such account of her life currently available;<sup>91</sup> and Katie Tyreman

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<sup>91</sup> David B. Elliott's ancestor was Marie Spartali's friend and Rossetti's secretary, Charles Fairfax Murray.

Herrington held a virtual exhibition called *The Three Graces* in 2013, highlighting the works of Spartali, Zambaco, and Coronio together. The analysis of the following chapters draws on the scant academic commentary available, which primarily emerges from catalogue entries put together by Marsh, Nunn or Frederick for exhibitions and auctions. A first, full *catalogue raisonné* database has been commenced by Margaretta Frederick during the development of this thesis.

Despite little academic engagement, Spartali's paintings have gained greater visibility in recent years. The solo exhibition *Poetry in Beauty* (2016), a collaboration between the Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington and Watt's Gallery, Compton, was a significant retrospective of her career that looked at a range of her artistic output. She was subsequently featured in Jan Marsh's major *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* (2019) exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London, which explored the works of a number of women in the Pre-Raphaelite *milieu*. Since 2020, a number of her previously unlocated works have surfaced and sold at auction for considerable sums.<sup>92</sup>

Modern academics and art dealers, as well as nineteenth-century friends and colleagues, utilise a range of names for the artist, sometimes calling her 'Maria' and 'Mary' or utilising either her maiden or her married surname. She signed her works inconsistently, but always with the monogram 'MSS' or 'Marie Spartali Stillman' following her marriage in 1871. She shall be referred to as 'Marie Spartali' throughout this dissertation.

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<sup>92</sup> Including: Bonham's, *The Last Sight of Fiammetta*, sold 21 September 2022 for £290,100; Christie's *The Enchanted Garden of Messer Ansaldo* sold 10 December 2020 for £874,500; Sotheby's, *Gelsomina (Jasmine)* sold 15 December 2021 for £107,100.

## A NOTE ON APPROACH

The thesis adopts a critical approach influenced by the deconstructionist thinking of Jacques Derrida and the poststructuralist thinking of Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. Querying a direct, stable relationship between sign and signified; decentring the subject; recognising a power imbalance inherent in the process of meaning-formation; and accepting that the symbolic can only gesturally reference (rather than reconstruct) the real, the analysis adopts a series of interrelated lenses that uncover curious and multifaceted consequences for the artists' exploration of desire. Finding a plurality of meaning that fragments and ruptures, Rossetti, Siddal and Spartali's othered subjectivities enter into a relational dialogue with representation itself.

Appended to these methodologies are an eclectic mix of contributions from the fields of psychoanalysis and philosophy that consider semiology, ontology, and transgression. Diverse because of the conflicting and often contradictory approaches discovered in each artist's *corpus*, these ideas offer possible – if not always neat and definitive – insights into the proliferation of meanings sublimated into these interdisciplinary or intertextual works. Lacan's theories form the foundation of the thesis' approach to desire; George Bataille is adopted to assist with consideration of eroticism, death and subversion; and Immanuel Kant, Slavoj Žižek, and Barbara Freeman's philosophical contributions are used to examine the emulation of, and deviation from, the Romantic sublime. Each offers new perspectives on the artists' exploration of sex and death, self and other, the delimited and the unbound.

Similarly vital to the dissertation are ideas suggested by twentieth century feminist critics including Judith Butler, Toril Moi, Carolyn Korsmeyer, and Donna J. Haraway, whose works are utilised alongside more recent contributions to the fields of intersectional feminism and queer theory. All are used to consider the construction and perpetuation of gendered identities, but it is vital to recognise that such ideologies form part of modern discourses unavailable to the artists in their own lifetimes. Investigative tools useful to devise new approaches to interrogate ideas of subversion, disruption, and subjugation, a presumption of binary cisgender identities and heteronormative sexualities pervades the works of all three artists, symptomatic of hegemonic institutions and ideals of their own time. While each may, to a greater or lesser extent, question or resist such notions, none of the artists are assumed to be feminist or queer – such terminology and ideology would be anachronistic.

## I. Distortion: desire and the transgressive body

Chapter one explores the body as a site of transgression in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Marie Spartali, and Elizabeth Siddal. It considers how the artists distort the corporeal form to articulate different forms of desire, curating materiality to reference the psyche. The exchange of ideas between Rossetti and Siddal, and Rossetti and Spartali, are reviewed simultaneously, evidencing a push-and-pull reciprocity between artistic collaborators. The introduction and conclusion examine Victorian and modern critical responses to exhibitions of the artists' works, to see how perceptions of transgression might have evolved over generations.

## Responses to three exhibitions, 1857-1867



Fig. 10 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *D.G. Rossetti sitting to Elizabeth Siddal*. Pen and ink. 10.8 x 16.7cm. Birmingham City Museum of Art, Birmingham (1853).

To Town to see if Rossetti would join in a newly projected exhibition, being of the opinion that unless he & Anthony would that it could have no chance. Of course he would not, being the incarnation of perverseness. Miss Siddall there looking better.

- Ford Madox Brown, diary entry, 20 May 1855.<sup>93</sup>

Ford Madox Brown's diary entry for Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> May 1855 offers succinct insight into the artist's perception of his friend and former pupil, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Exposing the more curmudgeonly aspects of Rossetti's personality, Brown's account conceives of the painter-poet as "the incarnation of perverseness",<sup>94</sup> obstinacy made

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<sup>93</sup> Ford Madox Brown, *The Diary of Ford Madox Brown*. Ed. Virginia Surtees. (London: Yale University Press, 1981), p.137.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

manifest. Rossetti's embodiment of intransigence intersects one set of contradictions with another; Brown's conflicting response to his colleague's behaviour. The resigned, familiar tone of the report suggests a knowing acceptance in his frustration, signalling the joint emotions of affection and discord, intimacy and reproach.

Brown had ventured to 14 Chatham Place to pre-emptively petition Rossetti to support an independent exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite art by the Brotherhood's wider circle, held in defiance of the Royal Academy. He knew that the proposal wouldn't be ratified by the collective without Rossetti's backing, which was moodily refused. Elizabeth Siddal's contribution to the dispute, if any, is not chronicled; Brown's account notes her presence as an aside.

The mooted display would eventually take place two years later,<sup>95</sup> when the first Pre-Raphaelite exhibition was held in a private residence at 4 Russell Place, Fitzroy Square.<sup>96</sup> Amidst pieces by familiar names of the movement – William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Rossetti, and Brown himself – were works by *debutante* artist Elizabeth Siddal, the only woman in the catalogue. “The new name of Miss E.E. Siddal is attached to other designs quite unlike anything which the manner of lady-artists has accustomed us to”,<sup>97</sup> remarks William Michael Rossetti in the antepenultimate line of a review for *The Spectator*. Like Brown's diary entry, the comment provides little insight beyond noting Siddal's propinquity, and suggests hesitancy in asserting her as an artist.

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<sup>95</sup> As Brown predicted, it was passed over in 1855. See Brown, *Diary*, p.138.

<sup>96</sup> Opening in May 1857, the event was semi-private with tickets available by invitation only.

<sup>97</sup> William Michael Rossetti, “Exhibition in Russell Place” in *The Spectator*, 6 June 1857, p.14. <<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/6th-june-1857/14/exhibition-in-russell-place>> [Accessed 19 April 2022].

Where the male artists are unanimously described as “contributors”,<sup>98</sup> Siddal’s name “is attached”<sup>99</sup> to particular designs.

Coventry Patmore provides more fulsome commentary for the *Saturday Review*:

Her drawings display an admiring adoption of all the most startling peculiarities of Mr. Rossetti’s style, but they have nevertheless qualities which entitle them to high praise... "We are Seven" and "Pippa Passes"... deserve more notice than we can stop to give them.<sup>100</sup>

Detecting a kinship with the eccentricities of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s early work, Patmore expresses an approving uneasiness in response to Siddal’s aesthetic. Fleeting and non-specific in his compliments, Patmore – like William Michael Rossetti – appears unable or unwilling to elucidate on the experience of encountering her works. While both critics consider that the works should be (more or less) admired, neither seem able to articulate why.

This chapter argues that it is Siddal’s idiosyncratic, knotty, and destabilising treatment of the body that creates the interpretative challenges that so flummoxed her critics. Rejecting normative standards of sensory function and depleting emphasis on gender identity while retaining a keen sense of sexuality, Siddal generates potent and highly suggestive works that reflexively reference vast and obscure interior capacities. Simply wrought but inscribed with profound emotion, her bodies – articulated in brief, fragmented verse and sparse, wispish illustrations – become spectral echoes of seismic interior experiences, highly resonant but indefinable.

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Coventry Patmore, “A Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition” in *Saturday Review*. No. 88, Vol. 4, 4 July 1857, pp.11-12, p.12. *HathiTrust*. <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=iau.31858016626396&view=1up&seq=21>> [Accessed 29 May 2023].

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Three years later, in February 1860, William Holman Hunt made his way to 6 Waterloo Place. The neoclassical villa had become the residence of The Hogarth Club the summer prior<sup>101</sup> and now housed exhibitions of work by the short-lived<sup>102</sup> society's membership – the latest effort by the bohemian group to showcase their work to London's *literati* in a space conspicuously proximate to the National Gallery and Royal Academy.

Hunt would write to Thomas Combe that the display “is not a very brilliant show”,<sup>103</sup> with Rossetti's 1859 oil-on-panel painting *Bocca Baciata* (fig.12) causing particular consternation. Concerned that it would be admired as a “triumph of *our school*”<sup>104</sup> – an accomplishment of the then-dissolved<sup>105</sup> Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which Hunt had co-founded – he was anxious that he might be rendered peripherally culpable in its genesis:

It impresses me as very remarkable in power of execution – but still more remarkable for gross sensuality of a revolting kind peculiar to foreign prints... I would not speak so unreservedly of it were it not that I see Rossetti is advocating as a principal the mere gratification of the eye if any passion at all – the animal passion to be the aim of art.<sup>106</sup>

Hunt's euphemistic intimation of 'foreign prints' – that is, pornography – succinctly exposes his perception of *Bocca Baciata* as erotic, and subversive in that

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<sup>101</sup> Deborah Cherry, “The Hogarth Club: 1858-1861” in *The Burlington Magazine*. Vol. 122, No. 925, 1980, pp. 237–244, p.237. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/879933>> [Accessed 5 April 2020].

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* The Hogarth Club was founded in April 1858 and dissolved in 1861.

<sup>103</sup> William Holman Hunt, William Holman Hunt's correspondence with Thomas and Martha Combe, 12 February 1860. MS Eng. Lett. C. 296, folio 71. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Manuscript.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as a formal entity had largely disbanded by 1853.

<sup>106</sup> Holman Hunt, correspondence with Thomas and Martha Combe.

eroticism. He was not alone in his disapproval. John Ruskin, enthusiastic about Rossetti's early medievalist subjects, came to deplore the hedonistic sensuality of *Venus Verticordia* (fig.15), decrying the "coarseness"<sup>107</sup> of the honeysuckle – a somewhat tangential remark that speaks to the critic's awkwardness in his response to the work as a whole.

The most public and personal attack on Rossetti came from Robert Buchanan's caustic 1871 essay 'The Fleshly School of Poetry'. Writing under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland, Buchanan declared the works "trash" which "extol[led] fleshliness as the... supreme end of poetic and pictorial art"<sup>108</sup> while lamenting the suggestion "that the body is greater than the soul".<sup>109</sup> Rossetti's perceived breach of decorum was his Venetian partiality for "colour over line and hence... sensation over reason and flesh over spirit",<sup>110</sup> an effect achieved by selecting and amplifying specific bodily motifs. This series of symbols, nominally appropriated from the 'stunner' model but highly stylised, creates a formulaic (re)deployment of signifiers that discursively reference the mechanics of sex.

Generated through the libidinous perspective of her admirer, Rossetti's female subject embodies both the object of desire and the experience of desiring. Both alluring and threatening, human and divine, her seductive power is a consequence of her connection to longing mind, an approach that proves remarkably effective. While criticism of Rossetti's overt eroticism wasn't universal, he received sufficient censure to

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<sup>107</sup> Helen Rossetti Angeli, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His friends and enemies*. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p.92.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Williams Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day*. (London: Strahan & Co, 1872), p.32.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body, Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.104.

retreat from public exhibition. After 1860 his paintings would be enjoyed privately, and were not widely seen until after his death.<sup>111</sup>

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Fig. 11 A. McClatchy after T.H. Sheperd, *Bullock's Museum (Egyptian Hall or London Museum), Piccadilly*. Engraving, 6.2 x 8.8cm. Wellcome Collection, London (1828).

In 1867, seven years after *Bocca Baciata* first scandalised Hunt, an exhibition was held at The Dudley Gallery in Piccadilly,<sup>112</sup> an institution with no regular membership

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.

<sup>112</sup> Jan Marsh, "Marie Spartali Stillman" in *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*. (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2019), pp.156-169, p.159.

which boasted a “reputation for advanced taste”.<sup>113</sup> Amidst the latest collection of watercolours were three works by Marie Spartali,<sup>114</sup> her professional debut: *The Pasha’s Widow* (unlocated), *Korinna, the Theban Poetess* (unlocated), and *The Lady Prays-Desire* (fig.22).<sup>115</sup> Unusual subject choices, two of these works suggest a remarkable statement of intent. Korinna was an ancient Greek poetess who challenged and bested her male adversary Pindar, while the Lady Prays-Desire is the allegorical embodiment of ambition discovered in Edmund Spenser’s *The Fairie Queen*. Themes of female creative aptitude and aspiration are evident, perhaps attractive narratives to a young woman entering the art profession within the stringent patriarchy of the late nineteenth century.

Contemporary reports reveal that a familiar face emerges from *Korinna’s* canvas:

Mr Burne-Jones was, we believe, the first artist who introduced us to a very peculiar type of womanhood which is now only too familiar... A low forehead, an ill-favoured and ill-tempered face, hair *ébouriffé*, an ungainly attitude, and a badly-fitting, awkward gown, are the principal marks by which this unpleasant personage is to be recognised... Miss Marie Spartali, in her “Corinna”, gives us once more the tiresome old ugly face, and the red disorderly hair.<sup>116</sup>

Dismissing her works as unoriginal, the critic of the *Saturday Review* overlooks the nuanced adjustments Spartali makes to a system of representation created and popularised by her peers, particularly Rossetti. At once a homage and a pastiche, these portraits appropriate and reform the standard of the ‘stunner’ model through a series of incremental modifications that assert individual capacity and offer gentle resistance to

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<sup>113</sup> Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900*. (London: Routledge, 2000), p.170.

<sup>114</sup> She would marry William Stillman in 1871.

<sup>115</sup> Dennis Lannigan, “The Dudley Gallery: watercolour drawings exhibitions 1865-1882” in *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*. Spring 2003, pp.74-96, p.92. Lannigan lists all of Spartali’s catalogue entries from 1867 to 1878.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Pictures of the Year II’ in *Saturday Review*. No. 591, Vol. 23, 23 February 1867, pp.236-237, p.236. <<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044092729391?urlappend=%3Bseq=310>> [Accessed 5 December 2020].

prescribed notions of femininity. Detecting the viewer's gaze, the subject shows she is cognisant of her symbolic value, obliquely hinting at her unease with the idyll she (re)constructs.

Spartali's approach isn't a seditious proto-feminist challenge to Rossetti's abbreviating methodology, but rather a series of careful, considered micro-adjustments that accrue to generate Aestheticist portraits in which feminine beauty is as important as independent subjectivity. Her figures are youthful and radiant, but knowingly and discursively evidence their subjugated intelligence, aptitude, and ingenuity. *Korinna* may be a counterfeit Pre-Raphaelite, but in her approbatory fraudulence may be discovered a transgressive attempt to challenge the *status quo* while retaining a reputable position in a highly regulated society – a complex and contradictory stance.

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These three exhibitions connect Rossetti, Siddal and Spartali historically and conceptually, positioning them at the periphery of, and in dialogue with, establishment institutions and ideologies. As explored in the following chapter, all three artists disrupt the portrayal of the human form, creating bodies that are relational, contradictory, and subversive, and that evidence a reciprocal exchange of ideas between artistic collaborators. Rossetti's sketch *D.G. Rossetti Sitting to Elizabeth Siddal* neatly summarises these multifarious, intersecting ideas, enacted as the female artist looks back over her easel. Models become artists, and artists models; ideas are shared, evolved, and returned; women undertake creative labours; and the gaze of the viewer

reinscribes the self-conscious, reflexive status of art foundationally reliant on forms that knowingly disrupt their own conventions.

To establish the idiosyncrasies of their respective treatment of the body, each of the artist's works is examined in turn. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's erotic double works will be explored first. As she directly engages with Rossetti's approach, Marie Spartali's single portraits of female subjects will be explored second. Finally, the chapter addresses Elizabeth Siddal's bodies in her poems and illustration.

“Portions of eternity too great for the eye of man”:<sup>117</sup> Rossetti’s erotic subjects



Fig. 12 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Bocca Baciata*. Oil on panel. 33.7 x 30.5cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1859).

July 23. D.G. Rossetti persuaded me into giving him £40 commission for an oil portrait of Fanny and asked me for £20 down which I could not refuse. Gave him £2 for a pencil

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<sup>117</sup> William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' in *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), pp.33-45, p.36, l.27.

sketch of Fanny which he is to finish for me. He pleaded being very hard up or I should hardly have let him have so much tin on account.

October 13. He has painted a splendid portrait of Fanny for me (according to commission) in late 16<sup>th</sup> century costume. He has devoted the last month to the painting of it. Stanhope came in and admired it as greatly as I did.

- George Price Boyce's diary, 1859.<sup>118</sup>

The indulgent eroticism of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata* – “the kissed mouth” – would not be lost on the work's patron, George Price Boyce, who was charmed into commissioning the work to commemorate “a girl called Fanny whose busy lips were... transporting both Rossetti and Boyce to heaven”.<sup>119</sup> Rossetti's portrait rejoices in Cornforth's erotic potential, explicitly aligning the female subject's mouth with rejuvenating sexual vitality; inscribed on the back of the panel is a line taken from Boccaccio's *Decameron*: “bocca baciata non perda ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna”.<sup>120</sup> The eponymous mouth, guarded by a pair of vivid, unsmiling lips, is carefully rendered in paint and positioned centre-top amidst an expanse of opalescent skin. The focal point of the work, their warm pink-red hues appears to radiate outward, lending colour to the figure's cheeks in contrast to the cooler, blue-green tones of her face.

In isolation the lips do not communicate sufficient sensuality to warrant the dismay expressed by Hunt when he first saw the work in 1860. Rather, it is the signifier's relationship to other key emblems that culminates in her eroticism, a process mirrored

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<sup>118</sup> George Price Boyce, *The Diaries of George Price Boyce*. Ed. Virginia Surtees. (Norfolk: Real World, 1980), p.27.

<sup>119</sup> Kathryn Hughes, *Victorians Undone: Tales of Flesh in the Age of Decorum*. (London: Harper Collins, 2017), p.218.

<sup>120</sup> “The kissed mouth does not lose its freshness, but renews itself like the moon”.

in the doubled companion poem 'The Song of the Bower'.<sup>121</sup> Working in tandem, text and image draw the viewer/reader's attention to the "neck like a tower",<sup>122</sup> a column of alabaster skin that leads to an unbuttoned *décolletage*, revealing the "bosom then heaving that now lies forlorn".<sup>123</sup> A small piece of white fabric, a glimpse of the woman's undergarments, is only peripherally visible but intricately rendered in paint.

Framing neck and torso is lustrous auburn hair, amidst which is nestled a white rose in bloom, its implied purity at odds with the subject's untethered sexuality. In her right hand she holds a loose strand of hair and a single marigold, deepening a sense of equivocality derived from paired symbols. A compound lexeme which invokes the Virgin Mary and equates her value with the precious metal,<sup>124</sup> the marigolds' fecund vitality form a background for the unlikely exemplar of feminine virtue. Coupled with this vision of fertile *flora* is the lone apple, which sits undisturbed on a low wall that separates the viewer/reader from the depicted subject. The lapsarian fruit, plucked from its tree but whole, mirrors her status as both taken and unconsumed.

These interwoven and contradictory signifiers complicate the subject's representation, and she is simultaneously affiliated with nature and the sanctified, the Virgin and the Fall of Man, and made both accessible and remote. Rossetti himself

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<sup>121</sup> Together *Bocca Baciata* and 'The Song of the Bower' are treated as a paired double work; the poem, according to manuscripts now held at the Fitzwilliam Library, Cambridge, originally had the same title as its paired painting. See Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the game that must be lost*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p.74.

<sup>122</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'The Song of the Bower' in *Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A New Edition*. (London: Ellis & White, 1881), pp.245-246, p.246, l.19.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p.246, l.20.

<sup>124</sup> D.M.R. Bentley, "Love for Love: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata* and 'The Song of the Bower'" in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, Vol.12, no.1., 2003, pp.5-16, p.5.

described her “Venetian aspect”:<sup>125</sup> hers is, as Titian would have it, a sacred and profane love, at once earthly and divine.<sup>126</sup>

*Bocca Baciata* represented a sea-change in Rossetti’s *corpus*, and from 1859 to the end of his life the poet-painter repeatedly conjures tight-cropped, sensual portraits of female subjects in oil. This series of works, dubbed “beautiful women with floral adjuncts”<sup>127</sup> by William Michael Rossetti, exposes Rossetti’s formulaic appropriation and distillation of anatomy into a small number of emblematic constituents to evoke the erotic. These key signifiers, mirrored in both the visual and textual components of the double works, create a framework of *loci* that reflect and rebound off one another, forming a flexing nexus of meaning between stable referents. Distilled in isolation, the units which form the architecture of the erotic female subject can be loosely classified as the hair, eyes, mouth, and unnaturally elongated expanses of exposed skin, often discovered in the shapes of neck, fingers, or forearms.

This fetishising process, described in Lacanian terms by Griselda Pollock as *corps morcelé*,<sup>128</sup> is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s influential treatise *Gender Trouble* and its central ideology of gender being performatively established and re-established through a “stylised repetition of acts”.<sup>129</sup> Only long hair and artificially coloured lips signal the feminine in a Victorian context, however; the eyes and exposed skin are androgynous. Thomas Hughes has commented on the transexual consequences of Rossetti’s

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<sup>125</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to George Boyce, 5 Sept 1859. Collection of The Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Manuscript.

<<https://hrc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll57/id/196>> [Accessed 7 May 2023].

<sup>126</sup> Titian’s 1514 work *Amor Sacro e Amor Profano* depicts a bride dressed in white beside the nude Venus. Which woman is sacred, and which profane, remains a topic of debate.

<sup>127</sup> W.M. Rossetti, *His Family-Letters*, p.203.

<sup>128</sup> The fragmented body. See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, femininity and the histories of art*. (London: Routledge, 2008), p.178.

<sup>129</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), p.192.

assemblage, describing the figure of *La Ghirlandata* (1873) as “the creature” and suggesting his approach lends the depicted subject a quality comparable to Frankenstein’s monster.<sup>130</sup>

Rossetti’s idiosyncratic redeployment of these key signifiers effectively abbreviates the body and erodes the individuality of the depicted woman – be she the ‘stunner’ model or the subject she embodies – in favour of externalising an experience of sexual desire. The cumulative effect is a homogenised female subject that firmly occupies the realm of the representational, a phantasmic, externalised fantasia of gynephilia itself. So successful is this invocation of eroticism that these works were condemned as degenerate, the celebration of sexuality, translated and re-articulated through the human body as it is observed by the desirous onlooker, dismissed as obscene by Rossetti’s detractors.

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<sup>130</sup> Thomas Hughes, “Transformation in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *La Ghirlandata* (1873) in Relation to Christina Rossetti”. *The Rossettis: In Relation Conference, 16 June 2023, Tate Britain, London*. Paper.

## The Mouth

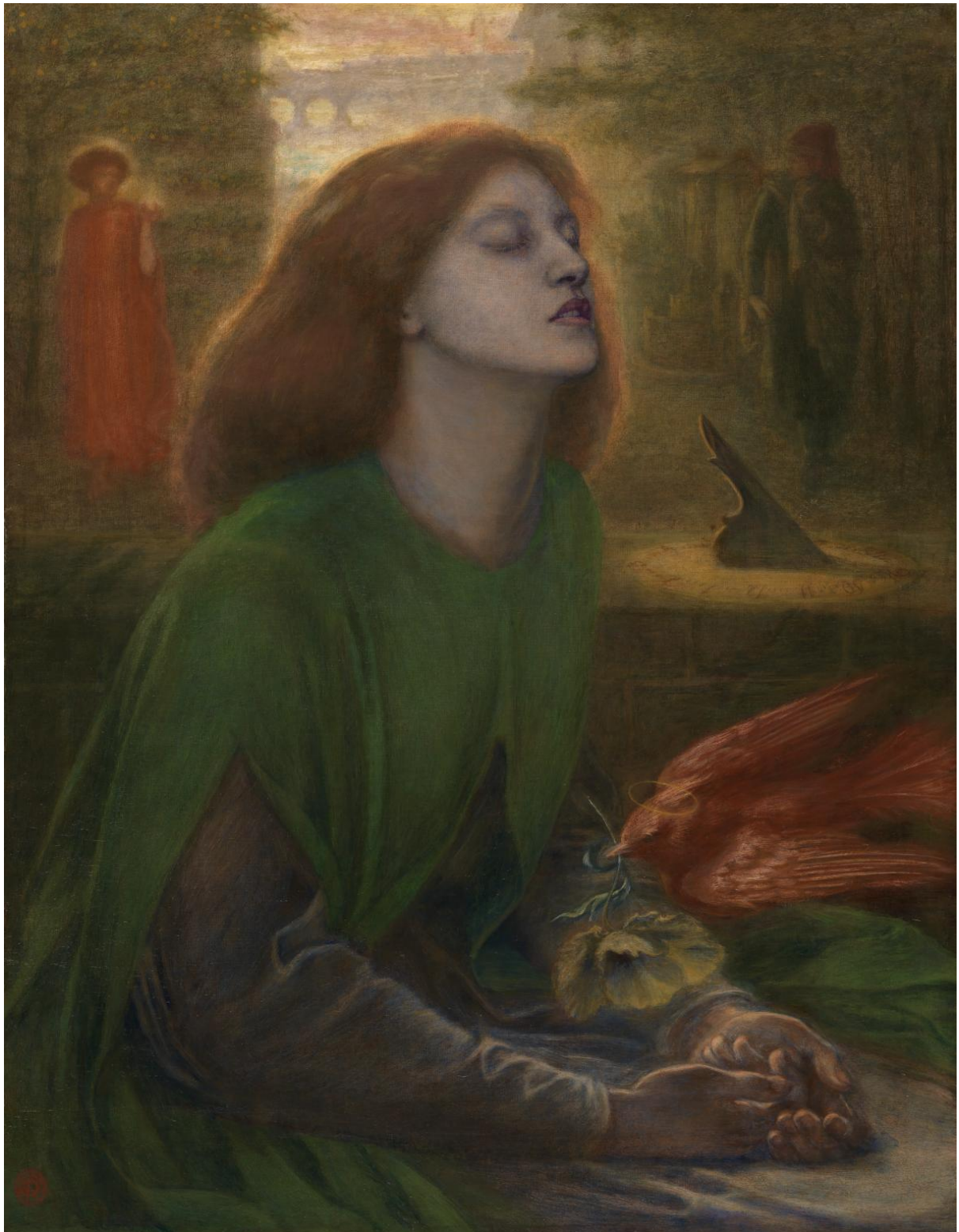


Fig. 13 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*. Oil on canvas. 86.4 x 66cm. Tate Britain, London (1864-70).

The line of Boccaccio selected by Rossetti for the reverse of *Bocca Baciata* comes from the story of Princess Alatiel, a woman who, despite sleeping with eight men

countless times, enters into nuptial bliss with a man who is convinced of her virginity. Like Boccaccio's heroine, the subject of Rossetti's double work evidences the rejuvenating potential of female sexuality in antithesis to the notion that loss of virginity is irretrievable. Both women replenish, offering the possibility of repeated sexual fulfilment "the last time, and the hundred before".<sup>131</sup>

Annexed to this ideology is the signifier of the *bocca*, the mouth, a lexical choice echoed in 'The Song of the Bower' ("my mouth to thy mouth as the world melts away")<sup>132</sup> – yet in the visual counterpart it is the gateway of the lips, the *labbra*, which are vividly executed with forensic precision. A correlation emerges between the oral and the genital, the joint signifiers encompassing "both the mouth and the labia, and the moisture that both produce".<sup>133</sup> Where the image references the lips and vulva, the text references the orifices of mouth and vagina.

Plump, artificially hued and dewy sets of lips are widely-recognised hallmarks of Rossetti's portraits, repeatedly conjuring this thinly-veiled allusion. *Fazio's Mistress*, also modelled by Cornforth, is accompanied by the poem 'His Portrait of his Lady, Angiola of Verona,' in which Fazio narrates the experience of beholding the object of his desires. For Fazio, one look at his mistress's "amorous beautiful mouth"<sup>134</sup> inspires "the thought"<sup>135</sup> which "gains full growth"<sup>136</sup> – another, more oblique reference to genitals, as the signifier of his mistress's mouth stimulates Fazio's erection.

Conquest of the lips represents fulfilment of all his desires:

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<sup>131</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Song of the Bower', p.245, l.6.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p.246, l.24.

<sup>133</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*. (Cambridge: TJ International, 2004), p.142.

<sup>134</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Canzone. His Portrait of his Lady, Angiola of Verona' in *Dante and His Circle: With the Italian Poets Preceding Him*. (London: Ellis and White, 1874), pp.429-432, p.430, l.18.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, l.22.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*.

between her lips, red as an open rose,  
Quite full of every dear and precious thing...

I would give everything that I possess  
Only to hear her say frankly, 'yes'<sup>137</sup>

Her assent is simultaneously verbal and physical. In speaking 'yes' she agrees to the sexual liaison, and in doing so, opens her lips to grant access to the cavity within.

The same process is enacted in the sonnet 'The Portrait', where the desired subject is constructed by, and validated through, the lustful perspective of her libidinous portraitist, who describes his fascination with "the mouth's mould"<sup>138</sup> which "testifies of voice and kiss".<sup>139</sup> The anonymous figure in *La Bella Mano*'s red lips act as vanguard to a prize, too, the orificial mouth containing "more bliss than man may crave".<sup>140</sup> In each case Rossetti attributes considerable value not to the lips, but to the cavity that lies beyond it; it is the empty space of the orifice, where the subject is without substance, that offers euphoria.

As J.B. Bullen has noted, the "kissed mouth" could equally signal the penetrated mouth in *lieu* of coitus; barely concealed references to oral sex are a repeated feature of Rossetti's works. Writing to Jane Morris a decade after the creation of *Bocca Baciata*, the poet-painter's desirous call to his lover's mouth is articulated in terminology rife with the mechanics of sex, alluding to the growing 'length' of the penis and, through the repeated use of the ejaculative 'come' and the presence of the seminal 'dew', male orgasm:

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.24-34.

<sup>138</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Sonnet IX, The Portrait' in *Poems: First Edition*. (London: F.S. Ellis, 1870), p.197, l.10.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'La Bella Mano (For a Picture)' in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis & White, 1881), p.334, l.8.

Come, beautiful mouth, O come again!  
Thinking of you at length, Love desires  
Sweet dew in your rosy path<sup>141</sup>

That *Bocca Baciata*'s "kissed mouth" – be it the penetrated mouth, vagina or both – "renews like the moon" furthers the concept of female absence, as the moon reflects, rather than generates, light. Similarly, the erotic subjects of Rossetti's double works don't originate sexual desire, but rather echo it back to its source.

While lips are generally closed in Rossetti's portraits, there are a handful of exceptions that potentially hint at a further complexity for the signifier. Beatrice in *Beata Beatrix* has the most open mouth of any of Rossetti's portraits of women, while the damozel of *The Blessed Damozel* (fig.67) and Beatrice in the 1871 iteration of *Dante's Dream* (fig.92) hold their lips slightly ajar, revealing a narrow crevice of white teeth beyond.

In each of these works the female subject is dead, her likeness constructed posthumously by her mourning lover. *Beata Beatrix* imagines the deceased Elizabeth Siddal as Beatrice, Rossetti adopting Dante's bereavement to express his own; the damozel is pressed against the bar of heaven, imagined by her surviving lover who lounges in the work's *predella*; *Dante's Dream* depicts Dante at Beatrice's deathbed. In these instances, death prevents the female subject's erotic energies from renewing<sup>142</sup> and the orifice of the mouth is rendered inaccessible by the bone-like material of teeth.

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<sup>141</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Reward' in *The House of Life by Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Sonnet-Sequence: A Variorum Edition with Introduction and Notes*. Ed. Roger C. Lewis (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2007) p.290, ll.9-11.

<sup>142</sup> At least, not on earth – 'The Blessed Damozel' indicates that sexual interaction is possible in heaven.

Of Rossetti's double works, the only living woman with her lips (slightly) ajar is the subject of *La Bella Mano* (fig.66). The subject of the painting gazes out of frame to a scene reflected back to the viewer/reader in the convex mirror of the background, wherein a four-poster bed stands beside a fire that blazes with symbolic heat. Having recently engaged in sexual activity, she appears to be depicted in the aftermath, undertaking an act of cleansing. The poem's narrator fixates on the "lovely hand, that thy sweet self doth lave / in that thy pure and proper element",<sup>143</sup> emphasising ideas of repurification – a process that will ceaselessly renew, as "endless fires spr[ing] from the wave".<sup>144</sup> Unlike her deceased counterparts, who have lost their rejuvenating capacities, she is presented in the act of replenishing, her vitality restoring in the process.

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<sup>143</sup> Rossetti, 'Bella Mano', ll.1-2.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, l.4.

## Hair



Fig. 14 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Fazio's Mistress*. Oil on canvas. 43 x 38cm. Tate Britain, London (1863-73).

“He is not as mad as a March hare, but hair-mad”,<sup>145</sup> wrote Elizabeth Gaskell shortly after meeting Rossetti in 1859, revealing that her conversation with the painter-poet would be consistently interrupted “when ladies with beautiful hair came in”<sup>146</sup> – specifically, “a particular kind of reddish-brown, crepe wavy hair”.<sup>147</sup> Rossetti’s preoccupation with wavy auburn locks is inescapable to even a casual observer of his works, and has become a trope of Pre-Raphaelitism more broadly. For his *femme fatales* particularly, long and often unfettered hair is imbued with a totemic “magical power”<sup>148</sup> correlated to the sexual potency of the depicted figure.

Fazio’s mistress artfully plaits hers, the seductive ritual performed for Fazio – and, by extension, the viewer/reader – as she holds out the hair on one side of her torso and bears her exposed shoulder toward him on the other. A sense of deliberate enmeshment is expressed as she interweaves her fingers amongst the strands, tactility favoured over the comb and brush which languish in the foreground.

Fazio is aware of the tactic but nevertheless enthralled, with the accompanying poem, narrated from his libidinous perspective, opening “I look at the crisp golden-threaded hair... Whereof... Love twists a net”.<sup>149</sup> *Lady Lilith* (fig.75), Rossetti’s doubled representation of Adam’s first wife, also ensnares with her “enchanted hair... the first gold”<sup>150</sup> twisted into a “bright web she can weave”.<sup>151</sup> Creating a net, the woman “draws

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<sup>145</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*. Ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p.560.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* Gaskell reports that Rossetti would immediately become distracted, and attempt to concoct a method to gain an introduction to the woman in question.

<sup>148</sup> Elisabeth G. Gitter, “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination” in *PMLA*, vol.99, no.5, 1984, pp.936-954, p.953. *JSTOR*, <[www.jstor.org/stable/462145](http://www.jstor.org/stable/462145)> [Accessed 2 March 2020].

<sup>149</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘His Portrait’, p.429, ll.1-2.

<sup>150</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Body’s Beauty’ in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis & White, 1881), p.240, l.4.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, l.7.

men to watch”,<sup>152</sup> notably predated a “youth”,<sup>153</sup> his sexual inexperience rendering him defenceless in the face of her erotic efficacy.

While the lips might contain the desired orifice, it is the latticework of hair that activates and beguiles the onlooker, deepening the double works’ symbolic allusion to genitals. Powerful and seductive, it represents “monstrous female sexual energies”,<sup>154</sup> allowing Fazio’s mistress “power upon all hearts”<sup>155</sup> and displaying her sexual freedom, unconfined by man or marriage. Lilith, meanwhile, appears to consume male sexual virility. A single interaction with her “sweet tongue”<sup>156</sup> – another reference to oral sex – and her lover is left with his “straight neck bent”,<sup>157</sup> a flaccid, post-coital image of emasculation brought about by the unruly temptress, predecessor of Eve and the serpent that precipitated the Fall.

A Medusan aspect is introduced through this oblique allusion to snakes, compounding Lilith’s status as both spiritual and mythic in formation. A well-established cipher of male anxiety in encountering sexually liberated femininity, the vision of the Gorgon enacts “the boy’s first sight of the female’s penisless... genitals, surrounded by hair”.<sup>158</sup> So the unwitting youth of ‘Body’s Beauty’, like the viewer/reader of *Lady Lilith*, falls prey to her ferocious sexual charms.

Not all of Rossetti’s female subjects are endowed with the same threatening potency, however, and even Lilith and Fazio’s mistress moderate the full potential of the signifier by concealing the majority of their hair behind torsos. The section flaunted to the

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, l.12.

<sup>154</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), p.27.

<sup>155</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘His Portrait’, l.89.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, l.3.

<sup>157</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Body’s Beauty’, l.13.

<sup>158</sup> Gitter, p.950.

viewer/reader is furthest away from the onlooker, creating a sense of distance and partial inaccessibility. It is a strategy to mitigate the power of the referent that Rossetti adopts across his *oeuvre*: the subject of *Bocca Baciata* has her hair loose but largely down her back, except the strands which frame her chest, while *Venus Verticordia*, the lascivious goddess of earthly love, conceals half her hair and exposes the other.

It is notable that these works are modelled by Fanny Cornforth and Alexa Wilding. Every double work of which Jane Morris is the model – *Proserpine*, *La Pia dei Tolomei*, *Pandora*, *Astarte Syriaca*, *Mnemosyne* and *The Day Dream* – shows off thick dark curls but almost always with two pins on either side of the crown fixing it down, the bulk only partially visible before disappearing past the shoulders. More respectable still are the figures of *Sibylla Palmifera*, *A Vision of Fiammetta* and *La Bella Mano*, who sport careful *coiffures* – in the case of the sibyl, the hair is mostly contained by a headscarf. These artificial methods of restraint are only so effective, however, with curling locks escaping confinement to drape down necks and backs. The viewer/reader is only offered sight of – but not wholesale access to – the scintillating motif. Only in his domestic pencil sketches of Elizabeth Siddal, Annie Miller, and Fanny Cornforth does Rossetti depict women's hair in its natural condition, and these are private works of considerable intimacy. Sketches of his sister Christina, meanwhile, seem almost obsessively concerned with intricate twists and plaits of styled hair, a hallmark of respectable restraint.

A scale of decorum appears to emerge through the manipulation of hair; at one end of the spectrum is the voluptuous and untethered, modelled by Wilding and Cornforth, and at the other the more modest constraint of Marie Spartali and Christina Rossetti. Regardless of its state, however, Rossetti unanimously executes women's hair

with intense chromaticity, shining lustre, and tactile allure, entrapping the gaze at the radius of the mouth.

Eyes, Necks & Limbs



Fig. 15 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Venus Verticordia*. Oil on canvas, 90.4 x 69.9cm. Russell Coates Museum, Bournemouth (1864-8).

The perimeter signifier of the hair encircles the face, capturing attention and directing it to dramatic bee-stung lips that sit, spider-like, near the heart of a web. This

process of channelling the viewer/reader's attention renders them unwittingly complicit in the act of sexualising the subject. Sharing the lens of the lusting gynephile, it is his perspective that orders and curates her image, and suffuses her surrounding symbolic apparatus with potent potential meanings. To engage with one of Rossetti's double works is therefore to share the space of the *innamorato* who conjured her, and to (re)encounter her as he (re)encounters her, nominally compelling participation in a heteronormative paradigm of man's sexual desire for a woman.

Rossetti equally curates epicene characteristics to intensify or defuse the semiotic potency of his female subject: the eyes and lengths of exposed skin. *Venus Verticordia*, a rare example of nudity in Rossetti's works, depicts the goddess of love staring audaciously out at the viewer, returning the gaze in what might be an attitude of provocative recalcitrance. Yet the accompanying sonnet clarifies that her glance is "still and coy",<sup>159</sup> a sense of incomplete assent reflected in the low wall of honeysuckle and her raised arms, creating barriers to her body. A sense of reserve is articulated in tandem with boldness; upturned wrists and fingers seem to signal receptivity, but the underside of the left hand is obscured, concealing her right breast in the process.

Both acquiescence and reluctance are indicated through these contradictions, suggesting faltering sexual availability, as further asserted by the apple that "she hath in her hand for thee, / Yet almost in her heart would hold it back".<sup>160</sup> The flesh of the fruit, like the flesh of pagan divinity, offers the potential for an erotic exchange but not certainty – the viewer/reader must first negotiate the obstacles presented.

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<sup>159</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Venus Verticordia (For a Picture)' in *Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A New Edition*. (London: Ellis & White, 1881), p.270, l.9.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 1-2.

The cause of her hesitancy might be discovered in the arrow she clutches in a masturbatory gesture. A phallic symbol allied with Venus' offspring Cupid, the arrow ostensibly points to her exposed breast, implying erotic stimulation, but potential neuroses simultaneously emerge. Not only is the breast a source of nourishment for her child, indirectly referencing the possibility of motherhood, the arrow's point rests over her heart – the conceptual, rather than the physical, seat of love. Even for a goddess, it seems, engagement in sexual activity is complicated by emotional and physical risks.

*Astarte Syriaca* (fig. 90) and *Mnemosyne* (fig. 91) – related double works modelled by Jane Morris – similarly maintain unsmiling eye contact with the viewer, but in an attitude of oscillating self-consciousness. *Astarte*, Venus' Assyrian predecessor, may have a face “of Love's all-penetrative spell”<sup>161</sup> in the poetic component of the double work, but her expression is oddly blank in the pictorial counterpart. Clutching her green gown in Botticelli's *pudica* pose, it is unclear if she protects or exposes herself. *Mnemosyne* has the same facial neutrality, undermining the brazenness of her direct gaze even as she holds the phallic lamp, “fire-winged to its goal”,<sup>162</sup> in suggestive proximity to her mouth.

*Mnemosyne* and *Astarte*'s guarded reticence forms a counterpoint to *Lady Lilith* (fig.76), *Fazio's Mistress* and the siren of *A Sea-Spell* (fig.65), who all coquettishly draw the viewer/reader in by extending exposed expanses of skin (including the underside of the wrists) outward from their canvasses while looking purposefully away. In each instance hesitancy and vacillating resolve “offe[r] an unanswerable challenge to the

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<sup>161</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘*Astarte Syriaca (For a Picture)*’ in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis and White, 1881), p.331, l.12.

<sup>162</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘*Mnemosyne (For a Picture)*’ in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed. William M. Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911), p.229, l.2.

male psyche”.<sup>163</sup> Despite their ostensible power and authority, communicated *via* their status as divinities or their *femme fatale* threat, participation in the sexual act is never certain, and each must be won.

Even Rossetti’s less formidable subjects, like the replenishing woman of *La Bella Mano*, present access and restriction, enthusiasm and reserve. A “flower of Venus’ own virginity”,<sup>164</sup> she grips the eponymous ‘mano’ in an unnaturally contorted manner, the absentminded sensuality of the touch obliquely referencing the eroticism of her lingering memories, rendering her simultaneously remote and near.

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<sup>163</sup> Bullen, *Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p.148.

<sup>164</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘La Bella Mano’, l.10.



Fig. 16 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Proserpine*. Oil on canvas. 125.1 x 61cm. Tate Britain, London (1874).

Twisting hands signal an equivocal relationship with recent sexual activity in *Proserpine*, too. Clutching the partially consumed pomegranate in her left hand – the hand conventionally allied to matrimony – the fruit symbolises both loss of virginity and her eternal bond to Pluto. That the right hand grabs the left wrist in distorted awkwardness suggests oscillating ambiguity in her relationship to the symbol and its associated sexual values. If she holds back the “dire fruit... [which] tasted once”<sup>165</sup> now “must thrall [her] here”,<sup>166</sup> the right hand tempers the instincts of the left, which drives the pomegranate toward her mouth. One faltering movement intersects with another, as the trunk of Proserpine’s neck turns toward the narrow gap of light; the warm, earthly domain of her mother Ceres glimpsed from the gloom of the underworld. The rest of her body, however, seems drawn into the dark. Gripped by uncertainty, the goddess is at once willing and averse, certain and changeable, wholly indeterminate.

Even where exposed, elongated lengths of limb appear to articulate less conflicted acquiescence, discrepancies proliferate. Fiammetta in *A Vision of Fiammetta* not only exposes the lengths of her forearms, revealing her torso, but she rests them against branches, fingers wrapping around and pushing against priapic signifiers that release a flurry of symbolic petals in response. Yet the arms and hands are turned away from the viewer; the branches prevent easy access to her form; the shape of her body beneath the gown is nearly entirely obscured; her hair is respectably confined with limited visual exposure, and her gaze does not quite meet the viewer’s own.

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<sup>165</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Proserpina (For a Picture)’ in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis and White, 1881), p.333, l.5.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

Tensions arise and rebound between these signifiers of acceptance and denial, communicating alongside her “reassuring eyes”<sup>167</sup> both “a presage and a promise”.<sup>168</sup> Threat and comfort, acquiescence and rejection, conviction and indefinity are all discovered in the transient relationship between the signifiers of eye, hair, and lengths of exposed skin – all simultaneously promising and frustrating attempts to access the orifice of the *bocca* beyond the *labbra*.

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<sup>167</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Fiammetta’, l.12.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, l.13.

## One Woman & All Women

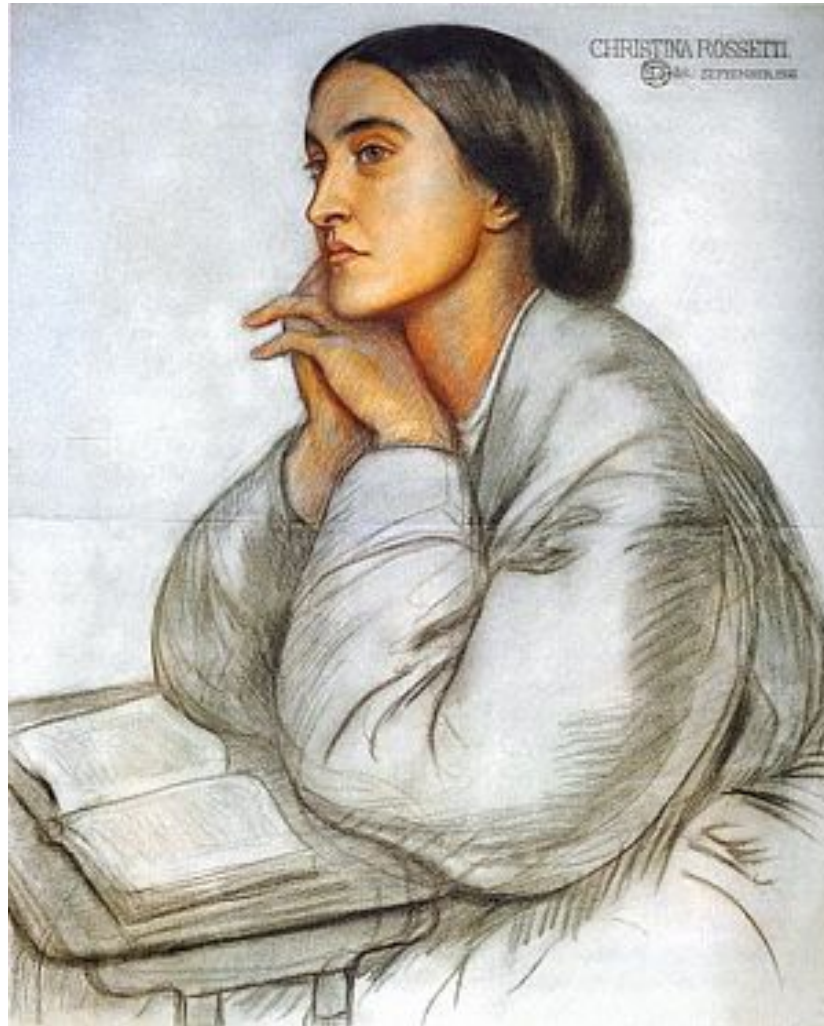


Fig. 17 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Christina Rossetti*. Coloured chalk on blue-grey paper, 81 x 65cm. Private collection of Andrew Lloyd-Webber (1866).

One face looks out from all his canvases,  
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans...

Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

- Christina Rossetti, 'In An Artist's Studio'.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'In An Artist's Studio' in *New Poems by Christina Rossetti*. Ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: MacMillan & Co., 1896), p.114, ll.1-14.

If there is any lingering doubt as to Rossetti's eroticising technique in his double works one need only reference the fraternally affectionate – but decisively less sensual – depictions of Christina. The access referent of the hair, while articulated with a healthy shine, is neatly pinned up behind her head; the olive skin is carefully expressed, but the shape of the neck and fingers are mostly concealed; her eyes, a lively brown, look away from the viewer, and those all-important lips, while expertly detailed, do not share the expressive colour, plumpness, and shining wetness of her painted cousins.

Naturally Rossetti is not going to represent his sister in the context, medium, and with the libidinous lens he adopts for the female subjects of his double works, but the comparison throws into sharp relief the eroticising methodology utilised by the painter-poet, exposing how and why his sensual portraits were considered transgressive. Propriety informs the artistic choices deployed here, and make manifest a key shift in approach: Rossetti is concerned with capturing likeness, both of outward appearance and of subjectivity. Sufficient evidence exists to suggest the visual resemblance is a fair one – Lewis Carroll's photographs of the Rossetti family at their home in Chelsea in 1863<sup>170</sup> attest to that – but care has also been taken to portray a reflective, intelligent, self-assured woman, despite a somewhat guarded pose.

Brother and sister were united by “the Pre-Raphaelite quest to unify word and image”,<sup>171</sup> seeking – in their own way – “the spiritual in the material”,<sup>172</sup> a pair who “were equals in each other's eyes”.<sup>173</sup> For Dante Gabriel Rossetti, however, the primary

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<sup>170</sup> Lewis Carroll, *The Rossetti Family*. Albumen print. National Portrait Gallery, London (1863). <<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw05460/The-Rossetti-Family>> [Accessed 1 March 2022].

<sup>171</sup> Norman Kelvin, “Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti: A Pairing of Identities” in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2004, pp. 239–259, p.257. <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150304000476>> [Accessed 1 March 2022].

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid*, p.254.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, p.258.

objective of his double works from 1859 onwards is the externalisation of desire – a process that, paradoxically, erodes the idiosyncratic qualities that defined his famed ‘stunner’ models. The “beautiful women with their floral adjuncts”<sup>174</sup> come to be ubiquitous ciphers, their identities made apparent by only a handful of signifiers: Jane Morris’s thick dark hair; Alexa Wilding’s narrow forehead; Fanny Cornforth’s heavier dimensions; Elizabeth Siddal’s slender figure and straight hair.

Christina herself commented on the dehumanising effect of her brother’s eroticising technique, identifying how his manifestation of sexual fantasy distils all women into one woman, a phantom of erotic potentiality manifesting as she “fills his dream”.<sup>175</sup> The dreamer is the authorial figure that curates her ethereal vision, a process Rossetti replicates in text and image through adopting a series of anatomical *loci* which are intensified and offset to express eroticism. In a technique that anticipates the condensed style of Picasso’s surrealist portraits of women eighty years later, Rossetti’s erotic subjects are articulated through the stylised repetition of key signifiers, conjured and amplified through the disjointed union of both text and paint.

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<sup>174</sup> W.M. Rossetti, *His Family-Letters*, p.203.

<sup>175</sup> C.G. Rossetti, ‘In An Artist’s Studio’, l.14.

## The Model Paints Back: simulacral bodies in Marie Spartali

Having established Dante Gabriel Rossetti's abbreviating treatment of the female subject in his erotic double works, the dissertation now turns to explore the body in Marie Spartali's single portraits of women. It discovers a dialogue between Spartali's approach and Rossetti's distinctive methodology, and evaluates the consequences of her modifications to his aesthetic.



Fig. 18 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Self-Portrait or On A Balcony*. Watercolour and gouache on paper. 63.5 x 50.8cm. Private collection (1874).

We should like to touch, lastly, upon... a portrait in water-colors of a lady, by Mrs. W. J. Stillman... it has given us a great deal of pure pleasure, though indeed the pleasure is of a sort which is hard to refer to definite sources. The picture represents a lady (the artist herself, we believe) leaning on the parapet of a balcony... The type of face and the treatment suggest the English pre-Raphaelite school, but in so far as the artist is a pre-Raphaelite, she is evidently a sincere and, as we may say, a natural one.

- Henry James, *The Atlantic*, May 1875.<sup>176</sup>

In Mrs. Stillman's pictures there is something very exquisite, in spite of a certain lingering amateurishness in the execution... the principal charm of her work is the intellectual charm... Imagination, intellectual elevations, cannot be studied, purchased, acquired... Mrs. Stillman has inherited the traditions and the temper of the original pre-Raphaelites... but she has come into her heritage in virtue of natural relationship. She is a spontaneous, sincere, *naïf* pre-Raphaelite.

- Henry James, *The Galaxy*, July 1875.<sup>177</sup>

Henry James, on the cusp of a tremendous literary career in 1875, first encountered Marie Spartali's vivid *On a Balcony* at an exhibition of watercolours in New York. It was the second time the piece had been displayed; it had been first shown in Boston late the previous year – then under the more explicit title *Self-Portrait*<sup>178</sup> – to little fanfare, although it seems to have captured the attention of James. In two articles written for separate periodicals, *The Atlantic* and *The Galaxy*, he outlines a hermeneutical

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<sup>176</sup> Henry James, "Art" in *The Atlantic Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science & Art*, Vol.13., No.207, pp.117-121, p.118. *Archive*. <[https://archive.org/stream/atlantic35bostuoft/atlantic35bostuoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/atlantic35bostuoft/atlantic35bostuoft_djvu.txt)> [Accessed 22 April 2020].

<sup>177</sup> Henry James, "On Some Pictures Lately Exhibited" in *The Galaxy*, Vol.20., Issue 1, pp.89-97, p.91. *Archive*. <[https://archive.org/details/sim\\_galaxy\\_1875-07\\_20\\_1/page/90/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/sim_galaxy_1875-07_20_1/page/90/mode/2up)> [Accessed 2 January 2022].

<sup>178</sup> Margaretta Frederick, "Self-Portrait" in *Poetry in Beauty The Pre-Raphaelite Art of Marie Spartali Stillman*, Ed. Margaretta S. Frederick and Jan Marsh. (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2015), p.80.

intricacy to the portrait, detected in spite of what he considers a ‘naïf’-like lack of sophistication.

First writing in *The Atlantic* James notes “the almost touching good faith of the work”,<sup>179</sup> declaring that “there is something in Mrs. Stillman’s picture which makes a certain sort of skill seem rather inexpensive, and renders cleverness vulgar; an aroma, a hidden significance, a loveliness.”<sup>180</sup> The review, while ostensibly glowing, characterises Spartali’s self-image at once as “awkward” and “refined”, displaying both “deep pictorial sentiment”<sup>181</sup> and “a singular intensity.”<sup>182</sup> These contradictory remarks are emblematic of a symbolic equivocacy that can be discovered across the known *corpus* of her portraits, the result of her subtle but radical modification of a system of representation designed to construct the female subject as phantasmic externalisations of gynophilic desire – a system created, duplicated, and popularised by her friend and colleague Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

James was not ignorant of the connection. Mentioning in *The Galaxy* that Spartali was working in Rossetti’s “shadow”,<sup>183</sup> he seems to suggest her works were a less impressive facsimile of her colleague’s originals. Yet *On A Balcony*, along with Spartali’s other sumptuous portraits of female subjects, offers a profoundly different prospect to their Rossettian sisters, a consequence of the artist’s “subtle but astute critique”<sup>184</sup> of Rossetti’s visual language.

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<sup>179</sup> James, “Art”, p.119.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> James, “On Some Pictures”, p.91.

<sup>184</sup> Katie J. Tyreman Herrington, *Three Graces: Victorian Women, Visual Art and Exchange*. Virtual Exhibition, hosted on the Research Portal of the Department of History of Art, University of York. <[https://hoaportal.york.ac.uk/hoaportal/threegracesExhibition.jsp?wallId=wall\\_1A](https://hoaportal.york.ac.uk/hoaportal/threegracesExhibition.jsp?wallId=wall_1A)> [Accessed 2 January 2021].

Modern academics have attempted to ameliorate Spartali's appropriation of Rossetti's aesthetics with a campaign to establish her as an accomplished independent artist. Jan Marsh,<sup>185</sup> Katie Tyreman Herrington,<sup>186</sup> and Pamela Gerrish Nunn all reference the intersection of ideas and similarity of approach between the pair, with Nunn calling for Spartali to be considered a celebrated practitioner of Aestheticism for decadent portraits that "exhibit the same Rossettian investment in the single female figure, beautiful, luxuriant, pensive or reflective".<sup>187</sup>

An indulgent tribute to Rossetti and his works that revel in feminine beauty, Spartali's portraits simultaneously assimilate tensions within, and present resistance to, hegemonic ideologies. Anatomical, exterior emblems previously embraced to denote erotic potential are naturalised and defused to assert and reframe interiority; subjects are encased in claustrophobic domestic or semi-permeable interiors, gently pressing toward the outside world; and female activities evidence active participation, intelligence, and ingenuity.

Societal prudishness necessitated some of Spartali's adjustments to Rossetti's eroticising technique. Her status as a professional artist was subversive enough, and overt voluptuousness would sabotage her considerable efforts to be considered a serious painter. Yet there remains a discernible attempt to locate and represent a different kind of femininity within her works, one that is perhaps more closely aligned to lived experience than to symbolic fictions. This is not a seditious rebellion against predominant practices, but rather a delicate kind of quiet mutiny, undertaken from

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<sup>185</sup> Jan Marsh, "Mariana" in *Poetry in Beauty The Pre-Raphaelite Art of Marie Spartali Stillman*, Ed. Margareta S. Frederick and Jan Marsh, (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2015), p.98.

<sup>186</sup> Herrington, *Three Graces*.

<sup>187</sup> Pamela Gerrish Nunn, "Alienation, Adoption or Adaptation? Aestheticist Paintings by Women" in *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, Issue 74, Autumn 2011, pp.141-154, p.149.

within an established mode and remarkable for its inherent, maybe even inevitable, contradiction.

In reconstituting female subjects using a mode designed to communicate a masculinised experience of gynophilic desire, Spartali is complicit in perpetuating the fetishising abstraction of Rossetti's approach at the same time she queries it – a paradox that augments, and intersects, the symbolic indeterminacy of her works. None of her practices represent subversion in the same way that Rossetti's provocative works elicit scandal, but rather form a series of micro-transgressions that, cumulatively, expose the simulacral nature of femininity itself.

## Spartali & Rossetti – Artists in Dialogue



Fig. 19 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Self-Portrait or On A Balcony* (1874) compared to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's oil on canvas *Venus Verticordia*. (1864-8). See figs. 18 and 15.

Nowhere is Spartali's emulation of Rossetti's visual language more apparent than in the colourful 1874 *Self-Portrait, or On a Balcony* that attracted James' notice.<sup>188</sup> On first encounter, the eye is arrested by the pale expanse of skin that occupies the centre of the canvas, the torso framed by dusky pinks, a little verdant green, and the elaborate, abstracted designs of the soft furnishings. Grey-blue eyes almost meet the viewer's own beneath lustrous auburn-red hair – a significant choice, given Spartali's hair is chestnut brown in portraits by George Frederick Watts (c.1860s),<sup>189</sup> Ford Madox Brown (fig. 24),

<sup>188</sup> Spartali's first official self-portrait was made in charcoal in 1871. See fig.55.

<sup>189</sup> George Frederick Watts, *Portrait of Marie Spartali Stillman*. Oil on canvas. Private collection (late 1860s). Reproduced in *Poetry in Beauty The Pre-Raphaelite Art of Marie Spartali Stillman*, Margaretta S. Frederick and Jan Marsh, (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2015), p.73.

and Rossetti himself (1870).<sup>190</sup> Artificially red lips sit toward the centre-top of the work, gently closed, and exposed, partially-upturned forearms and fingers clasp the cryptic symbol of a folding fan. Spartali, celebrated by her peers for her “intense love of colour and... deep poetic meaning”,<sup>191</sup> has reconstructed her likeness in a palette that evokes Rossetti’s sensual depictions of women, and she positions herself in the title role.

Comparison with Rossetti’s 1868 oil-on-canvas work *Venus Verticordia* exposes her mirroring of the same key constituents to facilitate a similar hermeneutic framework, augmented in the same hues and textures; even the golden arc of the fan echoes the shape and pigment of Venus’ effulgent aureole.

The extent to which Spartali is borrowing from *Venus Verticordia* cannot be known, although there is sufficient evidence to suggest that she encountered the work. Biographer David B. Elliott places the young artist in London and frequenting Rossetti’s studio at Cheyne Walk in 1868,<sup>192</sup> towards the beginning of their acquaintance – she would not sit for him until July 1869 – in meetings facilitated by Spartali’s friend (and Rossetti’s secretary) Charles Fairfax Murray.

*Venus Verticordia* certainly was at Cheyne Walk in 1868, in various guises. Rossetti wrote to Charles Howell to request the return of Leyland’s chalk iteration in March, that he might use it to persuade George Hamilton to commission a watercolour copy;<sup>193</sup> George Price Boyce reports that Rossetti was re-working the oil commissioned by John Mitchell over the same period, noting that the artist had “altered and partly

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<sup>190</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Head study of Marie Spartali Stillman for ‘Dante’s Dream’*. Pencil and coloured chalks on duck-egg blue paper. 54 x 61cm. Private collection (1870). See also the 1869 red chalk on paper sketch *Marie Spartali* in the collection of Andrew Lloyd Webber.

<sup>191</sup> Ellen C. Clayton, *English Female Artists*. (London: Tinsley Bros, 1876), p.136.

<sup>192</sup> Elliott, p.111

<sup>193</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to Charles Augustus Howell, 16 March 1868, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: IV The Chelsea Years 1863-1872, II 1868-1870*. 68.51. Ed. William E. Fredeman, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), p.42.

repainted his Venus picture, making it much finer”;<sup>194</sup> and Virginia Surtees places Mitchell’s oil in Rossetti’s studio until September, at which point it was finally delivered to its patron.<sup>195</sup>

These seven months from March to September offered Spartali a significant window to view *Venus*. If she did miss it then, Rossetti retrieved the oil within a matter of years to have it photographed, and – according to William Michael Rossetti – to rework it in 1873.<sup>196</sup> By this time, just prior to Spartali commencing work on *Self-Portrait*, the artists’ friendship was well established. Spartali was in regular written contact with Rossetti, and was first among those to receive copies of his newly published books.<sup>197</sup>

Despite the remarkable similarities between *Self Portrait* and *Venus Verticordia*, discovered in both the colour and the architecture of the accentuated referents, the effect of Spartali’s image is wholly different. Where Venus’ “glance is still and coy”<sup>198</sup> the subject of *Self-Portrait* is pensive and inscrutable, the humanity of her gaze reinforced by the natural shape of the eyes and the ambiguity of precisely where she is looking. Where Rossetti exerts pictorial emphasis onto the lips, Spartali rehabilitates the motif by reducing the size, and alleviating their emphasis by incorporating a flush to the depicted woman’s cheek. Where Rossetti depicts bursting, fecund flowers, Spartali places highly patterned fabrics.

Similar restraint is exercised with hair. The subject of *Self-Portrait* has hers coiffured high on her head, with only the smallest corner of the natural length visible – a

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<sup>194</sup> Boyce, p.47. This is likely Alexa Wilding’s face replacing the cook, who had modelled originally; it remains the cook’s torso.

<sup>195</sup> Surtees, p.99.

<sup>196</sup> William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*. (London: Cassell & Co., 1889), p.45.

<sup>197</sup> Elliott, p.68.

<sup>198</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Venus’, l.9.

potentially *risqué* choice, as respectability dictated “a few stray curls only were allowed on the neck”.<sup>199</sup> A further anomaly, discovered in contrast to the rest of Spartali’s currently located *oeuvre*, are the bare forearms. Rossetti uses the exposed skin of the wrists and forearms to indirectly signal an erotic subject’s receptiveness to the viewer – and, by extension, a potential sexual act – as a discursive gesture of acquiescence. The figure of *Self-Portrait* protectively crosses her arms across her body, concealing the underside of her wrists and hiding most of her fingers, tactility offered only as she wraps her left hand in the folds of her sleeve.

Redeployed, anatomical *loci* are adjusted to redirect semiotic prominence back on the subject herself, while obliquely problematising the practice of transfiguring attributes designated ‘female’. Paradoxically, the process also blurs the depicted woman’s motivations. No longer a cipher designed to communicate sexual interest and to elicit an erotic response, the nexus of meaning created between stable signifiers instead presents an enigmatic representation of a person. The subject of *Self Portrait*, with her tenacious glance and displayed fan, is isolated and mysterious, her interiority as ambiguous as her contradictory representation.

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<sup>199</sup> Georgine De Courtais, *Women’s headdress and hairstyles in England from AD600 to the present day* (London: BT Batsford, 1973), p.124. Only in her depictions of young girls does Spartali display unfettered hair; her adult subjects unanimously have their hair ‘up’. See Marie Spartali’s *A Crown of Wildflowers*. Watercolour and gouache on paper. Private collection (1882); *The Childhood of Saint Cecily*. Watercolour and graphite heightened with gouache. Private collection of Michael T. Cohen, New York (1883); and *A Wreath of Roses*. Watercolour and gouache on paper. Private collection, (1880).



Fig. 20 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Beatrice*. Watercolour and gouache on paper mounted on board. 57.6 x 43.2cm. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (1896).

Spartali's campaign for female rehabilitation is not limited to reworking anatomy. Each of her subjects is discovered with symbolic apparatus that conveys intellectual capacity in tandem with beauty. In the 1896 portrait *Beatrice* the object of Dante's affections is depicted alone, gazing out of her frame in distracted thought in a pose similar to *Bocca Baciata*. Yet where the woman in the marigolds runs one hand over the

other in her reverie, Beatrice rests her hand on an open book, possibly a book of hours. The extended finger on the open page – like the single digit tucked into the pages of the book clutched by *The Lady Prays-Desire* (fig.23) – conspicuously communicates the subject's assiduous engagement with the text, signalling her imminent return to reading. At the same time, her apparent distraction appears disobedient, as if bored with the genteel activity; a small act of insubordination undertaken by the person confined to the balcony.

The open but momentarily forgotten volume is an image invoked in many of Spartali's works: the woman of *Love Sonnets* (1894) is depicted with a small tome; *A Florentine Lily* (fig.62) has been disturbed while reading; and the subject of *Cloister Lilies* leans on a volume illuminated with haloed figures, the rosary conveying interruption from religious contemplation. The musical instruments of *The Childhood of St Cecily* (1883) and *The last sight of Fiammetta* fulfil the same function, asserting creative cerebral enterprise and dexterity.

Even flowers in Spartali's works attest women's industry, their careful curation and deployment a departure from the wild blooms that fill Rossetti's canvases: roses are engineered into wreaths in *A Wreath of Roses* (1880); arranged in a decorative vase in *A Portrait* (1873), or summoned through witchcraft in *A Rose In Armida's Garden* (fig.102). In each instance the number and types of flower are limited, lending greater iconographic weight to the few *genera* presented.



Fig. 21 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Cloister Lilies*. Watercolour and gouache on paper. 45 x 36cm. The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1891). Compared to a detail of the damozel's pose from *The Blessed Damozel*. Oil on canvas. 174 x 94cm. Harvard University Arts Museums, Cambridge Massachusetts (1871-78).

Modifications can also be found in the slight but poignant alterations made to posture, propagating a sense of resistive independence. The subject of *Cloister Lilies* is presented in a pose that closely resembles Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel*: both lean against a barrier with elbows extended, head angled to the right, hair loose, holding three white lilies that evoke the Trinity.<sup>200</sup> Where the damozel's body unravels in fleshly abandon, however, Spartali's reverent woman asserts poise, a sense of command emphasised in the subject's handling of her flowers; where the damozel cradles the stem, the woman of *Cloister Lilies* decisively pinches the florets together at the neck.

This renewed relationship with the lilies – an established symbol of purity and the Virgin Mary – mirrors the relocation of the subject from the divine to the earthly realm. Rossetti's damozel's lilies lie “as if asleep”<sup>201</sup> in heaven, making them at once organic

<sup>200</sup> D.M.R. Bentley, “From Allegory to Indeterminacy: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Positive Agnosticism” in *The Dalhousie Review*, vol. 70, no. 1, 1990, pp.70-106, p.77.

<sup>201</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘The Blessed Damozel [Text B 1870]’ in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Collected Writings*. Ed. Jan Marsh. (London: J.M. Dent, 1999), pp.12-15, p.13, l.47.

and divine, conscious and unconscious, ephemeral and eternal, their symbolic ambiguity reflecting the ambiguously virtuous sexuality of the damozel herself. In contrast Spartali's unnamed subject is unmistakably human, her mystery a demonstrably terrestrial one: that despite being discovered in the cloister of a nunnery, she is "plainly not a nun".<sup>202</sup>

*Cloister Lilies* is not unique in this reformation of grip. Armida in *A Rose In Armida's Garden* (fig.102) clasps an enchanted rose bloom, disturbing petals that float to the ground in a manner similar to Rossetti's *A Vision of Fiammetta*.<sup>203</sup> Where Fiammetta's fingers are spread over the branch, inadvertently shaking the petals loose, Armida holds the neck of the rose between finger and thumb, authoritatively holding it up for the viewer to see.

Signifiers are similarly repositioned in relation to the female body to denote cognitive faculties over sexual allusion. Where Proserpine holds the partially-consumed pomegranate (symbolising the act that has incarcerated her in the underworld) in close proximity to the mouth, *Love's Messenger's* subject holds a letter (evidencing reciprocity of intellect) close to her heart. In taming the eponymous dove who delivers her missives, the anonymous subject displays rebellious ingenuity in adversity, exhibiting both intelligence and resourcefulness.

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<sup>202</sup> Jan Marsh, "Cloister Lilies" in *Poetry In Beauty: The Pre-Raphaelite Work of Marie Spartali Stillman* (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2015), p.130.

<sup>203</sup> *A Rose In Armida's Garden* was painted in 1894, sixteen years after *A Vision of Fiammetta*.



Fig. 22 Marie Spartali Stillman, detail of the hands from *Love's Messenger* (fig.60) compared to a detail from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Proserpine*.

The intense chromaticity of *Self-Portrait* makes Spartali's revisionist approach brilliantly manifest, but the process can be discovered across her portraiture. Reformed and redistributed, signifiers previously utilised to signal female sexual energies are redrawn to articulate autonomy and humanity, and while there's a suggestion that "narrative is again merely pretext, and the viewer's satisfaction is attained... through effects of colour and implied texture and perfume"<sup>204</sup> the subject is rehabilitated in the process.

Interpretive stability is not achieved, however, and Spartali's works are fraught with a different contradiction: that the attempt to make these subjects more human makes them seem less real. Deborah Cherry has suggested that, in Spartali's works, "woman as sign is re-signed from visual icon to woman of culture... no longer limited to a signifier of masculine desire",<sup>205</sup> but there is a tension intrinsic to perpetuating a representational system devised to articulate sexualising gynephilia.

<sup>204</sup> Nunn, "Alienation", p.149.

<sup>205</sup> Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists*. (London: Routledge, 1993), p.199.

Spartali does not 're-sign' "woman", but rather works from within a semiotic framework to obliquely signal its insufficiency to articulate a standpoint peripheral to the *status quo*. 'Woman' remains "just a sign, a fiction, a confection of meanings and fantasies... an idol and nothing but a word"<sup>206</sup> – an inevitability when working within a hermeneutic paradigm that advocates the primacy of a desirous attestant.

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<sup>206</sup> Pollock, *Vision*, p.100.

Queering the gaze



Fig. 23 Marie Spartali Stillman, *The Lady Prays-Desire*. Watercolour with gold paint on paper. 41.9 x 30.5cm. Private collection (1867).

Critical to the construction of Rossetti's voluptuous subjects – the very influence that distils them into their intensified constituents – is the lustful perspective of her beholder, who “fashion[s] from inert matter an ideal erotic object for himself, a woman cut to the very pattern of his desires.”<sup>207</sup> Rossetti is explicit in identifying what Laura

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<sup>207</sup> Linda Nochlin “Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art” in *Woman as Sex Object, Studies in Erotic Art 1730-1970*. Ed. Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin. (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p.15.

Mulvey dubs “the male gaze”<sup>208</sup> as the authorial lens through which the female subject is created and understood. In ‘His Portrait of his Lady, Angiola of Verona’ the speaker articulates the process enacted by himself and – by extension – the viewer/reader, establishing their joint status as onlooker: “I look... I, gazing on that lovely one... Why am I not... alone with her.”<sup>209</sup> The phrase ‘I look’ recurs throughout the poem, preceding a new component of the mistress’s body. These listed features, ordered and regulated by his appraisal, execute the process of creating ‘his portrait’ of his mistress, her very existence determined and validated by his lustful scrutiny.

Brian Donnelly has attempted to free Rossetti’s exploration of scopophilia from accusations of misogynist representation,<sup>210</sup> citing Elizabeth Prettejohn’s analysis that Rossetti “allow[s] us to imagine the woman more generally as our own, or anyone’s, beloved.”<sup>211</sup> While it might be correct to say that Rossetti creates a *shared* space within which to appreciate the female subject, he simultaneously asserts the primacy of the authorial lover and – as exemplified in *The Portrait* – his jurisdiction over the formation of her image.

*The Portrait*’s artist-narrator revels in the dominion he has over the curation and dispersion of his sitter’s likeness:

Her face is made her shrine. Let all men note  
That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!)  
They that would look on her must come to me.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Feminism and Film Theory*. Ed. Constance Penley (London: BFI, 1988), pp.57-68, p.67.

<sup>209</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘His Portrait’, p.429, ll.1-13.

<sup>210</sup> Brian Donnelly, *Reading Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Painter as Poet*, (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 83-84.

<sup>211</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Beautiful women with floral adjuncts” in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed. Julian Treuherz, Elizabeth Prettejohn, Edwin Becker (Liverpool: The Walker, 2003), pp.51-110, p.67.

<sup>212</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘The Portrait’, ll.12-14

That her face is a 'shrine' is indicative of the speaker's veneration not of the woman but rather his perception of her, a construction that the fetishised portrait comes to encompass as an idol – shrines, unlike other religious spaces designed to facilitate dialogue with divinities, enable one-way reflection.

On the rare occasions Rossetti does incorporate male figures into his double works, he depicts them in the act of observing the female subject: the languishing male in the *predella* of *The Blessed Damozel* mirrors the viewer/reader's own inspection, and Dante in *Dante's Dream* is depicted in the act of gazing upon an expired Beatrice. In each instance the viewer/reader is offered the shared opportunity to participate in the act of contemplating her, but it is a space created, regulated and mastered by the subject's would-be lover.

Spartali's subjects signal that they are aware of their position within the object-to-be-viewed paradigm, and critically destabilise the coveted space of the viewer (and thus the site of the gynophilic lover) engaging in fantasy. *The Lady Prays-Desire* not only meets the viewer's eye, she rests her chin on the ends of her fingers – her hand contorted in an unnatural shape in the process – as if holding her face for inspection. She unflinchingly returns the gaze, appearing to assert her worth to bear the attention. The figure of *Self-Portrait* is less audacious, but the near-direct look articulated in the direction of the eyes clearly indicates she knows she is being scrutinised. The same is true of the figures of *A Rose In Armida's Garden* (fig.102), *Madonna Pietra degli Scrovigni* (fig.63), and *A Crown of Wildflowers* (1882). Even where Spartali's female subjects do not directly engage the viewer's eye, it is clear that they still discern the gaze.

Further recalibration of perspective is exemplified in *Mariana* (fig.39): Spartali positions the viewer *beside* her subject, behind the dividing barrier of the low wall – rather

than front-on – and the intimate proximity intensifies scrutiny of the woman herself. This concentrated focus diverges from the expansive perspective of John Everett Millais' *Mariana* (1851), where the viewer's withdrawn position grants the romantic apparatus of the archaic scene equivalent prominence to the figure depicted.

As Spartali laterally shifts the viewer's lens, so the semiotic structures of a predominant representational mode are reordered to draw attention to Mariana's subjectivity, the hegemonic influences exerted on her, and her resultant experience of social exclusion. The same effect is felt in *Love's Messenger* (fig.61), with the viewer apparently locked in the confined space with the subject. At such close proximity, Spartali draws attention to the schematics that construct and constrain the represented woman, and her efforts to co-exist with them.

Cherry identifies another tension inherent in Spartali's engagement with the male gaze, arguing that the artist's objective in portraying autonomous, individual female subjects is part of a method of de-centering the masculine perspective while simultaneously "offering masculinity its favourite and familiar position as voyeur."<sup>213</sup> Yet in meeting the authorial gaze Spartali's subjects do not simply challenge masculine perspective, but disrupt the concept of gendered gaze itself.

In critiquing a hermeneutic hierarchy while simultaneously perpetuating (and celebrating) an objectifying aesthetic, Spartali indirectly raises questions about the site of the viewer and the presumption of compulsory masculinity – particularly within a heteronormative paradigm. If Spartali enjoys Rossetti's sexualised treatment of women to the extent that she regenerates it, she is making a case for non-masculine

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<sup>213</sup> Cherry, *Painting Women*, p.199.

appreciation of female beauty – and perhaps, in the case of *Self Portrait*, even for narcissism or autoeroticism. In answering the gaze, she queers it, undercutting the sovereignty of masculinised perspectives within a gynophilic framework and instead making a case for appreciation of beauty more broadly.

In tandem with this paradox emerges and intersects another: the contradiction of expressing female experience from within a representational mode devised to articulate an experience of gynephilia. In their awareness of the viewer's gaze, Spartali's female subjects must equally be sensible of the intransigent criterion of patriarchy which orders them as "distorted as passive visual objects, dominated by the gaze of the men who made and stared at them in real life and on canvas."<sup>214</sup> The othering process this triggers is described by Jacques Lacan:

I can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not even see, not even discern... From the moment this gaze exists, I am already something other, in that I feel myself becoming an object for the gaze of others... others also know that I am an object who knows himself to be seen.<sup>215</sup>

So too Spartali's female subjects are articulated in a demeanour that signals their understanding of their status as constructs to bear the gaze, a condition they endure with varying degrees of fortitude.

Emily Orlando observes that "the women of the Pre-Raphaelite circle were compelled to make compromises in the name of art".<sup>216</sup> For Spartali, as a female artist

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<sup>214</sup> Susan P. Casteras, "Pre-Raphaelite Portraiture: A Strangely Disordered Vision" in *Collecting the Pre-Raphaelites: The Anglo-American Enchantment*. Ed. Margaretta Frederick Watson (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1997), pp.139-148, p.146.

<sup>215</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. John Forrester. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.215.

<sup>216</sup> Emily J. Orlando, "That I May not Faint, or Die, or Swoon': Reviving Pre-Raphaelite Women" in *Women's Studies: An interdisciplinary journal* Vol. 38, Issue 6, 22 July 2009, pp.611-646, p. 620. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870903021505>> [Accessed 12 December 2020].

and model, one of those concessions is participating in the system of her own subjugation. To be seen, female experience must be represented; to be represented means engaging in an artistic ideology that habitually commodified women. Spartali makes a move towards undermining this self-sabotaging paradigm by drawing attention to the fragility of its construction: ouroboros, vibrantly and joyfully represented, making quietly conspicuous her autosarcophagy.

*The Lady Prays-Desire*, with her Rossettian features, is a transgressive body not because of any overt sensualism, but because of her muted, questioning challenge to authorial male sexualisation and curation, enacted even as she performs to facilitate her own objectification. Her blueprints may have been contrived in accordance with a patriarchal standard, but this Lady Prays-Desire celebrates female vivacity at the same time undercuts the powers that shaped her, communicated with her direct, posed stare. None of Rossetti's women are so forward – even Venus might not be so easily entrapped.

## Humanising Phantasms



Fig. 24 Ford Madox Brown, *Marie Spartali*. Coloured chalks on paper. 77.5 x 55.9cm. Private collection (1869).

Such would be the successive phases of the image:  
It is a reflection of profound reality;  
It masks and denatures a profound reality;  
It masks the *absence* of a profound reality;  
It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

- Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulations*.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulations*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.6.

Like Henry James, a critic for *Appleton's Journal* struggled to articulate the hermeneutical incongruity of encountering *On A Balcony* when he saw it at the 1875 New York watercolour exhibition:

Like her other two paintings, this one is a poem in color... as decoration and flat-tint it has the charm of old stained glass, or rather floss embroidery.<sup>218</sup>

Synthesising ornamental signifiers associated with the realms of the holy (stained glass) and feminised domesticity (embroidery), the writer pivots from the sanctified to the everyday within just a few words, invoking symbolic referents that are adjacent to – and so not wholly representative of – either sphere.

His somewhat cryptic remark does little to elucidate on the ‘charm’ experienced as a result of encountering her portrait, but rather compounds a sense of lateral allusion; of the words of a poem replaced with vivid hues, suggestively ordered, to create an indistinct sense of something unspecified. It is equivalent to James’ “aroma of loveliness”,<sup>219</sup> a sense of a lingering ambience that can be enjoyed and meaningfully perceived, but never wholly grasped or interpreted.

This pleasant but indeterminate aftereffect is a consequence of Spartali’s attempt to represent femininity from within an aesthetic mode developed to idolise and amplify one element of a female subject – her sexual potential as perceived and regenerated by the lusting psyche. So Spartali radically conjoins two related but conflicting ideas: the construction of sexualised femininity, generated through the

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<sup>218</sup> “Art” in *Appleton's Journal*, Issue 13, 20 Feb 1875 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moajrn/acw8433.1-13.309/252>> [Accessed 2 January 2022]. He also makes some fairly unkind remarks about her facial features being insufficiently Greek.

<sup>219</sup> James, “Art”, p.119.

externalising lens of gynephilic desire, and the experience of femininity itself. In doing so, she creates images that are simultaneously more true, insofar as they are more naturalistic representations, and less real, referencing their own idyllic falsity.

A doubled image emerges as Spartali superimposes Rossetti's aesthetic onto her self-portrait. In the signifiers of sumptuous femininity are the hallmarks of the Pre-Raphaelite supermodel, a confection of semiotic *loci* that constitute 'woman'. The artist's celebration of the exquisite, fantastical Rossettian subject is betrayed simultaneously, as she interpolates herself into the role even as she queries its legitimacy. Underneath is the artist herself, a real person whose behaviour is governed by stringent social codes and who must exhibit humility and restraint. Spartali's uneasy marriage of these two constructions – the erotic Rossettian subject and the respectable Victorian wife – draws attention to the inauthenticity of each, revealing through the discordant coupling that both are simulacral.

Comparison between *Self-Portrait* and the affectionate 1864 chalk portrait of the artist by Ford Madox Brown, in which a young Miss Spartali is depicted painting what appears to be *The Lady Prays-Desire*, further throws into sharp relief the abstruse representation of femininity in each. Spartali is less recognisable to a modern viewer than in Rossetti's reimagining of her as Fiammetta, in much the same way Jane Morris seems alien as the sinewy creature immortalised in nineteenth century sepia photographs.

Ultimately, Spartali's "naïf"<sup>220</sup> *Self-Portrait* is fraught with equivocal complexity, formed as paradoxes intersect and rebound. The charmed bafflement of James and his

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<sup>220</sup> James, "Art", p.118.

peers is an attempt to rationalise the viewer's response to a work infused with intelligently wrought, if technically imperfect, symbolism. This approach to probing ideas of ontology, femininity, and the construction of subjectivity can be discovered across Spartali's *oeuvre*, unearthed as she reveals that the signifier will never authentically access the signified when both are wholly regulated by a metanarrative that does not allow for the subject's experiences.

Spartali's transgressive bodies are not, therefore, subversive for their aesthetic pleasures, nor for their apparent reciprocity with Rossetti's own works; but rather for a series of modest alterations to the representation of 'woman' that culminate into a lateral assertion of the artificiality of the construction, whether existing in flesh or in paint.

“(Wo)man has no body distinct from (her) soul”:<sup>221</sup> Siddal and embodied resistance

The final section of chapter one looks at Elizabeth Siddal’s transgressive bodies, examining how her unique aesthetic utilises physicality to reference interior, metaphysical concerns. It simultaneously considers similarities between Siddal and Rossetti’s works, particularly those that emerged in the 1850s.

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<sup>221</sup> Blake, ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, p.34. Alteration to gender is mine.



Fig. 25 Unknown photographer after Siddal, *Sister Helen*. Photograph of pencil sketch. 20.2x 14.9cm. The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. (c.1866).

Consider... that the plain hard fact is that I think you have genius... Utterly irrespective of Rossetti's feelings or my own, I should simply do what I do, if I could, as I should try to save a beautiful tree from being cut down, or a bit of Gothic cathedral whose strength is failing. If you would be so good as to consider yourself as a piece of wood or Gothic for a few months, I should be grateful to you.

- John Ruskin to Elizabeth Siddal, May 1855.<sup>222</sup>

These geniuses are all alike, little and big. I have known five of them – Turner, Watts, Millais, Rossetti, and this girl – and I don't know what was, or which is, wrong-headedest.

- John Ruskin to Mrs Acland, 10 July 1855.<sup>223</sup>

William Bell Scott first met Elizabeth Siddal in 1855, and the introduction was an awkward one: he happened upon Siddal and Rossetti alone after hours, and became incensed when Siddal left the room without acknowledging him.<sup>224</sup> He would later describe her as an overconfident, inadequate shadow to Rossetti, who considered “herself a genius too... [making] small, quaint, quasi-poetical imitations of his works”.<sup>225</sup> These suppositions appear wholly opposed to those expressed by Ruskin in his letters of the same year, written as he commenced his patronage.

Yet even as Ruskin places her in a pantheon of genius with Turner and Millais, his remarks are tinged with the deprecatory. He scales her sagacity as ‘little’, insinuates ‘girl’-like immaturity, and presents himself as a sort-of saviour figure who safeguards her like an ancient, threatened treasure. Notably, neither of Ruskin's allusions suggest

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<sup>222</sup> John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin* Ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. (London: George Allen, 1909), p.204.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

<sup>224</sup> William Bell Scott, *Autobiographical notes of the Life of William Bell Scott R.S.A.* Ed. W. Minto (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), p.316. Scott's enmity with Rossetti is well documented.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

authorial control. The architect and stonemason of the cathedral are dead, and the caretaker of the tree absent – if the tree was cultivated by human intervention at all. The value of Siddal’s work, and so the value of herself, appears to be something outside of her direct influence, her artistry fragile, juvenile, and in need of a protector.

Scott’s allegation of plagiarism is questionable. Rossetti was an enthusiastic proponent of her drawings, and (alongside recognising noted Rossetti-Siddal collaborations) recent scholarship has reassessed the influence Siddal’s works had on her eventual husband. Glenda Youde posits that Siddal’s “original ideas so inspired Gabriel that he had all her drawings photographed and [he] continued to ‘borrow’ from her designs long after her death”,<sup>226</sup> a viewpoint sustained by comparison of compositional devices invented by Siddal and reconceived by Rossetti in his works. Rossetti’s photographs of her original drawings, now in the custody of the Ashmolean Museum, remain the largest surviving archival source of Siddal’s works.

One such image preserves a series of studies for *Sister Helen*, based on Rossetti’s poem of the same name written “either in 1851 or beginning of 1852”.<sup>227</sup> These sketches envisage the eponymous figure burning an effigy of her disloyal lover, an act of witchcraft that brings about the deceiver’s demise – an event witnessed by her brother, who points through a window in the background.

Conjured in Siddal’s idiosyncratic aesthetic, wherein linear, inflexible, androgynous figures embody considerable interior challenges, Helen represents two things simultaneously: first, the enormity of her heartbreak, and second, the tragedy of

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<sup>226</sup> Glenda Youde, “Dante Gabriel and Elizabeth Eleanor Rossetti: The Artistic Partnership” in *The Rossettis*. Ed. Carol Jacobi and James Finch. (London: Tate Publishing, 2023), pp.114-135, p.116.

<sup>227</sup> Sir Thomas Henry Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), p. 125.

the lengths she must go to for retribution. In slaying her lover she has forfeited her soul, and she kneels besides a fireplace that both mirrors her burning passion and foreshadows the inferno she will endure for eternity. The violence enacted as Helen grips her throat evokes both her self-destructive anguish and the external influence of hegemonic forces that compelled the desperate act, signifying quashed voice, enforced silence, and an impotence to incite retribution without sorcery. For Siddal, Helen's options are limited, and the stakes catastrophic.



Fig. 26 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Sister Helen*. Pencil and brown ink. 16.5 x 21.6cm. In the private collection of Mark Samuels Lasner (c.1870).

Detectable within this image are interrelations between Siddal and Rossetti's practice, evidencing an exchange of ideas between the pair founded on related, if not identical, motivations. The precise date of Rossetti's sketch of the same subject is uncertain – Virginia Surtees dates the drawing at 1870, although the Rossetti Archive points out “a finished sketch was certainly done much earlier”<sup>228</sup> – but compositional similarities intimate a close kinship: Helen, the fireplace and the boy all occupy the same positions, while the boy's pose is the same in both.

Markedly different, however, is the condemned woman's mien. Rossetti's Helen is coy, exposing her neck and hair with tactile sensuousness, and divine and psychological peril is replaced with unruly, sensuous femininity. That she holds her arms straight out is noteworthy, as it is characteristic of Siddal's inflexible poses – Youde suggests Siddal's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* as Rossetti's source for the gesture.<sup>229</sup> Omitted from Rossetti's drawing is the brutality of the self-asphyxia, which is instead redeployed for Guinevere in *Sir Launcelot in the Queen's Chamber*, the action a gesture of autoerotic reverie seemingly provoked by Launcelot's sword, which points directly at her.

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<sup>228</sup> “Scholarly Commentary on Sister Helen”. *Rossetti Archive*.  
<<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s220.rap.html>> [Accessed 31 May 2023]

<sup>229</sup> Youde, p.127.

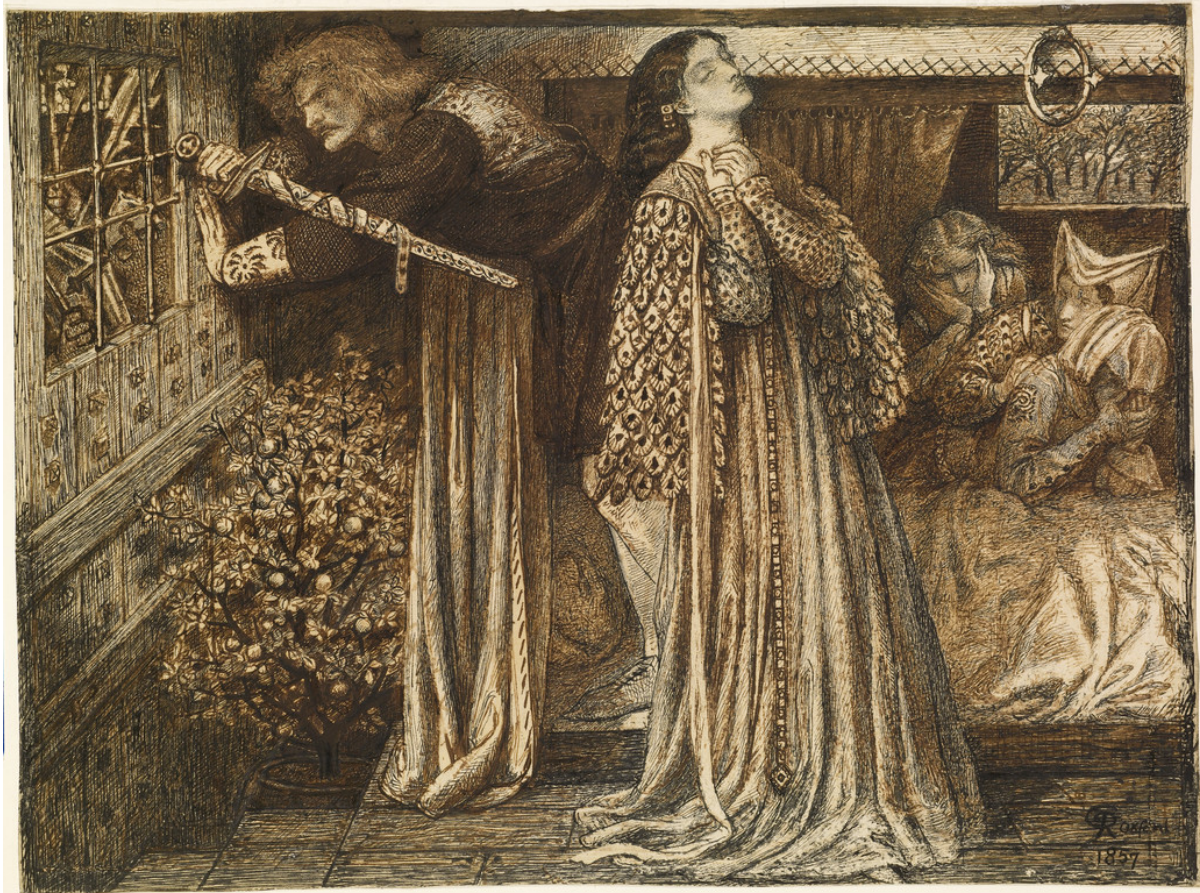


Fig. 27 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Sir Launcelot in the Queen's Chamber*. Pen, brown and black ink. 26.2 x 35.4cm. Birmingham Museums, Birmingham (1857).

So Rossetti and Siddal's mismatched Helens express two critically different subjective experiences: Rossetti's indulgent sensuousness over Siddal's muted desperation. All of Siddal's illustrations demonstrate the same preoccupation with discursively signalling immense internal struggles through the human form. Rigid, obfuscating, but profoundly evocative in the embodiment of intense emotion, *Sister Helen* evidences Siddal's appropriation of the body is a site of resistance, transgressive because of its unwillingness to conform.

In Siddal's poems and illustrations the human body resists nineteenth century notions of monolithic, binary gender difference and a straightforward approach to sensory perception; rather, the body is presented as a borderland which references

much greater, and more complex, interiority. These bodies are disruptive, stressed, caught between conflicting forces, and inscribed with the external pressures and tensions wrought upon them – even where formed in the sparse, faint lines of a pencil sketch or broken fragment of verse.

Venus Unsexed



Fig. 28 Elizabeth Siddal, *Jephthah's Daughter*. Black chalk on off-white paper. 15.1 x 9.5cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (c.1850-55).

The most overt evidence of Siddal's resistance to predominant cultural ideologies is the diminution of signifiers denoting gender identity. Her bodies are "consciously

medieval... angular androgynous figures with... stylised drapery”<sup>230</sup> conjured through the deployment of scant, linear strokes in her visual works. Examination of Siddal’s incomplete studies of *Jephthah’s Daughter* exposes how vestigial signifiers are ordered to signal father and daughter: Jephthah is taller; the outline of legs discernible from mid-thigh down; the hair is either ear-length or concealed beneath what might be a helmet; and in one sketch there is the faint outline of a beard (fig.28). His daughter’s femininity is determined by a dress (concealing the shape of the legs) and long hair.

Granted greater importance is the familial bond between parent and child, and Siddal’s experimental postures – with the father’s arms, outstretched in greeting and rebuttal, met with the leaning devotion of the daughter – deftly convey both deep affection and profound sorrow. Fresh from his victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah has made a sacred vow to sacrifice the first person he sees on his return, and it is his daughter who greets him.

Siddal is not unique in her use of androgynous bodies. Edward Burne-Jones and Simeon Solomon are famed for the gender ambiguity of their otherworldly subjects, and Rossetti has been credited with dismantling overly-feminine subjects by emphasising ‘masculine’ jawlines and angular appendages. A.J.L. Busst’s influential analysis of these “hermaphrodite”<sup>231</sup> Pre-Raphaelite forms cites Böhme’s theory of divine reunification as the symbolic quest that these representations serve – that through merging with woman “man hopes to recover his former androgyny and immortality; in woman he hopes to

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<sup>230</sup> Nat Reeve, ““An Hour before the Day”: the dismembered Book of Hours in Elizabeth Siddal’s Clerk Saunders.” *Word & Image*, vol. 38, no.2, 2022, pp.73-87, p.85.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2021.1923316>> [Accessed 12 May 2023].

<sup>231</sup> Busst uses the terms ‘hermaphrodite’ and ‘androgynous’ interchangeably and broadly to signify a being who is both or neither sex.

find... his lost half, the divine image that has become effaced in him”.<sup>232</sup> This reintegration of disconnected binaries echoes Jung’s theory that the androgyne exists as the archetype of the collective unconscious; that humanity craves the reunification of *animus* and *anima*, the unconscious masculine or feminine discovered in a person of the opposite sex.

Yet Siddal’s figures are more nuanced than this phallogocentric dualism. Her approach allows for a paradigm where, rather than woman being subsumed by man to create a pre-lapsarian idyll, humanity shares an ontological foundation disconnected from gender identity. Burne-Jones and Solomon make it “often impossible to distinguish a man from a woman”<sup>233</sup> – a consequence, says Busst, “of the mental exhaustion of the cerebral lecher”<sup>234</sup> – because their subjects are highly sexed visions of humanity, Hermaphroditus or Aphroditus embodying simultaneous genders and sexualities and so intensifying (and broadening) their erotic potential.

Siddal, in contrast, effaces and transmutes outward markers of gender difference, asserting non-binary identities that exist independent of their sexuality. They are, in modern parlance, genderqueer, while retaining an essence that denotes binary gender: femandrogyne and mascandrogyne respectively. In generating these hybridised entities Siddal refocuses hermeneutical attention onto the commonalities that unite her subjects, rather than focussing on the body as a site of difference.

Effaced signifiers of gender are equally characteristic of Siddal’s poetry. With the exception of ‘I care not for my Ladys soul’, her speakers are consistently anonymous and

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<sup>232</sup> A.J.L. Busst, “The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century” in *Romantic Mythologies*. Ed. Ian Fletcher. (London: Routledge, 1967), pp.1-96, p.47.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

more concerned with emotion than corporeality, typically with only one other party referenced *via* gendered pronouns. Despite this omission, a presumption of heteronormativity is superimposed onto Siddal's works, established by the Victorian-medievalist context of the poems' genesis and – as Serena Trowbridge points out – a tendency to assume the works are biographical.<sup>235</sup> Close reading, however, uncovers only small references to *potential* markers of gender identity.

Helen Taylor is among many modern critics who assume a male speaker of 'To touch the glove upon her tender hand', drawing a comparison to 'I care not' by exposing "the artificiality of the male speaker's courtly posturing"<sup>236</sup> – but the original poem gives no indication of the toucher's gender. Rather, it explores a tactile interaction with a woman and mourns her loss "with trembling and tears / And silence".<sup>237</sup> Taylor's suppositions are founded in culturally engrained ideologies that the author does not explicitly perpetuate, and Siddal's thematic emphasis is on psychological and spiritual distress.

Likewise, 'Thy strong arms are around me' gives an intimate account of an exhausted lover with "weary eyes"<sup>238</sup> and "faded mouth"<sup>239</sup> – perhaps, Trowbridge suggests, a contesting reference to Rossetti's customary motifs<sup>240</sup> – who describes the 'strong' arms and 'low' voice of their companion. While redolent of feminine and masculine characteristics respectively, bodily concerns do not form the foundational

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<sup>235</sup> Serena Trowbridge, "Introduction and notes" in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), pp.7-19, p.16.

<sup>236</sup> Beverly Taylor, "Beatrix/Creatrix: Elizabeth Siddal as Muse and Creator" in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 1994, Issue 4, pp.29-49, p.37.

<sup>237</sup> Elizabeth Siddal 'To touch the glove upon her tender hand' in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.89, ll.7-8.

<sup>238</sup> Elizabeth Siddal 'Thy strong arms are around me' in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), pp.86-87, l.14.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, ll.15-16.

<sup>240</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys Soul*, p.88.

crux of the poem, which instead dissects the inner turmoil of the depleted individual whose mouth “may not laugh again.”<sup>241</sup> The full stop is a rare occurrence of punctuation in Siddal’s poetry, asserting decisive finality that contradicts the uncertainty introduced by the modal auxiliary ‘may’.

Siddal equally demonstrates an ability to switch between speakers within a poem – or for one speaker to adopt the voice of another, suggesting gender’s performative, intersecting porousness. The first three stanzas of ‘I care not’ are spoken by the objectifying lover, with the eponymous Lady only emerging indirectly at the end:

Then who shall close my Lady’s eyes,  
And who shall fold her hands?  
Will any hearken if she cries  
Up to the unknown lands?<sup>242</sup>

A poignant temporal shift moves the poem into an imagined future, as the simultaneous emergence of concern for the lady suggests two possibilities: that the lady herself speaks, referencing herself in the third person, or that she has been speaking all along, satirising her admirer.

Ultimately, the identity of the speaker is ancillary to the appeal to the ‘unknown lands’ itself. The reader does not know what she cries, or why – if it is a shout of anguish, an appeal to a higher power, or both. Primacy is instead granted to the experience of suffering, the wordless howl of torment that may or may not be answered. Furthering the theme of quashed female voice, it is equally unclear if the lady can shout at all – it is not ‘when’ she cries, but ‘if’.

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<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, ‘I care not for my Ladys soul’ in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.35, ll.13-16.



Fig. 29 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ruth and Boaz*. Pencil, watercolour and bodycolour with scratching out on paper. 29.2 x 17.6cm. Private collection. (c.1855).

Rather than suggesting impotence or feebleness, Siddal's figures – in picture and in text – retain symbolic potency as they resist signifiers of gender. In eroding specific characteristics to allow a fluidity of potential subjectivities to emerge, attention is focused on spiritual and emotional experiences and their embodied manifestation.

It is this muted but powerful performance of interiority that Rossetti mines from Siddal's designs. Rather than "striv[ing] to achieve the same naïve effect in his own work"<sup>243</sup> he lifts the gestures and postures of Siddal's studies of *Jephthah's Daughter* to generate grappling sadness in love, optimising pathos. Not unexpectedly, these works reunite lovers rather than family, with works like *Ruth and Boaz* and *Carlisle Wall (The Lovers)* (1853) paralleling attitude and position but with romantic connotation.

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<sup>243</sup> Youde, p.122.

## Erotic Activation



Fig. 30 Elizabeth Siddal, *Pippa Passes*. Pen and brown ink. 23.4 x 29.8cm. The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1854).

Vitaly, Siddal's lessened emphasis on gender identity does not sanitise or eradicate sexuality in her works. In a pencil and ink imagining of a passage from Robert Browning's 1841 verse drama *Pippa Passes*, Siddal depicts the upright, elfin Pippa encountering a group of women whose louche, overlapping bodies are voluptuous and feminine: hair is shaped and styled; the outline of waists and breasts are apparent; and postures are curved, creasing the fabric of their dresses.

Revealing that Siddal can embody gender and sensuousness in her drawings, and that the “stiff and sketchy”<sup>244</sup> figures she conjures are an artistic choice and not wholly indicative of a “lack of anatomical study and life drawing”,<sup>245</sup> these (numerous) animated, disordered women are juxtaposed to the (single) virtuous heroine.

Pippa performs “the innocent girl in opposition to the ‘women of loose life’... distinguished by their dress and posture, and formally separated from Pippa by the vertical column in the centre of the composition.”<sup>246</sup> Embedded within this archetypal vision of the rare ‘virgin’ and the common ‘whore’ there is a meeting, a commonality discovered in the interface between factions.

Commenting on the figures on the steps, Amy Ujvari St. Jean notes “their proximity to Pippa and their subtle similarity to her, coupled with their role as savior in preserving her purity”,<sup>247</sup> detecting in Pippa a “transformed perception of the women”.<sup>248</sup> Yet while an acknowledged connection emerges, discovered between Pippa’s curious gaze and the woman who meets it with hand outstretched, the confrontation does not preface a revelation for either party; rather, it problematises and intensifies the tensions that exist in and between each categorisation.

It is notable that Pippa isn’t passing the seated women, but pauses in front of them, and her halting fascination suggests a further non-conformity. Huddled on the floor, their intertwining bodies signalling their comfort with bodily intimacy, the women appear to be aware of, and revel in, their sexual potential. Tactility is asserted through

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<sup>244</sup> Jan Marsh, *Elizabeth Siddal: Pre-Raphaelite Artist*. (Sheffield: The Ruskin Gallery, 1991), p.20.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>247</sup> Amy Ujvari St. Jean, *Unearthing Elizabeth Siddal: The voice and vision of a pre-Raphaelite artist and poet*. Kent State University (1999), PhD Thesis, p.88.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

hands which overlap shoulders and mouths, and the third figure is nearly obscured as bodies interweave, creating a sense of sapphic camaraderie.

Pippa's inquisitiveness could be interpreted as interest in their sexual freedom, attraction to their sexuality, an act of recognising her own capacity for sexuality, or all three. Her hand, held across her body in close proximity to the girdle and, behind, the genitals, could signal protection, exposure, or awakening. The physical and representational boundary between all three possibilities, and so between virtue and vice, appears remarkably thin. Caught and static, the branch she holds droops and catches the attention of the birds that hungrily peck at its leaves – an allusion to the women's potentially corrupting influence.

Potential homoerotic, or sublimated autoerotic, interest is not unique to *Pippa Passes*. The female lover of *Lovers Listening to Music* (fig.48),<sup>249</sup> while engaged in a heterosexual embrace, appears lasciviously fascinated by the women at her feet. Sitting partially up, grasping her own hair in voluptuous sensuousness, potential bisexuality is explored as she voyeuristically observes the intertwined bodies of the musicians, themselves engaged in sybaritic reverie. Their potential lesbianism compounds an otherness already asserted through their status as women of colour, a racist exoticism intensifying the fascination of their amorous audience.

In depleting the representational *onus* on the gender signifiers of the primary female subject in *Pippa Passes* and *Lover's Listening*, while emphasising the sexual potential of the lowly women in each scene, Siddal perpetuates but problematises two binaries simultaneously: first, the unity of male and female, as posited by Busst and Jung,

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<sup>249</sup> Hereafter *Lover's Listening*.

and second, the concept of 'pure' and 'fallen' femininity. Transgressive sexuality – be it heterosexual, autoerotic, or homoerotic – is undertaken in the private, interior worlds of the watching women, awakened and even acted upon in spite of their apparent status as androgynous, pre-lapsarian idylls, an act of insubordination that resists a cultural standard of purity and, in some works, of heterosexuality.



Fig. 31 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Found*. Oil on canvas. 92.1 x 81.1cm. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (c.1853).

Critically, Siddal's sexually activated female subjects do not appear to experience shame. Rossetti's unfinished double work *Found* – which Glenda Youde has identified as having close links to *Pippa Passes* (the works were developed in tandem)<sup>250</sup> – depicts the “fallen” woman crouched and green, as if rendered sick by promiscuity. Tugged at by her rescuer, the focal point of the image is the “dialogue of hands... as if one innocent world were struggling with the profane world”.<sup>251</sup>

Where Rossetti utilises touch to enact a rescue, hauling the female subject from the imprisoning wall, Siddal's intertwining, interlacing hands communicate comfort and intimacy. Resisting notions of scandal, humiliation, or confusion, Siddal's knowing female subjects in *Pippa Passes* and *Lovers Listening* appear comfortably rapt in sexual trance, caught up in the sublimation of the experience.

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<sup>250</sup> Youde, p.122.

<sup>251</sup> Bullen, *Painter and Poet*, p.77.



Fig. 32 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Hamlet and Ophelia*. Pen and black ink. 30.9 x 26.1cm. British Museum, London (1858).

It is worth noting, on the artists' handling of female sexual degradation, a further interrelation between the Rossetti and Siddal's works. Marcia Werner connects *Found* to Rossetti's contemporaneous development of *Hamlet and Ophelia*,<sup>252</sup> an association J.B. Bullen attributes to the thematic commonality of a broken vow and a woman turning away from an approaching man.<sup>253</sup> Rossetti dramatises the moment in Act 3 Scene 1 where the harangued Ophelia rejects Hamlet's accusations of licentiousness and he

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<sup>252</sup> Marcia Werner, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.192.

<sup>253</sup> Bullen, *Painter and Poet*, p.77.

curses her: “be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny”.<sup>254</sup> Kneeling on a bench and plucking a rose, Rossetti’s Hamlet symbolically strips the emblem of feminine beauty as he strips away Ophelia’s integrity.

This final iteration of the drawing stems from an earlier design, in which a sculpted, rigid, kneeling Hamlet holds his hands over his face. The pose exactly mirrors Sir Galahad in *The Quest for the Holy Grail* (fig. 60), a work conceived and designed by Siddal and completed by Rossetti and Siddal together. The similarities are striking enough to question if the early *Hamlet and Ophelia* sketch is correctly attributed to Rossetti – here, too, Ophelia turns her face from Hamlet, resolutely refusing to engage.

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<sup>254</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1, ll.137-138. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.244.



Fig. 33 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Hamlet and Ophelia*. Pencil on grey paper. 19.5 x 13.5cm. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham (c.1854).

## Sensory Sabotage

Completing the trio of Siddal's embodied resistance is her rejection of accepted modes of sensory intuition, with subjects confusing perceptual faculties as they parse external *stimuli*. The genderless, disaffected speaker of 'O god forgive me that I ranged' asks divine forgiveness for roving "into a dream of love",<sup>255</sup> the unreality of their experience comprehended as fast-changing, kaleidoscopic images that describe the after-effects of sensation. The speaker muddles information empirically gleaned in the material space, their experience oscillating between opposing positions: bodily rhythms become "a song of joy"<sup>256</sup> while the subject's "pulses quivered to the tune";<sup>257</sup> love manifests itself "in the mists of morn"<sup>258</sup> and "on the sunsets rays",<sup>259</sup> and unpleasant sensations like "the coldest blasts of winter"<sup>260</sup> become "like sweet airs in June".<sup>261</sup>

In each case, love has a psychoactive influence. Time and the faculties of sense are disrupted and compressed as morning mist is juxtaposed to dusk, a percussive pulse is perceived as vibration, and temperature is coupled with taste. Impressions received through biological apparatus blur within the mind as tropes of romance poetry clash and rebound off one another, generating ever-moving, conflicting significances as unreliable as the lost partner's love.

A bewildering disunion between body and mind is further complicated by the notion that the love-dream is pathologically inescapable – that "tears of anguish"<sup>262</sup> will

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<sup>255</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, 'O god forgive me that I ranged' in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.63, l.2.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, l.5.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, l.6.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, l.9.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, l.10.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, l.7.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, l.8.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, l.3.

“never wash / the passion from my blood”.<sup>263</sup> The allusion suggests (without explicitly stating a female speaker) irretrievable loss of virginity, problematising accepted notions of chastity, while the specificity of ‘the’ passion (as opposed to ‘this’) disassociates the speaker’s love from a specific beloved, redrawing attention to the interior experience of love and the personal consequences of desire.

Rather than having, as Trowbridge suggests, an “attractive straightforwardness”,<sup>264</sup> the poem is so disturbed by the speaker’s disordered experience that its architecture begins to rupture. Ostensibly five four-line stanzas comprised of three lines of iambic tetrameter followed by a line of iambic trimeter, overt irregularities arise: “Love kept my heart in a song of joy”<sup>265</sup> harnesses the anapaest ‘in a song’ to distort the rhythmic heartbeat of the poem at the same time it seeks to describe it, while the part-rhyme of ‘love’ and ‘blood’ in the second and last lines of the opening stanza reinforces the irreconcilable disconnect of devotion (mind) and sex (body), the latter harshly vocalised through the voiced alveolar stop.

These small but obfuscating markers enrich and convolute meaning, the body of the poem becoming – like the body of the forlorn speaker – both the receptor of, and the outward evidence of, a greater metaphysical experience. This same paradigm, wherein the body bears the trace echoes of a greater interior realm, is discovered across Siddal’s illustrations.

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<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.3-4.

<sup>264</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.14.

<sup>265</sup> Siddal, ‘O god forgive’, l.5.

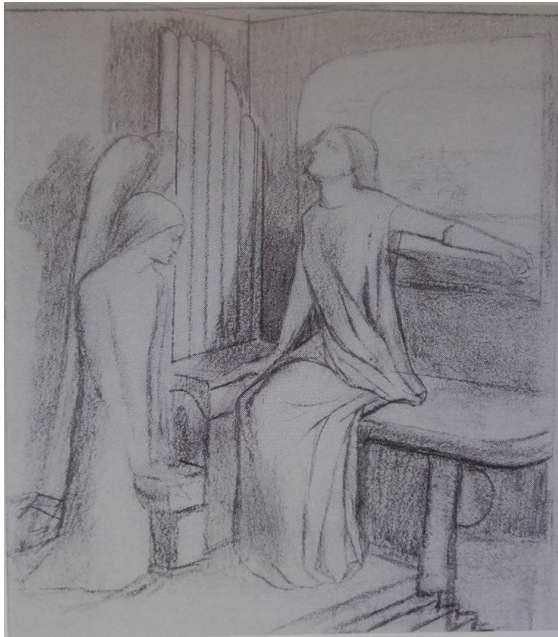


Fig. 34 Elizabeth Siddal, Study for *St Cecilia*. Pencil, pen and brown ink. 14 x 12cm. The National Trust Collection, Wightwick Manor (1855).



Fig. 35 Elizabeth Siddal, Study for *St Cecilia*. Pencil, pen, and brown ink. 21.5 x 20cm. The National Trust Collection, Wightwick Manor (1860).

Siddal's sketches of Saint Cecilia all bear signs of her idiosyncratic aesthetic, wherein sparse, linear forms are executed with considerable lightness of touch. Differentiating between Cecilia and her attending angel relies on a small number of signifiers: the human Cecilia has more detail on the body and clothing than the heavenly attendant, who has identifying wings and an aureole. In one iteration of the subject (fig.34), believed to precede the other (fig.35), woman and angel would be identical if it weren't for the outline of wings and a ghostly haziness suggestive of seraphic status. Cecilia's iconographic organ is the only prominent symbol in each piece.

Yet despite the similarities in form, each figure is gripped with complex and dramatic emotion, communicated through locked, outstretched arms and the direction of the gaze. In the earlier study, a curious role-reversal unfolds as the angel kneels at the feet of the defiant, sanctified mortal – celestial recognition for the virgin martyr's pious resolve. For all Cecilia's apparent temerity, however, the hand which appears as if it

should point in command forms a loosely balled fist, a subtle demonstration of hesitancy and faltering resolve.



Fig. 36 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *St. Cecilia*. Pen and brown ink. 9.84 x 8.25cm. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery (1856-7).

Situated alongside these two sketches by Siddal is Rossetti's own drawing of the same subject. Henry Marillier identified Siddal as a source for certain Rossetti compositions in 1899, including his *St. Cecilia*;<sup>266</sup> Surtees corroborates this assertion, citing William Michael Rossetti's remark that "Miss Siddal had made a design for the same subject which preceded Rossetti's, and that the 'detail of invention' (indicating the

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<sup>266</sup> Henry Currie Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of his Art and Life*. (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1899), p.57.

death of the Saint) was hers”.<sup>267</sup> Scant archival records mean dating Siddal’s studies is near impossible, but juxtaposition nevertheless offers insight into her representational priorities, revealed as the hagiographic subject is distilled through each artist’s lens.

Created as a companion piece for Moxon’s 1857 illustrated edition of Tennyson’s ‘The Palace of Art’, Rossetti’s variant sees the attendant figure changed into an affectionate, ambiguous being whose earthly attentions align more closely with the actions of a devoted knight. Modern scholarship widely describes this figure as an angel, presumably due to Tennyson’s original poem – the basis of Rossetti’s commission – explicitly stating it as so,<sup>268</sup> yet without the contextualising text one could be forgiven for assuming the figure is human.

Sensuousness is prioritised over Cecilia’s divine impulses: from Cecilia’s thick, unfettered hair and the synaesthesia of the organ to the Knight/angel’s close embrace, lips proximate to the saint’s own, and the rapturous slump backward in what could be heavenly ecstasy, earthly abandon, or both, Rossetti’s illustration is infused with eroticism. A deluge of symbolism surrounds the amorous pair: in the foreground a guard clutching a pike bites into a fruit, a reference to fleshly consumption played out in tandem with the pleasures of the musician. A hermeneutic obstacle course, the image asserts the primacy of the human faculty of sense above all else, divinity transmuted into carnal desire.

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<sup>267</sup> Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882): A Catalogue Raisonné*. Vol.1. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p.48.

<sup>268</sup> Tennyson, ‘The Palace of Art’ in *The Palace of Art and Other Poems*. Ed. E.H. Turpin. (New York: Maynard, Merrill & Co., 1898), pp.10-24, p.15, ll.99-100. William Michael Rossetti explains that his brother took “nothing more than a hint and an opportunity” from this original text, and Tennyson, while delighted with the image, was at a bit of a loss as to where to position it in the Moxon edition. See W.M. Rossetti, *His Family-Letters*, pp.189-190.

Siddal omits any such emphasis on sensory faculties in her own iterations, redirecting semiotic prominence on the interior space of the saint, the ghostly sketch existing as the superficial, proprioceptive echo of an imaginative realm that is performed and perceived through the margin of the body. Her Cecilia is gripped by psychic turmoil, an experience discerned but critically divorced from her physical being – in her later drawing, the martyr kneels with face and arms upturned as if seized in an unconscious surrender that could either be ecstatic reverie or contorted torment. Dramatic and complex, limited visual apparatus is manipulated to communicate seismic extrasensory capabilities that can be traced – but not comprehended – in the body as it exists in the material space.

Sex & the soul



Fig. 37 Elizabeth Siddal, *The Descent from the Cross*. Pen and black ink and brown wash on paper. 19.7 x 14.0cm. Private Collection (Unknown).<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> According to Christie's, who sold the work in 2011, William Michael Rossetti's note on the reverse reads 'last farewell before the crucifixion', suggesting the work's current title is misleading. See "Catalogue Note for *The Descent from the Cross*". Christie's <<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5521048>.> [Accessed 30 August 2023].

Oh Lord of Heaven  
how is it that we may  
have Hands true  
hearts that wildly love  
as upon this known Below

- Elizabeth Siddal, verse fragment.<sup>270</sup>

Clutching Christ's face, the veiled figure of the Virgin Mary fervently kisses her son – the tender, distraught act of a bereaved mother and pious Christian. Scratchy, linear contours of ink delineate the expressive scene with remarkable simplicity, with the Virgin and Mary Magdalene (their femininity denoted only by hair and veil) granted prominence through the manipulation of brown wash, which pools light onto their faces. Depicted in the wake of the crucifixion, the women's suffering is discerned in the physical world through the devotional kisses, but the semiotic corollaries of the act reverberate through each figure's interior spiritual and emotional worlds. The intensity of the Virgin's agony is particularly expressed as she grips Christ's face, adding an unexpectedly erotic charge to the maternal farewell, and disrupting and re-emphasising the depth and complexity of her grief and, perhaps, her virginal status.

This sense of the body inscribed with the barely controlled repercussive traces of a metaphysical experience is echoed in Siddal's verse fragment. In an appeal to the divine for understanding, the speaker asks how humanity can resolve having 'hands true' and 'hearts that wildly love'; control over the body, the poem suggests, is not indicative of dominion over the heart. Presented in tandem with this fractious confusion is the

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<sup>270</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, 'Fragments' in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), pp96-101, p.98.

indirect assumption that what is perceived in the physical world is one part of a much greater whole, the 'known below' implying the existence of an 'unknown elsewhere', a mysterious space beyond the faculties of sense and cognition.

Both Siddal and Rossetti's works depict phantoms, but where Rossetti conjures sensual subjects to externalise gynophilic desire – bringing out, in vivid and whirling technicolour, elements of the painter's (and so the viewer's) psyche – Siddal's apparitional sketches communicate in remarkably few lines and words the far-reaching interior worlds of her subjects. Gripped by emotions of considerable magnitude, the tensions implanted into her rigid, androgynous figures perform torment and ecstasy, the breadth and depth of which are detected through the peripheral borderland of the physical form. Rather than indicating that "the female persona is subject to the demands of two conflicting entities, the spectral and the physical body",<sup>271</sup> the body is shown to be the limit-edge of human experience, the perceptive boundary at the perimeter of the mind inscribed with, and contained by, unseen and challenging forces.

So Siddal's bodies are transgressive because they defy conventional emphasis on gender designation and reject a heteronormative standard, all while destabilising the relative certainty of empirical sensory perception. In effect, Siddal's bodies resist materiality itself, effectively undermining their own corporeality as they embody immense psychological and imaginative interior experiences. To Siddal, the body is a spectre, an insubstantial and nebulous manifestation of subjectivity projected into a limited and limiting reality.

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<sup>271</sup> Woolley, p.257.

## Periphrastic bodies

The conclusion to chapter one reflects on developments in criticism of the artists' works from the late nineteenth century to today, exploring how perceptions of their transgressive bodies have evolved over generations.



Fig. 38 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Love's Mirror or A Parable of Love*. Black pen and ink over pencil, with ink wash. 19.5 x 17.5cm. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham (c.1850).

Spartali's best work is more than a link in the chain of Victorian aestheticism... Spartali's portraits, especially those of the 1880s, are unusual in their psychological acuteness... There is a complex and self-aware ambivalence to Spartali's protagonists. They know that their impulses to poetry are buried by the demands of beauty.

- Dominic Green, review of *Poetry in Beauty* exhibition for *The New Criterion*, April 2016.<sup>272</sup>

Although volumes of Christina's poetry pop up elsewhere (and while Elizabeth's stiff, simple watercolours and drawings appear at various points), the exhibition is, effectively, a retrospective for Gabriel... why pretend otherwise? One possible answer: the zeitgeist demands collaboration, not individual genius.

- Alastair Sooke, review of *The Rossettis* exhibition for *The Telegraph*, April 2023.<sup>273</sup>

Rhetoric surrounding the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and Marie Spartali has evolved considerably in the century and a half since they were first created and exhibited, yet foundational points of criticism linger. Like Henry James's 1875 remarks in *The Atlantic* and *The Galaxy*, Dominic Green's complimentary review of the 2016 exhibition *Poetry in Beauty* struggles to reconcile a "complex and self-aware ambivalence" in Spartali's portraits. Offering a sense of indeterminacy comparable to James's "aroma, a hidden significance, a loveliness",<sup>274</sup> both the nineteenth and the twenty-first century critic seem to share a sense of something profound in Spartali's works obscured by aesthetic practice: a detectable but inexpressible interiority in which the knowing subject hints at their own subjectivity and their status as sign.

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<sup>272</sup> Dominic Green, "Pre-Raphaelite Sister: Marie Spartali Stillman". *The New Criterion*. 4 April 2016. <<https://newcriterion.com/blogs/dispatch/pre-raphaelite-sister-marie-spartali-stillman>> [Accessed 2 March 2024].

<sup>273</sup> Alastair Sooke, "The Rossettis: Radical? Plain creepy, more like". *The Telegraph*. 4 April 2023. <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/the-rossettis-radical-romantics-tate-britain-review/>> [Accessed 2 March 2024].

<sup>274</sup> James, "Art", p.119.

This oblique allusion to veiled consciousness is wrought as Spartali appropriates and redeploys Rossetti's abbreviating methodology, re-naturalising bodily motifs and asserting a sense of cerebral activity and poise. The artist does not, Green notes, permit "decorative details... [to] overcome the personality of the sitter"<sup>275</sup> – a perceived crime of Pre-Raphaelitism generally – but focuses on generating a feminine body that exhibits self-awareness and ingenuity, and that knows herself observed.

Recent reviews of Siddal and Rossetti exhibitions are equally similar in tone to their Victorian equivalents. Alastair Sooke's remarks on the 2023 Tate Britain exhibition *The Rossettis* for *The Telegraph* once more confines Siddal to a passing aside, much like Ford Madox Brown's diary entry and William Michael Rossetti's review of the 1857 display at Fitzroy Square. Referenced briefly in parentheses, Sooke dismisses Siddal's illustrations as stiff, simple, and inconsequential to Rossetti's. A similar comment is made by Jonathan Jones for *The Guardian*, which briskly describes Siddal's illustrations "clumsy and inert".<sup>276</sup>

Both critics are more curious about Tate Britain's motivations for presenting the exhibition. Sooke questions the presence of Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, concluding that it must be a consequence of modern attitudes to equality and collaboration – an accusation that he could equally level at this thesis. Jones regrets the display's "desperation to see the Rossettis as high-minded and progressive",<sup>277</sup> distastefully pointing out that *Bocca Baciata* is rather "a dirty joke, or sexual boast."<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Green, "Pre-Raphaelite Sister".

<sup>276</sup> Jonathan Jones, "The Rossettis review – lurid, luscious-lipped beauties drown out the family's real talent". *The Guardian*. 4 April 2023. <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/apr/04/rossettis-review-tate-dante-gabriel-christina>> [Accessed 2 March 2024].

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

Dryly concluding “what a laugh”,<sup>279</sup> Jones’s aversion is shared by his colleague at *The Telegraph*. Rossetti was sexist, says Sooke, his work “irredeemably porny”,<sup>280</sup> and *The Rossettis* exhibition only perpetuates that sexism – perhaps even defends it. Jones, Sooke and William Holman Hunt appear to see eye to eye.

Donna Ferguson, writing for *The Observer* in 2023 ahead of an exhibition at the Lady Lever Art Gallery, demonstrates the greatest evolution in commentary surrounding the artists since the late nineteenth century:

An infamous womaniser and a depressive insomniac who became a heavy drinker, Rossetti repeatedly made excuses in his letters to Rae, a Liverpudlian banker, about why the paintings Rae had bought weren’t ready on time... In 1882, paralysed and psychotic due to his addition to whisky and chloral, Rossetti died.<sup>281</sup>

This biting autobiographical epigraph reconceives of Rossetti as a troubled man, humanised through substance misuse and ill health; a critically different perception than romantic image of passionate, creative genius that emerged in the century after his death.

These persistent critiques of the artist’s works – Rossetti’s eroticism, Siddal’s simplicity, and Spartali’s obscurity – are the consequence of an underlying commonality: a commitment to disrupting the presentation of the body to gesturally reference (and, in some respects, make manifest) psychological and metaphysical concerns. Relational and contradictory, materiality is resisted or subverted to suggest a realm of existence beyond delimited physical space – be that the human form empirically comprehended in

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<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> Sooke, “The Rossettis: Radical?”

<sup>281</sup> Donna Ferguson, “‘Constant diarrhoea’ and other excuses: Rossetti’s five years of apologies for unfinished art revealed” *The Observer*. 17 December 2023.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/dec/17/rossetti-unfinished-art-george-rae-letter-excuses-diarrhoea>> [Accessed 2 January 2024].

the material world, or its representation in word and image. A sense of knowing is bound up in this oblique gesture towards something greater, a conviction that the faculties of the human body alone are inherently deficient to capture or communicate any ontological truth.

The potency of the intersection between mind and body can be traced in Rossetti's *Love's Mirror, or A Parable of Love*, a medievalist subject in which a (male) tutor assists his (female) student in the generation of a self-portrait. Summarising Rossetti's approach to the erotic female subject as a "fusio[n] of his desires and their object",<sup>282</sup> it is an illustration preoccupied with the act of looking. The artist-teacher looks at the reflection in the mirror; the artist-student looks at the portrait; and the jovial woman in the background looks at her master, completing a trio of gaze. None in the triangulation have their gaze returned.

The split between teacher and student is divided over gender lines. The male artist-creator doesn't look at the student he assists, but deflects his gaze *via* the mirror to the portrait. That his fascination rests with the reflection inscribed in the art-object, rather than its source, mirrors Rossetti's process in creating the erotic double works: taking anatomical markers from the 'stunner' model, the poet-painter amplifies and redeploys them in text and image, shaping the dual sign-systems to intensify their relation to one another. Emerging between these symbols is a female subject as alluring as she is threatening, her potency correlated to the desire of her maker, who fashions her from borrowed parts. Related to, but disconnected from, flesh-and-blood femininity, the

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<sup>282</sup> Martin A. Danahay, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Virtual Bodies" in *Victorian Poetry*, vol.36, no.4, winter 1998, pp.379-97, p.386.

representation (and the process of forging the representation) becomes a process of mediation of the self, wherein the self misinterprets the erotic female subject as other.

The female artist-student, meanwhile, gazes expressionless at the portrait she nominally creates, but under the close control of her teacher. Operating within a representational space that is limited by patriarchal influence, her relationship with the image is one of fascinated and unemotional ambiguity. Can the painting be called her creation, or is it too closely shepherded by her teacher's influence? Is it a fair likeness, or has it been disrupted in the process of art-creation? Does she recognise herself, or does she see a conception of herself that she struggles to reconcile with her own? Is she grateful for his guidance and fascinated by the process, or challenged by the limitations levied upon her?

Perhaps it is both: pleasure in an ideal, and unease with its inauthenticity, can co-exist, as evidenced in Spartali's portraits. Adopting and gently modifying Rossetti's aesthetic, these works begin to assert a sense of intelligent, capable, but fundamentally inaccessible subjectivity, revealing in the process the simulacra of femininity that haunts both real and imagined women. As revelatory as they are sumptuous, her single half-length portraits revise Aestheticist methodologies to obliquely reference interiority, contradiction forming a female subject that straddles the representational and the real.

Ostensibly, *A Parable of Love* shares little with Siddal's artistry: her own approach to art-creation rejects hyperfocus on the single portrait of the female subject in favour of dramatic scenes wherein linear bodies are encoded with hints of a vivid interior world. Here, the body is understood to exist as the margins of a greater, spiritual and conceptual realm, its capacities winked at by the spectre of the body in material space.

Emily Orlando, who proposes a better title for *A Parable of Love* would be “A Parable of Art”,<sup>283</sup> detects a kinship between Rossetti’s drawing and Siddal’s *Lady of Shalott* (fig.44). Suggesting that Siddal restructures the relationship between the female creative, her reflection, and dominant male influence, Orlando suggests that Siddal’s *Shalott* ruptures both the mirror and the patriarch’s controlling gaze, rejecting her position as “an instrument of the aesthetic process”.<sup>284</sup> In breaking out of her role, however, she has nowhere to turn, and the act of insubordination will result only in death and the cessation of all symbolic power.

It is the knotty, overlapping interrelation between the mind and the body, the artist and the subject, self and other – epitomised in *A Parable of Love* – that seems a central concern of the works of all three artists. Each disrupts the presentation of the body to gesturally reference something beyond the scope of its means; a process which seems to knowingly indicate the futility of the enterprise. The corporeal form, distilled and replicated in representational space, is a symbolic site onto which complex ideas and experiences can be inscribed, but never authentically accessed or regenerated. Recognising its flaws and its limitations, the presentation of the subject can only nod towards that which exists beyond itself; a known but unknowable realm of experience, potently referenced but ineffable.

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<sup>283</sup> Orlando, p.633.

<sup>284</sup> Rosalind White, “What of her glass without her? Prismatic Desire and Autoerotic Anxiety in the Art and Poetry of Dante Rossetti.” in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*. Spring 2019, Issue 28, pp.16-35, p.24.

## 2. Beyond the bounds: nature and aberration

Chapter two considers three sites occupied by the transgressive body in the artists' works: the walled garden; the forest; and the page or canvas of the art-object itself. It explores how desire is expressed, legitimised, corrupted or controlled within these spaces, raising questions of freedom and constraint, nature and aberration. Focusing on Marie Spartali's and Elizabeth Siddal's respective *oeuvres*, it examines how the physical and conceptual boundaries levied on femininity might be tested, circumnavigated or lacerated.

Borderlands: sites of desire



Fig. 39 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Mariana*. Watercolour and gouache on paper. 38.1 x 27.4cm. Private collection (1867).

The door was shut. I looked between  
Its iron bars; and saw it lie,  
My garden, mine, beneath the sky...

It had been mine, and it was lost.

- Christina Rossetti, 'Shut Out'.<sup>1</sup>

Marie Spartali's *Mariana* gazes out of an open window, a pane of crown glass pulled back as far as it can go. Situated beside the watching subject, the viewer's perspective of her outlook is limited; only a narrow sliver of a walled garden is discernible, and an indistinct realm of green beyond. Her close proximity imbues the portrait with a sense of claustrophobic isolation, intensified by the subtle tension sublimated into her clasped hands. Leaning on the windowsill, she seems to gently push against the boundary of the interior, drawn toward the world outside of her home.

Taken from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Mariana's confinement has been precipitated by tragic misfortune. Her brother and her dowry have been lost at sea, and Angelo – her betrothed, whose affections are discovered to be motivated by money rather than love or honour – betrays her. Neither wife nor maid, Mariana is condemned to the life of an outcast, severed from desire and rejected by both Viennese society and the man she still loves.

Mariana's house arrest figures her ostracisation, her transgressive status annexed to her captivity within the domestic space. The outdoor realm references her prior state of (relative) romantic liberation, becoming affiliated with past sensations of love and joy; its view now fades, along with Mariana's hopes of marriage. Spartali hints

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<sup>1</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'Shut Out' in *Poems of Christina Rossetti*. Ed. William M. Rossetti. (London: MacMillan & Co, 1904), pp.215-216, p.215, ll.1-8.

at the at the waste occasioned by Angelo's disloyalty through the ripe, unpicked fruit of the tree, doomed to spoil along with the subject's own youthful fecundity.

Angelo will ultimately be compelled to marry Mariana, legitimising their union, but Spartali elects to depict her at a moment of spurned precarity. This state of Edenic crisis, wherein a knowing Eve longs to return to the paradisaical promise of the garden that can be seen but not accessed, is echoed in Christina Rossetti's poem 'Shut Out'. Here, the cause of the speaker's incarceration is unclear, but appears related to their desire; when they ask for a token of the garden to hold, their guard – a blank male phantom with intractable power – builds a wall, blocking the view.

Both Spartali's Mariana and Christina Rossetti's poetic speaker have entered the garden and come to know the delights contained therein, but in crossing its borders they have risked their freedom. Evicted by unseen and intransigent powers, they are compelled to go back inside, their suffering intensified by their newly entered state of knowledge. Both endure their exile, haunted by the memory of former bliss and the spectre of the hegemonies that incarcerate them.

Spartali's open window offers a sense of porousness denied to Christina Rossetti's prisoner, whose tarnished view of the garden is doubly impeded as they become "blinded by tears".<sup>2</sup> An unsealed aperture that creates a partial sense of "liberation and spiritual expansion",<sup>3</sup> it heightens the tensions inscribed in Mariana's representation by hinting at a possible alternative. Straining softly toward it, Spartali's Mariana offers a taut stoicism absent from the louche boredom of Henrietta Rae's (c.1880s) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's (1870) *Mariana*, or the aching *ennui* of Millais' (1851).

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<sup>2</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'Shut Out', p. 216, l.22.

<sup>3</sup> Sophia Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel: Narrative Challenges to Visual Gendered Boundaries*. (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2005), p.65.

Spartali frequently positions the female subject on, beside, or flanked by an opening in a perimeter wall, be it a window, *loggia*, or balcony; *Self-Portrait, or On A Balcony* (fig.19), *Beatrice* (1896) (fig.20), and *Cloister Lilies* (fig.21) all offer the same subtle resistance to an architectural barrier as *Mariana*. Generating these semi-permeable sites allows a “view to the outdoors... problematiz[ing] Victorian women’s relation to the world beyond the domestic interior”,<sup>4</sup> and perhaps reflects the status of the ‘new woman’ of the nineteenth century more broadly; her freedoms are limited, and she remains restricted in both a physical and conceptual sense.

A sense of centrifugal, bordered sites of female occupation emerges as the walls of homes and gardens are inscribed and perforated. Each space is radially segmented: at the centre the domestic interior; next is the medial space of the garden; and beyond that a third, known but unknowable realm delimited by the garden wall. It is this final space that *Mariana* seems to look into, an obscure, remote area of green occupied by the roving Angelo.

Dinah Roe has recognised the symbolic value of the wall to act “as a framing device that isolates the garden’s contents, limits its reach, and contains the visitor, yet in doing so, it gestures beyond itself”.<sup>5</sup> Specifying its perimeter “both affirm[s] the power of boundaries and create[s] the conditions for their transgression”,<sup>6</sup> obliquely referencing the existence of a space of freedom beyond its limits. For Spartali’s *Mariana*, the realm beyond the garden wall is aligned with erotic freedoms and independence of spirit more broadly.

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<sup>4</sup> Herrington, *Three Graces*.

<sup>5</sup> Dinah Roe, “Naturally Artificial: The Pre-Raphaelite Garden Enclosed” in *Victorian Poetry*. Vol. 57. No.1. Spring 2019, pp.131-153, p.148. *Project MUSE*, <[doi:10.1353/vp.2019.0002](https://doi.org/10.1353/vp.2019.0002)> [Accessed 28 July 2023].

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Roe goes further, suggesting that the Pre-Raphaelite garden wall acts “not only as a space for art appreciation but also as a figure for art itself”,<sup>7</sup> an approach which conceives of the motif as the enclosing frame of a painting or page of a poem. Such interpretation holds particular significance for the Victorian female artist: in obliquely interpolating the borders of the painting into the representation, she can probe at the limitations levied on the art-object itself. Gesturally referenced in the process is an acknowledged but indefinite space that lies beyond its own edges; a site of enfranchising possibility, if the boundary could be surpassed.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



Fig. 40 Elizabeth Siddal, *Lady Affixing Pennant to a Knight's Spear*. Watercolour on paper. 13.7 x 13.7cm. Tate Britain, London (1856).

Elizabeth Siddal's creation of radial sites of occupation appear correlated to larger questions surrounding gender roles, including the status of the female creative. Her *Lady Affixing a Pennant to a Knight's Spear* depicts a soon-to-be-parted pair of lovers undertaking a final task before the knight's departure. Two apertures signal an inequitable porousness in the boundary between the interior and exterior worlds, the openings of window and doorway correlated to the female and male figure respectively.

Mirroring conceptual limitations levied on the lady, the window is both open and closed, its view to distant hills partially obscured by roundels of glass. The knight has unhindered access through the open door, where horse and squire wait to assist him. Greenery echoes these differing levels of liberty and containment, the windowsill's modest pot plant juxtaposed to the branches of a large tree seen through the doorway. Freedom, it seems, offers greater opportunity for these plant entities to thrive.

Notably, the scene's activity centres on the knight affixing the pennant – contradicting the work's title – creating a totemic object that fuses his weapon and her hand-made token. In taking her handiwork with him, he takes a fragment of herself over the threshold, the art-object enfranchised (in his custody) to cross a boundary that she cannot. This partial expression and dissemination of an element of her identity raises questions surrounding the status of female-produced art more broadly. In relinquishing the pennant, does it remain her own, or does it become subsumed into his identity? Does it offer her some form of visibility and liberty, or underscore her restriction and absence? Is this a scene of mutual reliance, of co-dependence, or of her dependence on him?

Generating marginal sites of occupation through the delineation of boundaries, the works of Spartali, Siddal and Dante Gabriel Rossetti simultaneously impose limitations on their subjects and reference the possibility of overcoming them. For Spartali and Siddal particularly, the creation of prescribed female spaces highlights the precarity of the delimiting wall, and their subjects experience both opportunity and profound threat.

Three marginal sites are explored in this chapter, each recurrent through the artists' works and each steeped in literary-aesthetic tradition. The first is the walled garden of medieval romance, a site conventionally allied with mannered and tempered

chivalric love affairs, wherein erotic impulses can be legitimately expressed and explored. Where Rossetti utilises the space to untether female desire, Spartali and Siddal's Edenic frontiers are sites fraught with danger, as intrepid visions of Eve are imperilled not by the lapsarian serpent, but by Adam's whim.

The second space is the wilds of the forest, a precarious landscape that – particularly in the Siddal's poetry and illustration – is entered after the rupture of a relationship, once the euphoric state of first-loving is irrevocably lost. Existing as a borderland between the material world and the psyche, the knowing, disenfranchised subject wanders in agony between the trees. Corrupted by desire and controlled by unseen forces, they might aberrate, humanity rendered monstrous within a feral landscape.

The final section of the chapter looks at a border identified by Dinah Roe: the picture frame itself, as the female artist crosses out of her socially prescribed role and into a public profession. Conceiving of the art-object as a manifestation of ambition, it looks inside and outside of the canvas to explore how Siddal and Spartali tackled prescriptive notions of femininity. Operating at the margins of an *avant-garde* movement while closely affiliated to its centre, both artists walked the tightrope between propriety and immorality, legitimacy and illegitimacy, nature and artifice, and in the process made a case for a new kind of art that is valued for its origins in othered experience.

## Visions of a New Eden

The first section of chapter two looks at the space of the walled garden in the artists' works, and questions the extent of its liberation.



Fig. 41 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Roman de la Rose*, watercolour on paper. 34.3 x 34.3cm. Tate Britain, London (1864).

“I was half mad with beauty on that day,  
And went without my ladies all alone,  
In a quiet garden walled round every way;

“I was right joyful of that wall of stone,  
That shut the flowers and trees up with the sky,  
And trebled all the beauty...

...in that garden fair

“Came Launcelot walking; this is true, the kiss  
Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,  
I scarce dare talk of the remember’d bliss...

“After that day why is it Guenevere grieves?”

- William Morris, ‘The Defence of Guenevere’.<sup>8</sup>

Roses burst into bloom in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s 1864 watercolour *Roman de la Rose*, a work doubled with selected lines from Guillaume de Lorris’s poem of the same name. In a long-established literary trope asserted by the work’s title, the flowers become synonymous with the desired female subject, their bursting fecundity a reflection of her beauty, sexual awakening, and the couple’s blossoming love. Symbolically merged, the contained eruption of both woman and rose is permissible because of the temporal distance of the medievalist setting and the curated order of the outdoor space, governed and enclosed by the surrounding trellis.

An antediluvian signifier that connotes both the Fall of Man on a biblical scale and a humble pastime on another, the symbol of the walled garden constitutes a natural but structured space cultivated through human interference. For Rossetti’s female subject the result of this controlled intervention is, somewhat paradoxically, emancipating.

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<sup>8</sup> William Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1908), pp.7-9, ll.109-141.

Within the *hortus conclusus*, used as a *locus amoenus*, she is sufficiently enfranchised to instigate the kiss, indicated as she bends down to meet the face of her kneeling lover – an act granted divine approval by the supervisory angel. Within the walled garden the courtly lady can act upon her impulses with propriety due to the safety afforded by its containment, its sexual liberation dependent on its regulation.

Yet the perimeter can magnify as well as contain, the bursting vitality of the bordered garden endangering the female subject. William Morris' poem 'The Defence of Guenevere' imagines the adulterous queen justifying her infidelity with Launcelot, an event that was initiated within a walled garden. Recalling that she was 'half mad with beauty on that day', Guenevere rejoices in the stone boundary's delimiting capabilities, expressing gratitude as it intensifies the cultivated splendour of the garden space. But its rigid edges also create the conditions for her downfall, forming a crucible that 'trebles' the beauty of the natural environment and, by inference, the madness-inciting beauty within her mind. So concentrated, its amplification of charm renders iniquity inevitable.

Notably, Guenevere describes her 'madness' as near-total synthesis with the natural world; holding her hand up to the sky, she feels as though "that by rights [she] ought to see quite through".<sup>9</sup> This is also the only moment within the poem that she expresses profound clarity ('this is true'), indicative of a lucidity experienced both during the event and in her remembrance of it.

The revelatory cohesion of humanity and nature experienced in the build-up to the fated kiss queries the heterodoxy of Guenevere and Launcelot's love-making. If the act was undertaken within the context of complete fidelity to the environment, is its

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8, l.123.

perceived aberration natural, or a consequence of artificial control? The court's denunciation of Guenevere, in contrast, has caused rupture. Condemned to burn for her sins she begins to disassociate, referring to herself in the third person: 'After that day why is it Guenevere grieves?'

Morris' use of a walled garden as the setting of Guenevere and Lancelot's mutual act of passion is a notable departure from his source materials. Thomas Malory's fifteenth century *Le Morte d'Arthur* omits the context of Lancelot and Guinevere's union,<sup>10</sup> while the thirteenth century Vulgate Cycle places the couple in a meadow. In this earlier French iteration, Guinevere brings three of her ladies with her and initiates the kiss; Lancelot is too shy.<sup>11</sup> If Morris is making a case for humanity's integration with the natural world to achieve holistic connection, it is coalescence with a site that remains symbolically controlled, not a return to unspoilt, untamed nature.

For Morris and Rossetti, the walled garden is not "a conventional accompaniment of feminine purity, a sacred space where the modern Madonna inhabited an insular sanctuary of artificially preserved maidenhood";<sup>12</sup> nor is a space of "female resistance to male encroachment".<sup>13</sup> Rather, the delimited arena creates "a mythic space accommodating the erotic passion which dominant sexual ideology strove to contain";<sup>14</sup> particularly female passion, awakened and untethered amidst the gorgeous fecundity of the outdoor space.

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<sup>10</sup> Morris uses the spelling 'Guenevere', while Malory and the Vulgate Cycle use 'Guinevere'.

<sup>11</sup> In Morris' version Guenevere is alone, and the kiss mutual. See Margaret Lourie, "Explanatory Notes on The Defence of Guenevere". *William Morris Archive*. <<https://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/explanatory-notes-on-the-defence-of-guenevere>> [Accessed 30 March 2024].

<sup>12</sup> Susan P. Casteras, "John Everett Millais' 'Secret-Looking Garden Wall' and the Courtship Barrier in Victorian Art" in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol.13, spring 1985, pp.71-98, p.72. <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S009247250000537X>> [Accessed 10 February 2024].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Deborah Gail Schizer, *Eroticising the Middle Ages: Gender and Sexuality in Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism*. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1995, p.10.

The works of Marie Spartali and Elizabeth Siddal similarly make use of the walled garden as a site to unfetter female desire, but to cross its boundary is to make an irrevocable choice that demands profound risk. This is not a space where romantic impulse can be blissfully explored amidst the shrubbery, but a precarious borderland wherein the bisecting perimeter wall inscribes and exacerbates restrictions levied upon othered subjects. Once the crossing has been made, her fate will be determined by an unseen, intractable power – one that exists beyond influence and beyond comprehension.

## Crossing the Rubicon



Fig. 42 Elizabeth Siddal and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, A panel from *Jane Morris' Jewel Casket*. Painted wood, iron frame, hinges and clasp. 17.7 x 29.2 x 17.7cm. The Society of Antiquities of London, Kelmscott Manor (c.1859).

The lovers in a panel from Siddal and Rossetti's unfinished collaboration *Jane Morris' Jewel Casket* navigate their courtship within the delimited environment of a

walled garden. Sharing a preference for “images that through imagination transcended mere actuality: the truth of feeling rather than that of fact”,<sup>15</sup> the artists lean on the codification of chivalry and the temporal distance of the medievalist aesthetic to temper the depicted exploration of desire.

Alicia Faxon identifies the image’s source as an illumination from *The Book of the Queen* by the fourteenth century Venetian court writer Christine de Pizan,<sup>16</sup> although the Victorian facsimile makes a number of alterations to the original. Latticework and grey parapets have been replaced with a flower-strewn lawn and a red brick wall suggestive of Philip Webb’s Red House, William and Jane Morris’ Bexleyheath home,<sup>17</sup> while the dividing obstruction of the tree is removed to intensify a sense of mutual attraction. Transposed and presented with fewer obstacles to their union, the medieval couple have been redeployed with renewed and immediate resonance for the artists and the Morris.

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<sup>15</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Artist*, p.22.

<sup>16</sup> Alicia Faxon, “The Influence of Christine de Pisan on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal” in *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts*. Ed. Liana de Girolami Cheney (Lampeter: Edwin Mellon Press, 1992), pp.95-105, p.98.

<sup>17</sup> William Morris commissioned and co-designed the house with Webb, and lived there with Jane Morris from 1860-1865. It was being designed at approximately the same time Rossetti and Siddal decorated the casket, which is probably designed by Webb too.



Fig. 43 Christine de Pizan, copy of an illumination from “Collected Works (‘The Book of the Queen’).” Harley Manuscript 4431, f.376. The British Library, London. (c.1410-1414).

A more visually overt, but hermeneutically ambiguous, deviation from de Pizan’s antecedent is Siddal and Rossetti’s adjustment to colour. The lady is dressed in scarlet in the nineteenth century iteration, and the royal blue is gone entirely (the gentleman, dressed in green, somewhat fades into the scenery). This substitution could indicate fervent ardour, as “the colour blue is associated with chastity and loyalty, while red commonly symbolizes passion”,<sup>18</sup> an indirect allusion to impassioned, potentially

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<sup>18</sup> Dinah Roe, *The Pre-Raphaelites from Rossetti to Ruskin* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.348. Serena Trowbridge comments on Ruskin’s preference for Siddal to be in blue versus Rossetti’s enthusiasm for red. See Trowbridge, *My Ladys Soul*, p.77.

carnal, motivations – a significant choice for the female character in a chivalrous love scene.

A flexing oscillation between red and blue, and so between *eros* and *agape*, is not unique to this Siddal-Rossetti reproduction. Siddal's 'Oh never weep' utilises a symbolic shift between these hues – understood as a change in 'fashion', and so encompassing both clothing and character – as indicative of inconstant love, exhibited by a masculine entity (perhaps the absent lover or a cupid-like embodiment of love) to secure the affections of his beloved:

Since love is seldom true,  
But changes his fashion from blue to red,  
From brightest red to blue<sup>19</sup>

While there's no suggestion that the lady on Jane's casket is inconstant, the artists' switch to a red dress challenges a binary interpretation of red/lust/masculinity and blue/purity/femininity, bestowing the figure conventionally allied with chastity with potentially lascivious fire. Where the male courtier gestures to his heart, the conceptual seat of love, she holds out the girdle of her dress.

The consequences of this obliquely communicated sexual interest are unclear. David Latham, commenting on Siddal's blue/red exchange, draws a comparison with Morris' 'The Defence of Guenevere'.<sup>20</sup> The queen's account describes a death-bed allegory in which she is presented with two lengths of cloth by an angel: one is wavy, long and blue, and presumed to denote heaven, while the other is short and red, and assumed

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, 'Oh never weep for love that is dead' in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.76, ll.1-4.

<sup>20</sup> David Latham, "A 'world of its own creation': Pre-Raphaelite Poetry and the New Paradigm for Art" in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*. Spring 2016, pp.5-27, p.20.

to align with hell.<sup>21</sup> Logic dictates the choice is blue, but – Guenevere reveals – blue leads to the inferno. Morris, like Siddal, demonstrates the limitations of a blue/red dichotomy, presenting an impossible scenario in which whatever his (anti)heroine selects, she is condemned.



Fig. 44 Elizabeth Siddal, *The Lady of Shalott*. Pen, ink and pencil on paper. 16.5 x 22.3cm. Private Collection. (1853).

For Siddal and Spartali, Eve's (re)-entry into Eden remains a perilous act, in which the outdoor space may be curated and contained, but it is also fraught with danger. Tim Barringer has noted that, despite Tennyson's preoccupation with the narrative of a woman at the mercy of mysterious hegemonic powers, Siddal's visual representation of

<sup>21</sup> Morris, *Defence of Guenevere*, pp.2-3, ll.22-38.

*The Lady of Shalott* depicts the lady at “the one moment she is in control of her own destiny”,<sup>22</sup> when she elects to activate her curse. In a horizontal re-ordering of the linear relationship between convex mirror, subject, window and reflection, the catalyst for her self-destructive act is perceived as the advancing knight Lancelot, who ignites her latent sexual interest.

The decision to leave the safety of the domiciliary interior and pursue Lancelot will cost her life, and Siddal presents divine risk in tandem with mortal danger through the inclusion of the effigy of Christ. Lawrence J. Starzyk suggests that, in positioning the lady between the Lancelot and the crucifix, Siddal “seems to be questioning the relationship between the two”,<sup>23</sup> but the ambiguity of the triangulation can equally be understood as synthesis of her desire and Christian belief. Such interpretation challenges notions of lack of purity as antithetical to goodness, following the same blurred morality as the flashing red and blue hues: Shalott’s desire for Lancelot, Siddal proposes, can co-exist with her love for God.

Specifically annexed to the signifier of the crucifix (as opposed to a cross, book of hours, or other religious motif) is the notion of corporeal sacrifice, aligning the martyrdom of Christ with the pursuit of love. The lady’s decision to act on her desire puts her at risk of both bodily and reputational damage, with death in childbirth and social disavowal presenting considerable jeopardy for both the medieval and Victorian woman. Such self-sacrifice is inevitable: the foliage of a climbing plant creeps into the window through which a tree-lined, curated outdoor environment is discerned – the space in

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<sup>22</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p.154.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence J. Starzyk, “Elizabeth Siddal and the ‘Soulless Self-Reflections of Man’s Skill’” in *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, Fall 2007, pp.8-25, p.19.

which she hopes to unite with Lancelot – vegetable nature permeating the domestic cell just as her human nature pushes out of it.

The symbol of the encroaching ivy is discovered in Spartali's *Mariana* (fig.39), a partial fragment of leaf overlapping the window frame. In this image the disastrous consequences of entering into the site of romantic dalliance have already been rendered, and the power of the garden space to legitimise Mariana's romantic impulses has evaporated along with Angelo. Pressing against the domestic threshold, she looks out of her immediate environs and into the space in which she was authorised to love, condemned to cloistered reminiscence.



Fig. 45 Elizabeth Siddal, *Study for Lady Clare*. Pen and ink, brown and black wash over pencil on paper. 14.9cm x 11.5cm. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (c.1857).

Even in instances where entering the garden realm resolves joyously for Siddal's female subjects – where the domestic interior is escaped, lovers are united, and some

form of liberation is attained – the artist’s compositional emphasis is on the personal sacrifice of crossing the Rubicon. Siddal’s *Lady Clare* depicts the moment that Clare’s distressed nurse reveals that she is the noblewoman’s biological mother. Kneeling at her daughter’s feet, she begs Clare to keep the admission a secret for her own advancement. Clare’s aristocratic betrothed, Lord Ronald, may reject her on discovering the truth of her low birth. Clare obscures her mother’s face, eliminating her identity from view even as she accepts her heredity. Resolved to tell Ronald, she opens the door behind her to reveal a regimented garden space with an enclosing wall, a line of trees, and swans on a pond. In choosing to risk all, she crosses the threshold to enter the space of romantic possibility.

The exterior space represents both Clare’s freedom and her desire. Ronald will ultimately rejoice in her honesty and agree to marry her for her integrity, but Siddal chooses to portray Clare at the moment she is caught between her mother and her lover, her body and her soul, at the dramatic zenith of a terrible choice. The manuscript-style compression of the image, in which Clare unsmilingly sags under the weight of societal and familial expectation, intensifies a sense of pressure within the interior space.

In Siddal’s final colour illustration of *Lady Clare* (1854-1857), the stained glass of the window depicts a scene from the Judgment of Solomon. The biblical narrative mirrors the theme of truth demanding sacrifice, but the presence of an ancient patriarch of Israel references and probes the hegemonic authority of man’s influence. Clare may make the decision to act, but any sense of autonomy is vitally undercut by Ronald’s jurisdiction – he may discard her, for all she renounces her domiciled maidenhood and her mother’s deception.

In each instance, the structured, contained, symbolically ordered visions of Eden are not sanctuaries where female desire can be unfettered without consequence, as discovered in Rossetti's fecund bowers. Rather, they are treacherous spaces in which the tensions between interiority and exteriority, nature and artifice, legitimacy and illegitimacy, chivalry and vulgarity are tested – all dualisms intersected by the perimeter wall.

Gardens, knowledge and power



Fig. 46 Marie Spartali Stillman, *The Enchanted Garden of Messer Ansaldo*. Watercolour and gouache on paper. 72.4 x 102.9cm. Private Collection (1889).

Now choose one cloth for ever; which they be  
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell

Of your own strength and mightiness.

- William Morris, 'The Defence of Guenevere'.<sup>24</sup>

Crucially, what imperils William Morris' Guenevere isn't which of the allegorical cloths she selects, but rather the power that creates the illusion of choice and compels

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<sup>24</sup> Morris, *Defence of Guenevere*, p.2, ll.23-25.

her to make a decision. Lacking guidance and embroiled in a situation that appears engineered to trip her up, Guenevere has only her instinct to 'somehow tell' what to do. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, argues the queen, and in the moment her options weren't straightforward; the distinction between knowledge and innocence, between red and blue hues, is deceptively complex. Under such conditions, failure is inevitable.

For Morris, as for Spartali and Siddal, the decision to enter the Edenic space is the decision to enter into an irrevocable state of knowing; Guenevere's virtue is compromised the moment that she crosses the perimeter wall. Loss of innocence renders the garden space treacherous ground, and knowledge assimilates with precarity as the female subject surrenders to a great, mysterious, and unpredictable power.

The garden's association with a state of knowledge makes it a space that can also render errant desire permissible. This is particularly true of the magic garden, which forms the setting of Spartali's *The Enchanted Garden of Messer Ansaldo* and *A Rose in Armida's Garden* (fig.102). Within these environs, the tensions between nature and artifice, perversity and conformity are intensified by their supernatural origins. Disconnected from the natural world while aping its magnificence, these arenas are designed to seduce unwilling partners into participation in sex, their fecund vibrancy masking trickery and the threat of violation.

Ansaldo has acted upon Dianora's promise to succumb to his attentions when flowers bloom in midwinter, resorting to witchcraft to meet a condition that was intended to be unachievable. *The Enchanted Garden of Messer Ansaldo* imagines Dianora and her entourage surrounded by luxurious flowers while snow and ice fill the world beyond the walls. Dianora, who is married, is honour-bound to keep her word. Spartali communicates her discomfort through wringing hands; John William Waterhouse, who

adopted the same subject in 1916, appears to borrow Dianora's anxious gesture from this earlier work.<sup>25</sup> Tasso's sorceress Armida, meanwhile, is imagined alone in a grand, wild landscape. She has conjured the garden to imprison her desired lover Rinaldo, who she captures and incarcerates in her realm of earthly delights, although Spartali's portrait focusses on the sorceress's poised tenacity over her sexual transgression.

In both cases, the solicitation of magical powers contorts and permits the seducer's lust, but also guarantees the relationship's failure. The artificiality of the botanic space renders union between the proposed lovers impossible: Armida's power is insufficient to contain Rinaldo, and he will ultimately escape; Ansaldo, realising Dianora's continued reticence, will release her from her promise. In each case, masculine prerogative dominates, just as Angelo condemns Mariana; Lord Ronald accepts Lady Clare; and the Lady of Shalott perishes at the whim of an unseen force. Only Launcelot can save Guenevere from the Knights' fire, despite his equal culpability in their sin.

While the garden is nominally a site of sexual freedom in the fecund idylls of the Rossetti's works, Spartali and Siddal demarcate the space as a site of fraught precarity. The boundary of the garden wall, while ostensibly creating a safe realm of sexual adventure, represents a risky threshold that – once crossed in the pursuit of love – can cause irrevocable damage. Intensifying the hazards of the garden, the perimeter stands in for the intractable ideologies that confine the female subject more broadly, an inflexible barrier that claims protection but creates the conditions that endanger her.

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<sup>25</sup> Jan Marsh, "The Enchanted Garden of Messer Ansaldo" in *Poetry in Beauty: The Pre-Raphaelite Art of Marie Spartali Stillman*. Ed. Margareta Frederick and Jan Marsh. (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2015), pp.104-105, p.105.

So the borderland of the garden isn't a tamed domain of liberation, but an enthralling jungle of trials, its safety an illusion as it blurs the ideologies it purports to preserve. The boundaries of virtue and vice, nature and artifice, good and evil – all binaries that are purportedly clear, rigid categories – become blurred, as blatant and confusing as the treacherous flashing of blue and red hues. In exiting the domestic interior and entering it, the female subject forfeits all, and its dangers can be catastrophic.

## Woods, masochism and monstrosity

The next section of chapter two considers the borderland of the wood relative to the Edenic promise of the walled garden, particularly in relation to the works of Elizabeth Siddal.



Fig. 47 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *How They Met Themselves*. Watercolour, 33.9 x 27.3cm. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (c.1860).

O silent wood I enter thee  
with a heart so full of misery...

I sit in thy shadow but not alone

- Elizabeth Siddal, 'O silent wood I enter thee'.<sup>26</sup>

Where Marie Spartali's *Mariana* only smudgily hints at the realm on the other side of Eden, Elizabeth Siddal introduces a third borderland site of othered occupation closely correlated to ideas of desire: the wilds of the forest. A feral and oppressive landscape that becomes synonymous with a corrupted state of knowing and loss, isolated and tormented subjects wander amidst the trees in the wake of a broken relationship.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti adopts the setting in a work closely related to Siddal. Strolling through a wood at twilight, the finely attired couple of *How They Met Themselves* stumble upon their doppelgängers. The confrontation is a moment of folkloric portent – “traditionally, to meet one’s doppelgänger is to experience an omen of death”<sup>27</sup> – and the profundity of the encounter is encapsulated in the lovers’ fervent but diverse reactions. The woman falls back into a faint, her outstretched arms a simultaneous gesture of appeal and rejection, greeting and collapse. Her companion draws his sword, but fails to wield it; perhaps he is overcome with shock, or perhaps he recognises its impotence against an otherworldly threat. Slumping flaccidly to one side, a barrier forms between the pair and their spectral visitors.

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, 'O silent wood', in *My Lady's Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. by Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.72, ll.1-12.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Cheeke, "What Did Rossetti Believe?" in *Essays in Criticism*. Vol. 63, No.2., April 2013, pp.148-176, p.171. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgt002>> [Accessed 23 January 2024].

The arcane significances of *How They Met Themselves* likely held particular resonances for both Rossetti and Siddal, appearing rooted in shared artistic ideologies. They modelled the couple (and so their doubles), and Rossetti re-worked the image during their Parisian honeymoon in 1860.<sup>28</sup> The foreboding forest setting – described by J.B. Bullen as an “arboreal claustrophobic horror”<sup>29</sup> – is a recognisable landscape within Siddal’s own pictures and poetry, wherein woodland becomes a pressurised space in which to scrutinise the suffering mind.

Despite the profound influence the supernatural beings have over their mortal equivalents, the nature of Rossetti’s eerie beings (and so the source of the couple’s distress) is not immediately apparent. Emitting a warm glow and united in a comforting embrace, the doppelgängers appear calm, their composed manner intensifying their mystery and potential threat. They could be flesh-and-blood beings; apparitions; replicas of their originals; or alter egos, generated by sorcery or by divinity. Both return the gaze of their equivalent, the narcissistic act depersonalising the subject and catalysing the rupture that renders them inert. Appropriating the ancient forest as a primeval, recessed cipher for the human psyche, Rossetti’s adventurers must reach into its depths and face – rather than the beasts or witches of fairy-tale – the monstrosity of the self.

Siddal’s poem ‘O silent wood I enter thee’ similarly uses the wood as a borderland site for the subject to endure a difficult, uncanny encounter with an indefinable being. Entering the woodland to regenerate the sensations of a past relationship, the presence seems both a product of the speaker’s memory and an

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<sup>28</sup> Bullen, *Painter and Poet*, p.135.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

independent entity that resists control. Just as Rossetti's artist-narrator in 'The Portrait' attempts (and fails) to recreate the vivid dynamism of a lost lover in paint "mid mystic trees",<sup>30</sup> Siddal's psychically generated love-ghost is both semiotically powerful and materially absent.

In both Siddal's 'O silent wood' and Rossetti's 'The Portrait,' the forest forms part of a fallen vision of prior romance, and the speaker longs for the past revelation of love; not to re-enter a state of innocence, but to relive innocence being lost. The rupturing consequences of isolation are profound, and just as *How They Met Themselves* represents "a moment that unites presence and absence, plenitude and loss ... a moment of revelation that invites the dark other side of sublimity",<sup>31</sup> so the poetic speakers fuse past and present, lack and abundance, as they grieve within in the wood. For Siddal, exile amidst the trees can prove transformative. As pain substitutes love, so desire can mutate into something callous, uncontrollable, aberrative – perhaps even monstrous.

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<sup>30</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'The Portrait' in *Poems, Third Edition*. (London: F.S. Ellis, 1870), pp.127-132, p.128, ll.20.

<sup>31</sup> Alison Chapman, "Uncanny Epiphanies in the Nineteenth—Century Sonnet Tradition" in *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*. Ed. Wim Tigges. (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), pp.115-136, p.115.

## Beyond the Wall

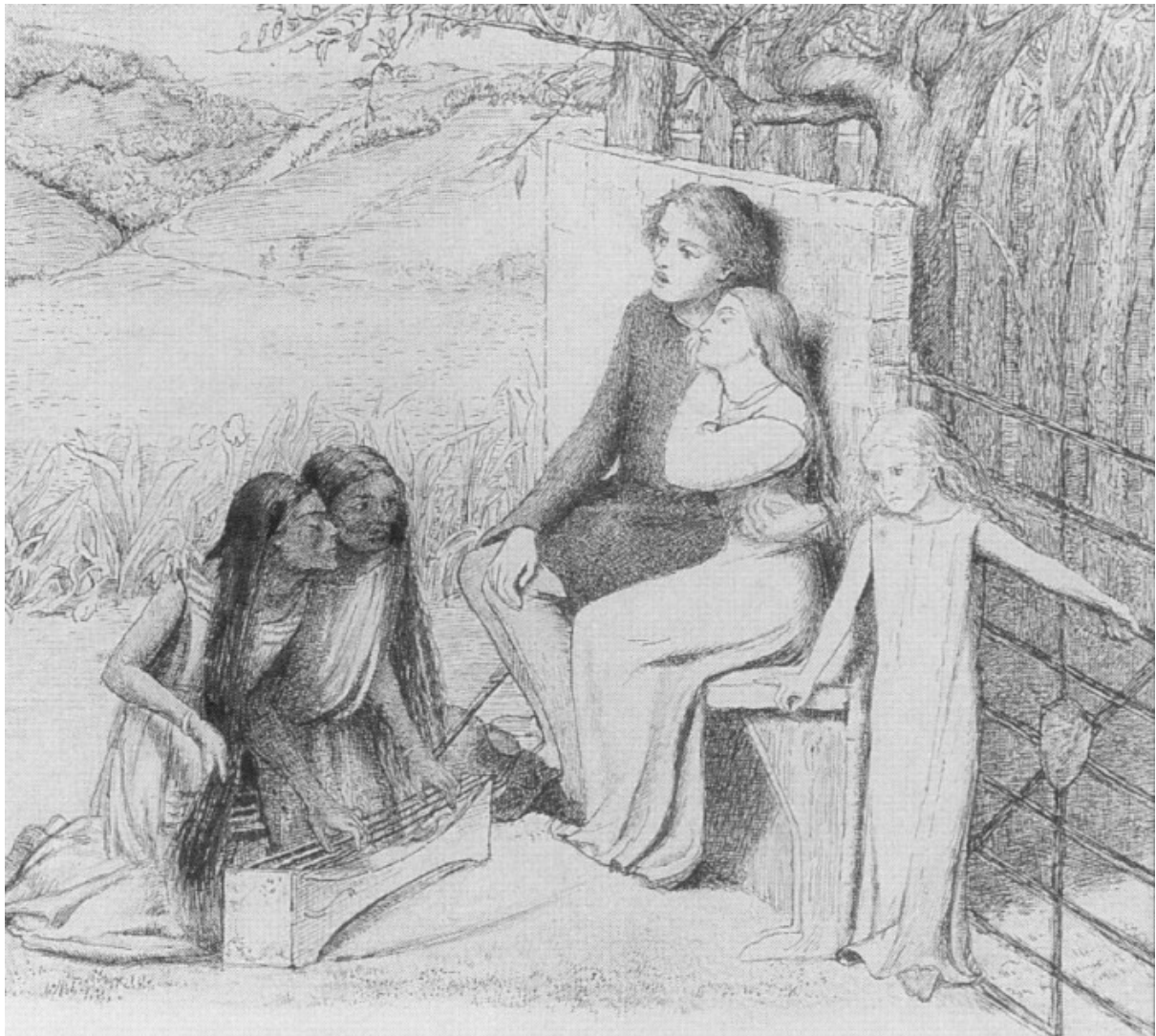


Fig. 48 Elizabeth Siddal, *Lovers Listening to Music*. Pencil, pen and ink on paper. 37.8 x 39.8cm. National Trust Collection, Wightwick Manor (1854).

Woven into Rossetti's *How They Met Themselves* is the environment which creates the conditions for the doppelgängers to appear: the dark, oppressive space of the wood itself, its uncanny threat magnified by the aesthetic peculiarities of the work's medievalist approach. Disconnected from civilisation and bearing a mystic, ancient resonance, the forests of Siddal's works are closely associated with ideas of knowledge, loss, and suffering.

According to the iconography of the middle ages, forests “carried negative symbolic value because they were all considered wild and remote places inhabited only by correspondingly wild and savage creatures”,<sup>32</sup> be they fantastic beasts or wandering hermits. Equally, they were the settings for “trial and adventure in romance and legends... a fantastic refuge and a place of strange encounters”.<sup>33</sup> This conflation of primitive, uncontrollable threat and precarious, exhilarating escapade – in which much is risked for potential romantic reward – makes the forest a useful symbolic tool for Siddal as she negotiates the complexities of othered desire.

In both *Lovers Listening to Music*<sup>34</sup> and *Pippa Passes*, large sections of the image are committed to an enclosed area of trees accessed *via* a guarded gate. The shadowy forest of *Lovers Listening* is bordered by a high brick wall which seems to seal the wood in, rather than keep the action out, and its looming presence is laden with interpretive possibility. It both references the sensuous enjoyment of the rapt lovers and threatens their union, a sense of foreboding generated through the meagreness of the leaves, the claustrophobic proximity of the trunks, and the darker pencil work pooled between them.

The gate itself is porous, and easily overcome; a shield on the ironwork suggests patrician ownership, compounding the romance narrative of the scene. Managing this flimsy barrier is a robed child, who takes on a spiritual mien suggestive of Eros or a cherub. It is unclear if they seek to open the gate or hold it closed, the polysemous action perhaps suggesting the volatility of love itself, as precarious as the flashing of red and blue hues. The threat that the trees offer to the concupiscent lovers intensifies the sense

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<sup>32</sup> Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.44.

<sup>33</sup> Veronica Sekules, *Medieval Art*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.19.

<sup>34</sup> Hereafter *Lover's Listening*.

of barely contained eroticism, and the consequences of its transient appetite: if the gate to the wood is opened, it might consume them both.

A sense of grim pleasure derived from, and intensified by, the intimidatory space of the wood is echoed in Siddal's 'O silent wood'. The speaker, entering and addressing the forest, specifically seeks out "thy darkest shadow",<sup>35</sup> a space where they will succumb to feelings of misery and the blackness of the gloom. The cause of the speaker's anguish is insinuated through the "clinging trees"<sup>36</sup> of their surroundings, reflecting a memory of a lost love – he whose "limbs [are] bound".<sup>37</sup> His might be the presence that accompanies the speaker in the shadow of the trees, or it could be the spirit of the forest itself, or "the mystical experience of sexuality"<sup>38</sup> once known and now lost.

Despite choosing the darkest corner of the forest the speaker expresses apprehension about the impending ordeal, asking of the trees "a boon / That I may not faint or die or swoon".<sup>39</sup> Seeking out pain while simultaneously asking for protection from its most extreme consequences, the speaker then dehumanises themselves, describing their passive position "frozen like a thing of stone"<sup>40</sup> as life and hope are dispelled in the act of self-surrender; their "spell bound lips... uttered not a word".<sup>41</sup> The liberation experienced in the masochistic act of self-mortification appears to be the speaker's objective, and the final couplet questions, rather than asserts, God's power to fulfil the speaker's desires:

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<sup>35</sup> Siddal, 'O silent wood', l.5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, l.18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, l.16.

<sup>38</sup> Woolley, p.74.

<sup>39</sup> Siddal, 'O silent wood', ll.7-8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, l.11.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, l.13.

Can God bring back the day when we two stood  
Beneath the clinging trees in that dark wood<sup>42</sup>

As Anne Woolley identifies, “sexual, not religious love is to be [the speaker’s] redemption, even if [they are] asking God to facilitate it”,<sup>43</sup> and the primitive setting of the wood compounds a sense of uncivilised, impious feeling. That the forest is ancient is surmised from the reference to ferns (unusual given their primary use as ornamental within the period),<sup>44</sup> the extremity of sexual experience tethered to ideas of prehistory and a near-barbarous otherness; all ideas prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century with the emergence of texts like Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

‘To touch a glove’ similarly portrays a speaker wallowing in the memory of a lost love, enduring sexually-charged torment arising from sycophantic adoration of a woman:

To touch her shadow on the sunny grass  
To break her pathway through the darkened wood  
Filled all my life with trembling and tears  
And silence where I stood<sup>45</sup>

Stimulated by the smallest interaction with the desired figure’s presence, wherein the speaker never physically touches her – they only come into contact with impressions and outlines of her bodily form, be it a glove or jewel, shadow or pathway – the interaction within the ‘darkened wood’ results in the same loss of humanity discovered in ‘O silent wood’. A sense of ‘filled’ completion facilitated by these controlled, partial interactions results in a powerful, emotional reaction that ‘trembles’ through the body, and although

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.17-18.

<sup>43</sup> Woolley, p.74.

<sup>44</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.73.

<sup>45</sup> Siddal, ‘To touch the glove’, ll.1-4.

the speaker fawns on the woman's indifference for ostensibly selfless reasons, the act is narcissistic.

Just as the speaker of 'O silent wood' fetishises their own sadness, so the speaker of 'To touch' fetishises their deference, deriving pleasure from service. Both poems may be marked by desolation caused by the irretrievable loss of a past lover, but within the context of memory – and within the confines of the wood – submission to the pain of grief becomes submission to a partner as well as the speaker's own erotic impulses. In the absence of the dominant lover the speaker becomes the agent of their own subjugation, the autosadistic act of entering the forest and intensely engaging in painful memory substituting the feelings of the living relationship.



Fig. 49 Elizabeth Siddal, *The Haunted Wood*. Gouache on paper, 12 x 11cm. The National Trust Collection, Wightwick Manor (1856).

Siddal's 1856 painting *The Haunted Wood* offers a visual representation of the subject caught between the darkening trees. Haunted by a wraithlike spectre, the image and 'O silent wood' have long been affiliated,<sup>46</sup> and there are striking compositional similarities to *How They Met Themselves*, too; both depict a human subject confronted by a mysterious double. The supernatural figure emerges from between the trees with

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<sup>46</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.75.

hands held up in what seems to be appeal, while the human subject's reaction is as equivocal as the child in *Lover's Listening*. For each gesture of recoil is an equal suggestion of attraction: she twists her body to run away, but faces the figure before her; she pulls her hair back to either ease her escape, or to see her visitor more clearly; she reaches out a hand perhaps to block its way, or perhaps to reach out to touch it. So distorted, her attitude makes the interloper seem both familiar and alienating, terrifying and comforting.

While tactility is prevalent – hands are held up and out, and one runs through hair – the two figures fail to come into contact, emphasising the mystery of the ethereal, portentous being. Perhaps this too is a doppelgänger, a prelude to Rossetti's later watercolour; or a lost lover, a divine being, or an errant, material corollary of the subject's distressed mind (an embodiment of Woolley's "mystical experience of sexuality").<sup>47</sup> Serena Trowbridge is amongst those to suggest that the being is "almost angelic in appearance",<sup>48</sup> and Jan Marsh has made a case for *The Haunted Wood* being the annunciation scene referenced in the posthumous 1892 sale of Frederick Richards Leyland's collection.<sup>49</sup> If the scene is an annunciation it is a grotesque one, in which Mary exhibits more fear and allure than Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* of 1849.

The subject – whether she is Mary, an anonymous woman, or a cipher for femininity more broadly (and so operating as both or either) – discovers herself within a primordial forest, its oppressive wilderness mirroring her tempestuous mind. Within this ominous, symbolically suggestive space the ancient, arcane apparition that emerges

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<sup>47</sup> Woolley, p.74.

<sup>48</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.75.

<sup>49</sup> Jan Marsh, "Elizabeth Siddal: 'The Annunciation' Re-Discovered" in *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*. Spring 2020, pp.5-7, p.5.

from the trees manifests an ancient, arcane problem presented to the subject's psyche, and embodying a number of potential (and related) romantic, sexual, religious, and mortal threats.

One of Siddal's unfinished verse fragments questions if the wood itself dreams, deepening the concept of the forest as an intimate yet treacherous space of illusory memory:

Knows a wood –  
And bears its sleep  
and dreams?  
So is the memory of a love  
where good was never found  
Till waking by an unknown  
stream  
The angels gather round<sup>50</sup>

The wood is both profoundly familiar and alienatingly unfamiliar, disorienting consciousness as knowledge, slumber and illusion meld interchangeably. A degree of reciprocity is insinuated through the blurring of human and plant thought, as if the subject is unable to disentangle their consciousness from the trees' influence. Memory and fantasy become distorted, offering – rather than the comfort of private self-reflection – the inevitability of harm; in the forest 'good [is] never found'.

The woodlands discovered in the verse fragment, 'O silent wood', and *The Haunted Wood* are sullied visions of Eden radically different to the lusty warmth of the medieval garden, with the promise of curated trees and cultivated flowers. Within Siddal's darkening forests erotic desire has been fulfilled, sublimated, explored, lost,

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<sup>50</sup> Siddal, 'Fragments', p.97, ll.1-8.

and is sought again with near-masochistic obsession, in which the subject chooses to submit themselves to torment in an effort to relive former romantic encounters.

This reading of the wood as a place of post-sexual awakening, wherein the isolated subject seeks to rediscover erotic fulfilment, has consequences for the forested area in *Lover's Listening*. Still in the throes of arousal and intimacy, the couple's union appears in a honeymoon phase. As their partnership fractures, so they will be drawn into the shadows of the trees as they attempt to rediscover their former romance. Respite and redemption may be possible, but perhaps – Siddal's verse fragment suggests – only on waking from the nightmarish dream, when the cleansing waters of the stream reform the disordered dream into a vision of angelic solace.

Equally, the enclosed outdoor space of *Pippa Passes* may indirectly relate to differing states of innocence and knowledge. Browning's original verse describes Pippa traversing "from the Turret to the Bishop's Brother's House, close to the Duomo S. Maria",<sup>51</sup> suggesting this area might be the grounds of the Duomo itself. The virtuous Pippa is backed by a low wall and a neat row of saplings, her access to the holy site relatively uninhibited. The seated women, visually separated from Pippa by a pillar, are backed by a set of closed gates. A mess of body parts with three heads, there's a Cerberus-like quality to their presentation, yet for all their apparent power they are locked out of the realm they seem to guard. Just as Spartali's lay subject in *Cloister Lilies* exists at close proximity to – but not within – her cloistral environs, the figures of *Pippa Passes* exist proximate to, but vitally outside of, a religious site.

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Browning, *Pippa Passes, A Drama*. (Boson: Dana Estes & Company, 1902), p.105. In Browning's original, the poor girls on the steps go on to discuss the damage done to their gardens due to their neglect.

Crossing the Line: Monstrous Desire



Fig. 50 Elizabeth Siddal, *Clerk Saunders*. Watercolour, bodycolour, coloured chalks on paper laid on a stretcher. 28.4 x 18.1cm. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. (1857).

As the physical borderland of the forest figures a conceptual crossing from a state of reciprocal love to corrupted isolation, so the lines of social acceptability become blurred. This is no longer a straightforward, linear passage from innocence to knowledge,

like the dualism bisected by the Edenic garden wall, but a complex and disorienting state where the self struggles to parse or ameliorate the experience of desire in the wake of a broken relationship. Subjugated instincts begin to proliferate in complex and uncontrollable ways, creating strange visions of misguided love – a consequence of the lover’s absence and the inflexible strictures of hegemonic ideologies.

Nowhere is Siddal’s exploration of the aberrative consequences of thwarted desire more evident than in her depictions of love and the dead. In *Clerk Saunders*, Margaret, kneeling at the foot of the bed in which she recently lost her virginity, gazes at the reanimated corpse of her murdered lover. Walter Scott’s ballad *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, the illustration’s source, emphasises the power of Margaret’s erotic desires. Seduced into pre-marital sex by Clerk – her only cited concern, rectified in eight lines, is what her seven brothers will think of her<sup>52</sup> – her lust appears undiminished by Clerk’s demise. On his ghoulish return to her bedchamber she expresses three desires: first, a kiss;<sup>53</sup> second, to know what happens to women who die in labour (suggesting she is pregnant from their liaison);<sup>54</sup> and third, to get into his grave and lie beside him,<sup>55</sup> as if re-entering the site of their sexual encounter in death.

The ferocity and atrocity of her desire is communicated as she attempts to engage sexually with the living corpse. In response to her request for a kiss, Clerk makes clear that his “mouth is full cold, Margaret, / It has the smell now of the ground”,<sup>56</sup> and when she asks to sleep beside him, his “bed it is full lowly now: / Among the hungry worms I

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<sup>52</sup> Walter Scott, ‘Clerk Saunders’ in *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Vol III. Ed. T. F. Henderson. (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902), pp.222-229, p.222, stanza 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.226, stanza 19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.227, stanza 22.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.228, stanza 28.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.226, stanza 20.

sleep / Could mould is my covering now”.<sup>57</sup> Decomposition and the frigid cold of Clerk’s cadaver are conjured in tandem with the warmth of Margaret’s passion, which is unaffected by his rotting state.



Fig. 51 Elizabeth Siddal, *Clerk Saunders*. Watercolour with gum Arabic and scratching out on paper. 25.4 x 19.1cm. Private Collection (1855-57).

Siddal’s watercolour depicts the moment Margaret releases Clerk from his troth, allowing him to be at peace; unable to touch him, she kisses a wand instead. The

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.228, stanzas 29-30.

symbolic potency of the act is particularly evident when compared to preparatory sketches, in which Margaret either looks at Clerk or kisses the wand, but not both. In the final composition the kiss is the focal point of the image, creating a sense of erotic frisson as Margaret's face, the point of contact with the wand, is warmed by the light of the encroaching dawn. So Siddal takes the scandal of the pre-marital liaison and succinctly intensifies its taboo by integrating a necro-erotic interaction unaffected by the faculty of disgust. Pushed to the extremity of acceptability, Siddal correlates female sexual desire and the materiality of death, Lacan's *objet petit a*<sup>58</sup> mutating into a vision of Kristevan abjection.<sup>59</sup>

Nat Reeve has identified a further subversion in *Clerk Saunders*, discovered in the re-ordered prayer stool, book of hours, kneeling woman, and message-bearing man: an appropriation and fragmentation of the medieval annunciation scene.<sup>60</sup> The disruption of these signifiers emphasises the failure of both divine and romantic love; if Margaret is pregnant, her child is born of a perversion that "instead of promising a reinvigorated new epoch... hints towards an impending creative apocalypse".<sup>61</sup>

The integration of splintered Christian doctrine raises questions of causality, and why Margaret and Clerk's love collapses into tragedy. If their pre-marital liaison had not been forbidden under social and religious doctrine Clerk would be alive, and Margaret's desires could not have developed into something abhorrent. Understood within this

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<sup>58</sup> The representative object that stands in for the lack that precipitates desire. See Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*. (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.87-88.

<sup>59</sup> Julia Kristeva uses the 'abject' to describe the rupture of the boundary between the symbolic and the real: "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life." See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.4.

<sup>60</sup> Reeve, p.85.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*.

paradigm, Margaret's passion for Clerk – which pre-figured his death – reflects devotion to a specific partner rather than lust for an objectionable body.

Within *Clerk Saunders*, then, Siddal seems to wield abjection to probe the fitness of hegemonic attitudes to sex. Social pressures have brought about the inversion of the annunciation, contorting a divinely-wrought order, and in so doing have – through unnatural means – rendered the natural (sex between the living) into the unnatural (a fantasy of oral sex between the living and the dead). Perhaps this remarkable exploration of transgressive longing suggests female desire is not inherently corrupt, but has become corrupted because of its perceived depravity.

A sense of repression or rejection leading to near-inhuman deviancy manifests in different ways throughout Siddal's poetry. Cannibalising love is discovered in the consumptive gaze of the callous speaker of 'I care not for my Ladys soul', who repeats that they "care not"<sup>62</sup> for the Lady they gaze "through".<sup>63</sup> A vampiric quality imbues the poem as the female subject's lustre diminishes – that the "starlike beauty"<sup>64</sup> of her eyes dies suggests it is a celestial but finite resource used up by her admirer. Yet the Lady, like Margaret, knowingly re-enters the sexually charged encounter with her lover. Constance Hassett has adroitly suggested that the Lady is neither passive nor sexually innocent, while Trowbridge emphasises that she is "mute but not necessarily a victim".<sup>65</sup> Such interpretation suggests the dissected figure chooses to remain in the devouring relationship, resisting and potentially deriving some form of pleasure from their subjugation. Equally, Siddal's poem reveals that the "love which has been given"<sup>66</sup> holds

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<sup>62</sup> Siddal, 'I care not', l.1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, l.6.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, l.8.

<sup>65</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.38.

<sup>66</sup> Siddal, 'I care not', l.12.

her there, perhaps drawing on the notion of loss of virginity as irrevocable and eternal. Perhaps it is all three, a complex and perverse series of conflicting emotions in which the female subject's connection to the disinterested lover becomes inescapable.

The image of lovesick humans feeding on the dismembered bodies of old lovers is a repeated feature of Siddal's work, wherein love, once spent, cannot be replenished – an inversion of Rossetti's revitalising ethos as expressed in *Bocca Baciata*. The speaker of Siddal's 'It is not now a longing year' mourns the loss of a first love, asking "who can take their first dear love / and kiss him the old way?".<sup>67</sup> The question references both the loss of the specific beloved and a desensitisation to love itself, a consequence of the kiss. The revelatory horror that "a new face lies between my hands"<sup>68</sup> moves the speaker to wish they could weep, their anthropophagy having depleted their humanity and so their capacity for emotion. This fresh disembodied head creates a sense of feasting brutality, wherein the speaker tries, and fails, to rediscover lost feelings.

While the speaker remembers the sensations of romance, their inability to conjure tears speaks to a sense of atrophy Siddal closely associates with the act of loving. That love and sex are physically and mentally corrosive is discovered with visceral intensity in unused and unfinished fragments of Siddal's poetry, particularly in the Bryson fragment drafts of 'Is it not now a longing year':

I lie among the tall green grass  
That bends above my head

And covers up my wasted face,  
And folds me in its bed  
Tenderly and lovingly

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<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, 'It is not now a longing year' in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.40. ll.5-6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, l.9.

Like grass above the dead<sup>69</sup>

Anne Woolley points out that “the physical body registers emotion, sensation and needs, but is wasted by disease and sexual attraction despite being erotically powerful”.<sup>70</sup> Prone and corpse-like, the image of the lone figure’s ‘wasted’ form becomes fused with the apparitional memory of amorous lovers entwined in bed. Love’s vampirism has drained the speaker of their materiality, reducing them to an emaciated remnant that lies entombed in grass.

Another of Siddal’s verse fragments makes clear the inevitability of the loss, as irrevocable as the loss of fecundity, virginity, and youth:

Time that shall dry  
The river bed  
and hush the song of birds  
Shall stop the pulses of the heart  
where sorry has no words<sup>71</sup>

The water of the river echoes the fluidity of the speaker themselves, its drying up mirroring an erosion of virility in the depletion of bodily fluids, just as the speaker’s tears dry up in ‘It is not’. It is notable that the final iteration of this stanza describes “The river ever flowing down / between its grassy bed”:<sup>72</sup> desire endures long after the euphoria of first-loving is lost. ‘Ever-flowing’, nature compels the speaker to discover “another dream / When this sad dream is dead”,<sup>73</sup> bringing another lover, when this one has moved on.

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<sup>69</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.44.

<sup>70</sup> Woolley, p.199.

<sup>71</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.44.

<sup>72</sup> Siddal, ‘It is not now’, ll.19-20.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.23-24.

Emphasis on a predator/prey, consumer/consumed relationship in love-making is discovered in Siddal's visual works, too. Pippa may be imbued with greater nobility for her virtue, but she occupies a space between two sets of three animalistic beings. The three women on the stairs reach out to Pippa, their sexuality capturing her attention. Reflected on Pippa's other side are three geese, beaks open in hungry want. While they appear to reach for the olive branch Pippa carries, the direction of their attention focuses on Pippa's body rather than the vegetation itself. Caught between these insatiate beings, Pippa – intrigued – considers whether or not to succumb to their vociferous, consuming desires.

The rapt lovers in *Lovers Listening*, meanwhile, watch the entwined, sapphic forms of the musicians with an aloof intensity that functions as a kind of sensory feeding. Almost predatory, their colonising, exoticising gaze soaks up the sight of the figures as they absorb the implied sound of the music. Rather than forming any kind of coalescence, a clear sense of division is created – one in which the onlooking figures maintain their individuality, while the bodies of the music-makers blend into one another, as if forming a single entity.

The cumulative effect of the corrosive qualities of love are discovered in 'Life and night are falling from me', wherein the speaker is almost completely depleted of empathy. "Hollow hearts"<sup>74</sup> and "soulless eyes have / ceased to cheer"<sup>75</sup> a subject who has become eerily detached from life, and whose bodily form endures even as imagined in heaven:

How is it in the unknown

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<sup>74</sup> Siddal, 'Life and night are falling from me' in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), pp.49-51, p.49, l.8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.8-9.

Land do the dead wander  
Hand in hand<sup>76</sup>

Siddal's reference to 'the dead' offers a sense of the reanimated cadaver over a union of the eternal soul, as if the corroded bodies of old lovers have been simply been transported to another world.

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50, ll.27-29.

“If you were Queen of Pleasure and I were King of Pain”<sup>77</sup>



Fig. 52 Elizabeth Siddal, *A woman and a spectre*. Pen and brown ink on pale grey paper. 16.8 x 20.2cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (c.1850-1862).

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<sup>77</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'A Match' in *Poems and Ballads*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1900), pp.116-118, p.117, ll.41-42.

Ghoulishly suspended over the prone form of a woman, the apparition of Siddal's *A woman and a spectre* stares furiously into the world. Wild eyes and dishevelled hair articulate the chaos unleashed through its spectral form, a near-disembodied head floating with potent ferocity beside what appears to be its host body. In this instance, a different perimeter has been perforated by the female subject: the boundary between body and either mind or spirit (or, perhaps, both).

The illustration is thematically linked with *The Haunted Wood*, with the ghostly beings – comprising head and arms – holding the same pose. It is unclear if the fallen figure is conscious, unconscious, or dead, the sparse sketch leaving only a haze-like smudge around the head to suggest the wraithlike being is the manifestation of a psychogenic agitation. The catalyst for the schism is unknown, but the physical form appears unable or unwilling to either prevent the fracture or reunify the disparate parts; bursting forth from the neat, organised body, the spectre upturns order and control.

Anne Woolley has noted the simplicity with which the drawing “encapsulates a fluid internal conflict as well as an awareness of the essential nature of both spirits”,<sup>78</sup> yet the overlapping entities are vitally separate. Siddal appears to represent a moment of severance, of emotional and psychological torment so great that the body has been rejected by the tempestuous mind, a failure of cohesion that is akin to a kind of death. In the “deep-seated struggle between the physical and spectral body”<sup>79</sup> it is chaos that lacerates order, the subject's ferocious interiority unable to be contained.

This failure of the enclosing perimeter echoes the precarity of the garden wall, its apparent controlled, cultivated safety an illusion. The budding fecundity of its ordered

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<sup>78</sup> Woolley, p.199.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

space may be the setting for new romances, where love blossoms along with the greenery, but it too holds dark and tempestuous phantoms that threaten the female subject, just as the body fails to contain – perhaps even antagonises – the more unruly elements of the psyche.

For Siddal, the forest offers a counterpoint to Eden's vibrant promise; those who have known and lost love cross its boundaries in an effort to regenerate past sensations. To enter its fringes is to pass into a new frontier, one that sits between civilisation and barbarism, the conscious and the unconscious, the joy of first-loving and the dislocated confusion of isolation. Stalked by the ghosts of old lovers and corrupted desire, the subject dreams of reliving the transition from innocence to knowledge.

Under the trees, organic matter begins to reshape the tortured self, as love for another is replaced by the agony of grief. Denied the legitimacy of the living relationship, pain becomes indistinguishable from pleasure, masochism coming to define the subject as they autosadistically seek out suffering. The mutation of sexual impulse is discerned throughout Siddal's *corpus* of work, and while the forest may be a setting connected to torment and memory, the monstrous consequences of corrupted love manifest in other contexts – including in interactions with new partners, re-emphasising the significance of awakening first love.

Just as the boundary wall of the garden gestures to the world beyond itself, so containment and control of desire generates a standard to exceed; the delimitation of a perimeter contrives its own transgression. So from the tensions between legitimacy and illegitimacy, nature and artifice, body and mind, emerge nightmarish experiences that erode empathy, love, and humanity as othered subjectivities become severed from desire. Trapped within this paradigm, erotic impulses evolve. Having been feasted on by

the ghouls of lost love, wasted remnants are left behind, the erotic potential of the body corroded by sexual consumption. The border between the natural and the unnatural begins to blur, as self-inflicted agony replaces love, the queen of pleasure deriving a new form of gratification from the pain rendered by an absent king.

## The Picture Frame

The final section of chapter two considers the boundary manifested in the picture frame, discovering a profound expression of desire as Marie Spartali and Elizabeth Siddal enter the art profession. Tracing the theme of female ambition inside and outside of their canvases, it explores possible intersections between art and life.

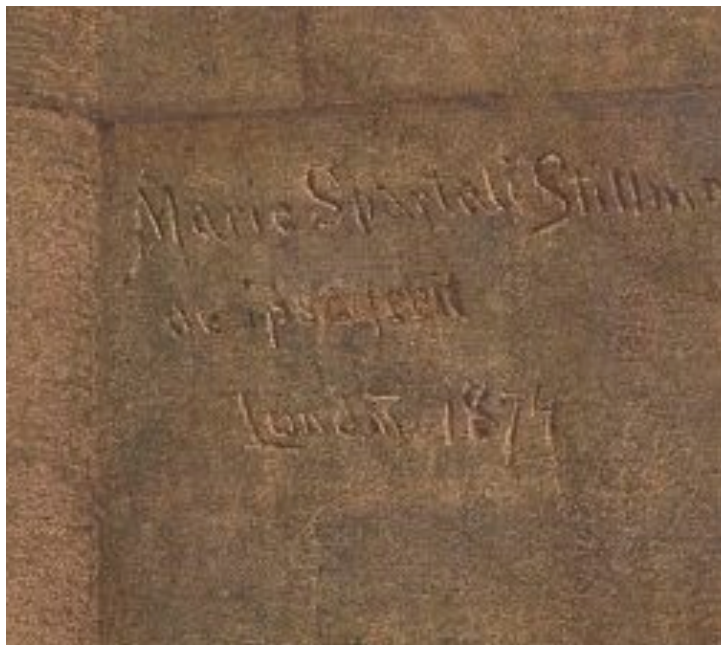


Fig. 53 Marie Spartali Stillman, detail from *Self Portrait, or On A Balcony* (1874).<sup>80</sup>

Women do things more easily than men, but they do not penetrate below the surface, and if they attempt to do so the attempt is but a clumsy masquerade in an unbecoming costume... Women have created nothing... they have hideously and most mournfully parodied the art of men.

– George Moore, *Modern Painting*, 1893.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> The text reads: “Marie Spartali Stillman / de ipsa fecit / London 1874.”

<sup>81</sup> George Moore, *Modern Painting* (London: W. Scott, 1893), p.220

For the eagle-eyed, a remarkable assertion of artistic legitimacy can be mined from Marie Spartali's 1874 watercolour *Self-Portrait, or On A Balcony*. In the top right-hand corner, between the artist's name and the year, are three nearly imperceptible words: "de ipsa fecit".<sup>82</sup> Roughly translated, the Latin reads "made by herself" or "made of herself".

Detectable only at close interrogation, the motto connotes a range of meanings. The most obvious is the invocation of 'fecit', a post-signature flourish that associates Spartali with an artistic tradition spanning millennia. According to Pliny, the word 'fecit' was used by artists to denote completion, signalling the work's readiness to receive judgement and "testifying of the supreme confidence the artists had in these particular pieces".<sup>83</sup> The practice endured for centuries: Anna Tummers has interrogated the invocation of 'fecit'<sup>84</sup> by the seventeenth-century Netherlandish painters, who utilised the same lexeme to communicate quality and mastery in tandem with emphasising the painter's moral right to be identified as the creator.<sup>85</sup> The extent to which Spartali was claiming any superiority for *Self-Portrait* will never be known, but it is clear that she invokes the word 'fecit' to position herself within the "masculine concept of 'descent

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<sup>82</sup> It's hard to see on many reproductions of the image but is detailed in the Sotheby's catalogue from the last sale of the work in 2016. The catalogue can be accessed online at the Sotheby's website. "Catalogue Note for *Marie Spartali Stillman*". Sotheby's.

<<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2016/victorian-pre-raphaelite-british-impressionist-l16132/lot.10.html>> [Accessed 13 May 2020].

<sup>83</sup> Anna Tummers, "'By His Hand': The Paradox of Seventeenth-Century Connoisseurship" in *Art Market and Connoisseurship: A Closer Look at Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and their Contemporaries*. Ed. Anna Tummers and Koenraad Jonckheere. (Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam, 2014), pp.31-66, p.45.

<sup>84</sup> In some cases, 'fecit' is initialised to 'f'.

<sup>85</sup> 'Fecit' is especially used to denote when the work was completed by the master himself, not a studio assistant.

from the great painters of the past”,<sup>86</sup> an artist of integrity for whom self-representation is a natural and worthwhile exercise.<sup>87</sup>

Dissatisfied with simply using ‘fecit’ in isolation, Spartali makes an addition that is entirely her own: the prefixing words ‘de ipsa’. Critically, ‘ipsa’ is the feminine-singular iteration of the demonstrative pronoun, an inclusion made alongside her first name, reasserting the artist’s gender in relation to her role as creator. Spartali’s embedded proclamation of artistic value, therefore, is foundationally linked to her femininity, and she simultaneously communicates her status as artist and model, representer and represented, being both ‘made by’ and ‘made of’ herself.

The latter translation unlocks a further complexity of the self-portrait as pictorial genre: the faithful (if partial) encapsulation of interiority in the representation of the exterior. As early as the third century AD self-portraiture has been considered a “withdrawal into the self”,<sup>88</sup> Plotinus’ “product of memory and imagination”,<sup>89</sup> and Spartali discreetly emphasises her status as both creator and interpreter, communicating herself as both physical being and conceptual entity.

This latent, potent affirmation of female artistic capacity is made in the context of nineteenth-century attitudes towards femininity. George Moore’s overt prejudice toward female artists was by no means ubiquitous – education, resources, and the business of female art was growing in scale and popularity when his *Modern Painting* was published

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<sup>86</sup> Susan Casteras, “‘The Necessity of a Name’: Portrayals and betrayals of Victorian Women Artists” in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*. Ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor. (Northern Illinois University Press: Illinois, 1992), pp.207-232, p.216.

<sup>87</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti uses ‘fecit’ only twice, and in the context of representing older art-objects within his paintings and poetry. *Roman Widow* (1874) has ‘fecit’ engraved on the deceased’s urn (“Papirira Gemina Fecit”), and *Anima: The Sonnet* a pen and ink work created in the style of William Blake is dedicated in Latin to Rossetti’s mother (“DG Rossetti pro Matre fecit Apr 27 1880”).

<sup>88</sup> James Hall, *The Self Portrait: A Cultural History*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), p.11.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

in 1893 – but succinctly captures an attitude that was prevalent enough to impede Spartali and Elizabeth Siddal’s professional ambitions. His bias highlights John Ruskin’s comparative progressivism when he patronised Siddal some forty years prior, although Ruskin too had his prejudices. In an 1858 missive to Sophia Sinnet, Ruskin revealed that there had never “been such a being yet as a lady who could paint”,<sup>90</sup> although he seems to consider it a possibility.

Snubbing female-produced work for its inability to ‘penetrate below the surface’ – they simply lack the requisite tools, implies Moore – creative supremacy is firmly positioned as the domain of man. Female creative endeavour is only deviancy, bungling mimicry that disfigures man’s genius. Any brilliance in Spartali and Siddal’s works, according to this rubric, is a consequence of its relation to Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s (and his associates’) originals. Reciprocity or collaboration doesn’t enter Moore’s thinking.

Yet in implanting “de ipsa fecit” into her self-image, Spartali makes a case for the female painter that explicitly challenges the ideology articulated by Moore. Here is an artist whose creative powers are specifically informed by her femininity, for whom ‘de ipsa fecit’ signifies four concepts in tandem: first, that this is a self-portrait in which the artist has depicted herself; second, that she is an artist in direct line of descent from the masters of old, and benefits from the knowledge of the same; third, the content of the artwork – and the quality of that artwork – is inextricably linked to femininity, and fourth, the representation extends beyond herself as a physical entity, entering into the interior, conceptual space of the artist.

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<sup>90</sup> Ruskin, p.308. Ruskin’s opinion was later changed by Elizabeth Thompson’s *The Roll Call* (1874).

Siddal and Spartali's careers – while modest – evidence a profound expression of desire as both negotiate entrenched biases to become professional models and painters. Their illustrations perceptively engage with, and disrupt, art historical conventions, fusing the past to their present while recuperating the female subject and her associated symbolic values. While neither can be considered feminist by modern standards, each devised and asserted potent (if often thwarted) visions of femininity that evidence tensions with spaces designated 'female'. Alternative conceptions of manhood are conjured in tandem, generating an empathetic, devoted, emotional form of masculinity epitomised by Dante and the 'maiden knight' Sir Galahad. In each case, the perimeter of the picture frame is inscribed and perforated, making a case for female creativity and querying its regulation.

Penetrating below the surface

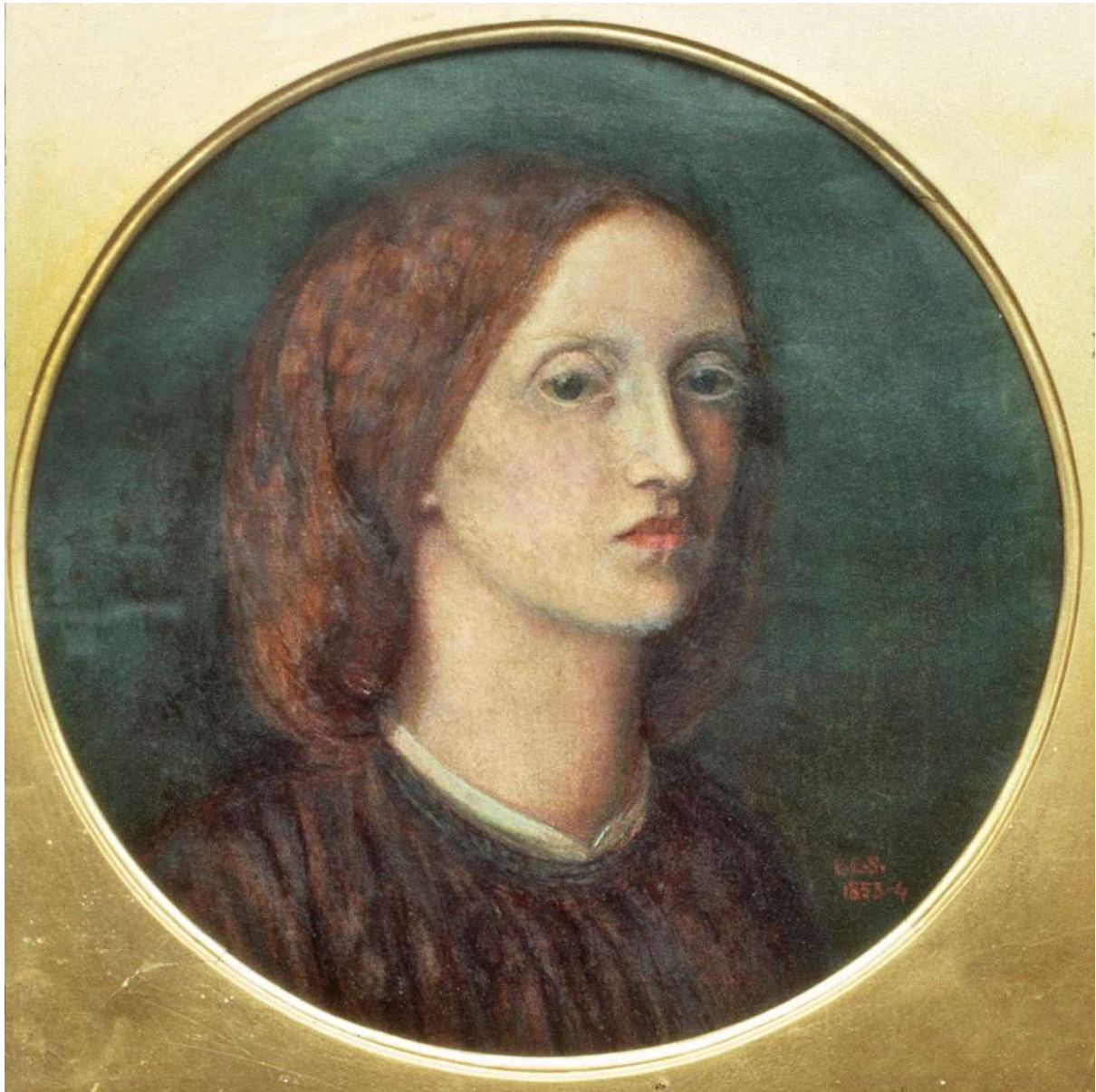


Fig. 54 Elizabeth Siddal, *Self Portrait*. Oil on canvas. 23cm diameter. Private Collection (1853-4).

Eighty years after Moore's condemnation of female artists, Denys Sutton wrote a review for an exhibition of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work for *Apollo Magazine*, highlighting the pervasiveness of the professional and sexual denigration of Elizabeth Siddal:

Lizzie is a pathetic figure. She was beautiful, even though the drawings of her do depict a rather wishy-washy personality... It was in keeping with the doomed nature of Lizzie's life that she produced a still-born child... Rossetti was a sensual

man and Lizzie, it may be suspected, was frigid; she answered his dreams but not his needs.<sup>91</sup>

The critic draws startling conclusions from Rossetti's paintings of his eventual wife. Her alleged feebleness of mind and body are faded mediocrity in opposition to Rossetti's substance, and a presumed lack of sexual interest is correlated to the tragedy of her still-born child – an outcome Sutton appears to suggest was the inevitable consequence of a lack of both real and symbolic potency. Rossetti is depicted conversely as the fertile, concupiscent, charismatic creator, with the ability to generate meaning and life.

If this is how critics interpreted Rossetti's representations of Siddal over a century after her death, how did the artist present herself? As Siddal and Spartali generate their portraits, how do they shape and project themselves into the canon? And, operating within a marginal position that walks the tightrope between respectability and immorality, how might those self-images be influenced by their joint experiences as artist (representer), subject (represented), and model (representee)? In undertaking self-portraits each artist enters into a dialogue with antique art historical convention, engaging with a male-dominated tradition while recalibrating it to shape their own likenesses. These are not the works which the artists model out of necessity – the pensive woman of *Sir Patrick Spens* (fig.82) appears to be Siddal and *The Lady Prays-Desire* resembles Spartali, for example – but rather the works created and positioned as self-representations, encompassing the likeness and interiority of the artist herself.

Siddal's self-portrait was begun in 1853 and completed by 1854,<sup>92</sup> during the height of her relationship with Rossetti; it was the period when he was providing sufficient

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<sup>91</sup> Denys Sutton, "The Prisoner" in *Apollo Magazine*, February 1973, pp.123-7, p.123.

<sup>92</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Artist*, p.45.

tutelage, resources and encouragement to facilitate meaningful experimentation.<sup>93</sup> Profoundly different to the romanticised, eroticised depictions of the model produced by Rossetti and his cohort, the face Siddal presents is unsentimental and stark, its pale, pinched features accentuated by both the circular canvas and the depth of the deep, rich shades of the background. Rendered in oil, a rare medium for Siddal, the rich shades appear to reference Old Masters: the deep, single-colour emerald green background is redolent of Holbein, while the shadowy quality of the dress and vivid copper of the hair evokes Rembrandt. The austere gaze and arcane expression is reminiscent of Jan Van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man (Self Portrait?)* (1433), which had entered the National Gallery's collection to considerable fanfare in 1851.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>94</sup> W. H. James Weale. "Paintings by John van Eyck and Albert Dürer Formerly in the Arundel Collection" in *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 6, no. 21, 1904, pp.244–49, p.249. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/856162>> [Accessed 6 September 2023]. The work was then called *Portrait of a Man with a Red Turban*. Given the Pre-Raphaelite interest in van Eyck, it's likely Siddal would have encountered the work.



Fig. 55. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Elizabeth Siddal*. Graphite and watercolour on paper. 18.1 x 16.2cm, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (c.1854).

Rossetti created two related watercolour portraits of Siddal either in tandem with, or very shortly after, this self-image.<sup>95</sup> Comparison between these works highlights the audacious severity of Siddal’s self-representation: particular care has been taken with the subject’s enigmatic gaze. Looking back, Siddal inverts the to-be-looked-at paradigm “underscor[ing] her commitment to representing herself as an active gazer rather than a passive beauty”.<sup>96</sup> Challenging the viewer, Siddal has taken care to position her face as the external, detectable *purlieu* of a greater portion of human experience, the boundary

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<sup>95</sup> The second is in the custody of the Ashmolean Museum. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Portrait of Elizabeth Siddal facing left*. Watercolour on wove paper, 28.3 x 24cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1854).

<sup>96</sup> Orlando, p.631.

of something nearly unfathomable yet identifiably human beyond. This complexity was not lost on Coventry Patmore, who celebrated Siddal's "high, pure, and independent feeling for that much misunderstood object, the human face divine"<sup>97</sup> after seeing the piece at Ford Madox Brown's 1857 exhibition in Fitzroy Square.



Fig. 56 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Self Portrait*. Charcoal and white chalk on paper. 64.4 x 52.3cm. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (1871).

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<sup>97</sup> Patmore, p.12.

Spartali's first *Self Portrait* was executed in charcoal in 1871, and the timing is noteworthy: she was newly married, likely in the early stages of her first pregnancy, and less than two years from her first commercial success, having sold her oil-on-canvas work *Antigone* to Frederick Richard Leyland for forty guineas in 1869.<sup>98</sup> Hegemonic notions of propriety allowed a genteel woman a modest ability to draw or paint, provided that she did so privately and strictly for recreation, and the newly wedded were expected to “abando[n] their professional ambitions, submitting to the roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper”<sup>99</sup> – likely one of Siddal's reasons to delay marriage. The creation and subsequent exhibition of a self-portrait speaks to Spartali's courageous (and perhaps reactionary) refusal to conform, even as she entered marital life. Rossetti, who intervened to facilitate *Antigone's* sale after Michael Spartali tried to prevent it, privately disclosed to Leyland that the young artist was “quite bent on adopting art as a serious profession”,<sup>100</sup> an attitude further evidenced when Spartali revisited the monochrome representation of herself in 1874, reconstructing the image with much the same composition but this time in full, vivid watercolour.

The labour of forming and reforming her self-portrait, and her subsequent campaigns to exhibit the work in the United Kingdom and America,<sup>101</sup> manifestly affirms Spartali's desire to forge and disseminate a unique – and critically respectable –

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<sup>98</sup> D.G. Rossetti, letter to Ford Madox Brown 27 July 1869, *Correspondence: IV The Chelsea Years II 1868-1870*, 69.95, pp.211-212. See also 69.96, pp.212-213.

<sup>99</sup> Jan Marsh, “Working Practices and Poetic Works” in *Poetry In Beauty: The Pre-Raphaelite Art of Marie Spartali Stillman*. Ed. Margareta Frederick and Jan Marsh. (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2016), pp.48-65, p.53.

<sup>100</sup> D.G. Rossetti, letter to Frederick Richard Leyland c. 27 July 1869, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti The Chelsea Years*, pp.211-212. Spartali's father had attempted to insist that she gift the work to Leyland to avoid any embarrassment; he did not want his daughter to become a working artist.

<sup>101</sup> Margareta S. Frederick, “Marie Spartali Stillman in America: A Study in Transatlantic Cultural Interaction” in *Poetry in Beauty: The Pre-Raphaelite Art of Marie Spartali Stillman*. Ed. Margareta S. Frederick and Jan Marsh (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2015), pp.29-45, p.33.

professional artistic identity. That it was a self-conscious crusade she sustained “against the pervasive dismissal of all (or, at the least, most) women’s art as amateur”<sup>102</sup> speaks to the ferocity of the appetite.

Notably, neither Siddal nor Spartali paint themselves wielding the tools of her trade, as discovered in Ford Madox Brown or John Everett Millais’ self-images. Propriety isn’t the motivating factor; Milly Childers (1889) and Emma Richards (1853) clutch brush and mahlstick in their own self-portraits, and Richards was a favourite of Queen Victoria, then the epitome of feminine decorum. Rather, Siddal and Spartali are primarily concerned with a conceptual approach to artistry that blurs the boundary between artist and model, rejecting the mechanics of art-making to redouble focus on the individual creative mind.

At the same time, both artists blur the boundaries of modernity and history. Margaretta Frederick associates Spartali’s amalgamation of the folding fan and sixteenth-century attire in both iterations of her self-portrait with a conscious union of the tropes of Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism,<sup>103</sup> positing that the artist was making “a tentative move towards the ‘art for art’s sake’ philosophy of the Aesthetic movement”.<sup>104</sup> Rather than suggesting Spartali’s work occupies a conceptual *locus* at the cusp of contemporary art creation, however, the artist presents herself simultaneously at a point on the spectrum of art history and at its cutting edge – evoking the Italian Renaissance, just as Siddal evokes Old Masters, through the lens of the Victorian *avant-garde*. In the process, both Siddal and Spartali “reclai[m] their own representation... exposing and dismantling the ideology of the aesthetic for which they

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<sup>102</sup> Cherry, *Painting Women*, p.83.

<sup>103</sup> Frederick, “Self Portrait”, p.80.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

have served as symbols”.<sup>105</sup> The model now gazes back, intelligently and provocatively represented by her own hand.

Tellingly, neither artist first exhibited their respective self-images under the title ‘Self-Portrait’. Siddal’s was listed as *Study of a Head* in the catalogue of the 1857 Fitzroy Square exhibition, while Spartali’s 1874 self-representation was dubbed *On A Balcony* when first exhibited in Boston the same year (following a “concerted effort”<sup>106</sup> by the artist to get the piece displayed). These attempts to anonymise the works evidence unease surrounding the status of female artists, with each work presented with titles that suggest they are decorative, anonymous facsimiles, disassociated from their creators’ subjectivity. The perceived representational *gravitas* of a self-portrait is communicated by omission, speaking to the ability of the self-image to impart something of the private, intimate world of the artist – a process too indecorous, too exposing, for a respectable Victorian woman.

Siddal and Spartali’s willingness to create and exhibit self-portraits is at odds with the considerable care both exercised around their writing, indicative of the different values assigned to text and image. As noted in the introduction, Siddal kept her poetry private, concealing it even from her great friend Algernon Swinburne. Spartali (like many Victorian women) destroyed all her correspondence, fearful of future misinterpretation. The few missives that survive are found in the custody of the Rossetti and Brown families, including the note to Cathy Madox Brown that reveals the artist’s penchant for privacy:

It has always been my custom to destroy all letters. I have seen so much mischief come from letters which are found after people are dead.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Orlando, p.617.

<sup>106</sup> Frederick, “Self-Portrait”, p.80.

<sup>107</sup> Marie Spartali Stillman, Marie Stillman to Cathy Madox Brown, MSI/1995/14/105/10, 15 Jan 1895, Ford Madox Brown Correspondence, NAL Col., V&A. Sorry, Marie.

That Siddal and Spartali felt they could imbue an image with an ambient suggestion of their subjectivities, but not allow their writing to be read, is significant. Text is a liability, its meaning sufficiently determinative to threaten the perception of its author. Images can be suffused with a plurality of potential meanings, to be intuited – but never definitively fixed – by the viewer.

## The Dissenter in the House



Fig. 57 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Pharmakeutria (Brewing the Love Philtre)*. Watercolour with gum arabic and bodycolour on paper laid down on panel. 52 x 47cm. Collection of Peter Nahum. (c.1880).

Themes of female aptitude and subjectivity emerge in the artists's narrative illustrations, too. Despite the assured proto-feminist tone of *The Lady Prays-Desire* and *Korinna, or the Theban Poetess* when Spartali debuted at the Dudley Gallery in 1867, the

theme that consistently emerges from her canvases is stymied female endeavour. Although Korinna was purportedly victorious over Pindar in her own time, little of her work survives and less is known of her life; Pindar's works, meanwhile, are some of the best preserved from ancient times. *The Lady Prays-Desire* may re-envision Edmund Spenser's original character as a courageous beauty, but the source text presents a melancholy woman who struggles to ameliorate her aspirations with inescapable inertia. She reveals to Arthur that her sadness stems from her "great desire of glory and of fame"<sup>108</sup> which she has not yet realised. Spenser, who never reveals Prays-Desire's fate, indirectly suggests that she never will.

Quashed female desire, of power frustrated and potential curtailed, manifests recurrently in Spartali's known *corpus*. Taken from Theocritus' 'Idyll II', Simaetha and Thestylis undertake alchemical labours in *Pharmakeutria* (notably, in a walled garden). Resorting, like Tasso's Armida, to supernatural means to entrap a desired lover, Simaetha knows that her attempt to lure her lover Delphis back to her will likely fail: she tells the moon, a symbol closely allied with the feminine, that she will use an Assyrian poison to kill Delphis if her plan doesn't work.<sup>109</sup> Spartali inscribes a line of Greek text into the frame, creating a kind of double work: "O wheel (of fortune) draw this man to my house".<sup>110</sup> Referencing the wheel Simaetha spins throughout Theocritus' original text, Spartali's caption simultaneously describes female power and its limitations. The potion-maker may undertake a dangerous, supernatural labour to capture Delphis'

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<sup>108</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*. Ed. A.C. Hamilton. Vol.1., Book 2, Canto 9, stanza 38, l.7. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.281.

<sup>109</sup> Theocritus, "Idyll 2" in *The Greek Bucolic Poets*. Trans. J.M. Edmonds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912), pp.26-39, p.39.

<sup>110</sup> See Peter Nahum, "Notes on *Pharmakeutria*." *Leicester Galleries*.

<<https://www.leicestergalleries.com/browse-artwork-detail/MTk3MjY=>> [Accessed 9 September 2023].

attention, but the effort does not guarantee success; her influence can draw her errant lover into her domain, but she can't keep him there. This joint vision of potentiality and impotence is supervised by a portentous owl, who appends the women's nighttime activity with the wisdom, craft, and warlike tactics of goddess Athena.

A more brutal vision of female constraint is discovered in *Procne in Search of Philomela* (unlocated).<sup>111</sup> Illustrating the woman of Greek myth whose husband had raped and brutalised her sister Philomela, Procne's power to extract vengeance is so limited she is compelled to resort to terrible means, killing her son and feeding him to his father to exact revenge.

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<sup>111</sup> Unlocated. Known to exist through the records of The Dudley Gallery, which lists the work as catalogue no. 131 in the annual exhibition of the Society of Women Artists. See Elliott, p.74.

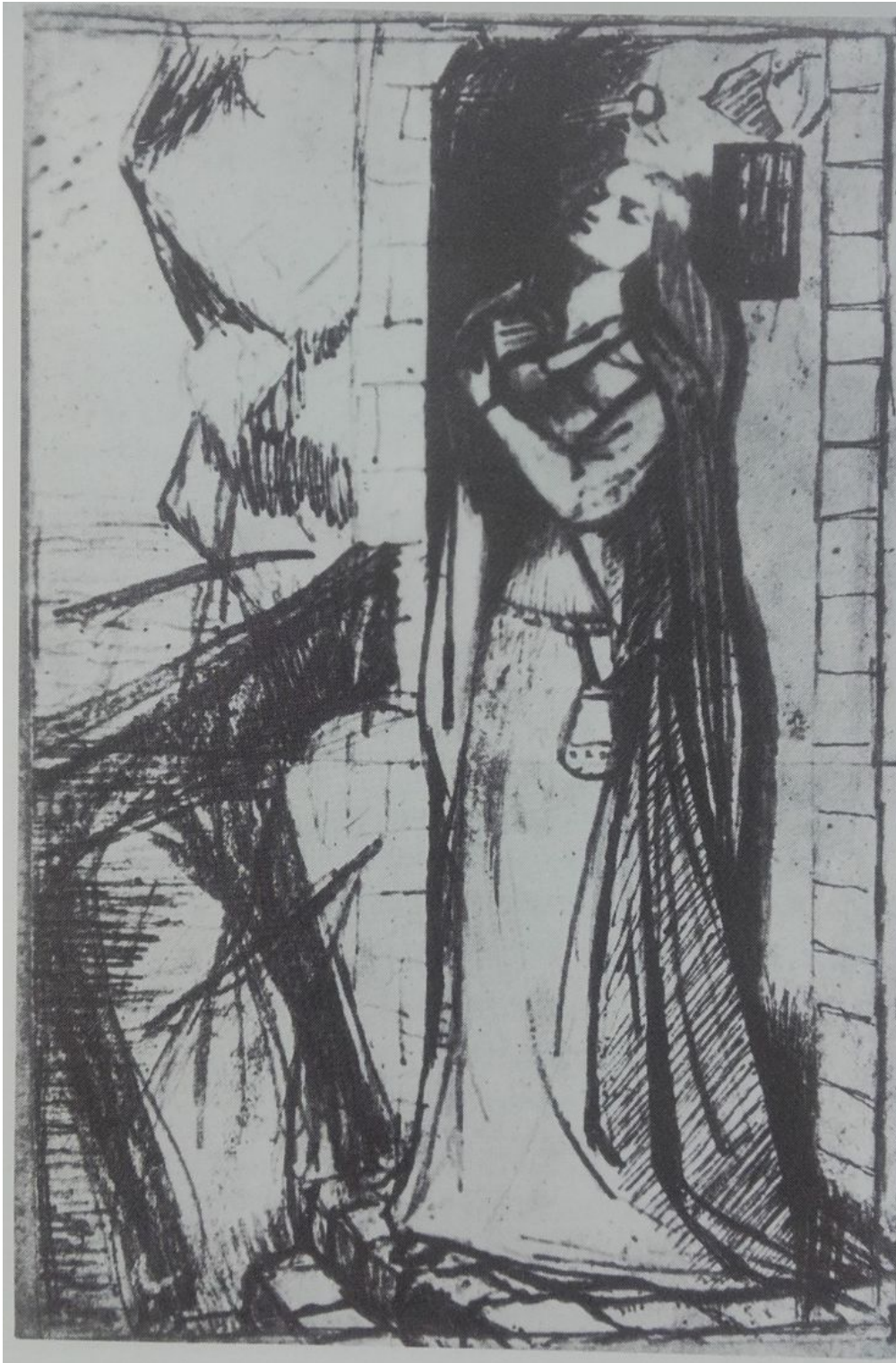


Fig. 58 Anonymous photographer after Elizabeth Siddal, Glass plate negative of Study for the *Maid of Lochroyan*. 16.3 x 12cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1866).

Siddal's works are equally preoccupied with the expatriated female subject and the limitations and consequences of defiance. The subjects of *The Lady of Shalott* and

*Lady Clare* have seized a moment of autonomy that precipitates the crisis depicted in their respective illustrations, frustrating the prescribed categories of 'maid' and 'wife'. Similarly, *Study for the Maid of Lochroyan* captures the fatal moment the maid is rejected by her lover Gregory, father of the illegitimate child she clutches to her chest. Banished from his home, both mother and baby are ostracised to the ramparts, doomed to freeze. Spurned, she is at once alive and dead, active and passive, righteous and condemned, just like Sister Helen as she burns her lover's effigy, relinquishing her soul, or Margaret as she admits to Clerk's corpse that she might be pregnant; Margaret's hourglass, ominously empty,<sup>112</sup> indicates her time has prematurely run out. The unifying strand which sabotages each female subject is her inability to meaningfully change her circumstances, her thwarted potential forming the crux of the depicted tragedy.

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<sup>112</sup> Deborah Cherry, "Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall (1829-1862)" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*. Ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.183-195, p.183.

## Alternative masculinities



Fig. 59 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*. Watercolour on paper, 42 x 61 cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1853).

Sublimated into the twilight machinations of Spartali's *Pharmakeutria* and the rigid torment of Siddal's *The Maid of Lochroyan* is an archetype of perpetrating masculinity that is treacherous, self-interested, and all-powerful. Its supreme authority is made patent by man's absence, forming a monolithic vision of oppressive patriarchy that is discursively manifested in other works by Siddal and Spartali, like the unfeeling and sexually exploitative lover of Siddal's 'I care not for my Ladys soul'.

Yet offered in tandem with, and in counterpoint to, these apathetic libertines and tyrannical fathers is an alternate vision of masculinity which embodies empathy and creativity, chastity and passion. For Spartali and Rossetti, this new paradigm is

embodied in Dante Alighieri, the “poetic incarnation”<sup>113</sup> of masculinity who exhibits an “open male emotivity quite alien to the constrained world”<sup>114</sup> of Victorian orthodoxy. Resisting nineteenth century notions of discipline and restraint, Dante offers Rossetti a “Bohemian construction of artistic manhood”<sup>115</sup> that the artist identified with himself – a partial self-representation (re)inscribed in the literary-historic Florentine, blurring the distinctions of real and imagined, artistic and authentic manliness.

A weeping Dante appeals to Virgil in Spartali’s *Dante and Virgil in the Dark Wood* (c.1908), which illustrates the opening passages of the *Divine Comedy*. Transplanted into the environs of a forest and stalked by wild allegorical beasts, Dante is relieved to encounter Virgil, who appears amidst the rapacious animals: “help me, o famous sage, to stand against her / for she has made my blood and pulses shudder”.<sup>116</sup> Gracious, humble, articulate and afraid, Dante and Virgil meet in homosocial intimacy, fear and love communicated in clasped hands. In the foreground is the she-wolf of Dante’s original, a partial inversion of the paradigm of male/predator and female/prey.

Rossetti’s depictions of Dante imagine an ascetic, disciplined poet who exhibits masculinity’s prescribed stoicism. While surrounded by the affectionate care of others, he does not reciprocate their touch, signalling both self-sufficiency and the capacity to endure profound emotion in isolation. It is the leaning weight and outstretched hands of his friends that reference the magnitude of his grief in *The First Anniversary of the death*

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<sup>113</sup> Jay D. Sloan, “How grew such presence from man’s shameful swarm’: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Victorian Masculinity” in *Pre-Raphaelite Masculinities: Constructions of Masculinity in Art and Literature*. Ed. Amelia Yeates & Serena Trowbridge. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp.11-34, p.34.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.116.

<sup>116</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy. Inferno*. Canto I, ll. 89-90 Petrocchi Edition. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. *Digital Dante*. <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-1/>> [Accessed 9 September 2023].

of *Beatrice*, for example;<sup>117</sup> tactility is only returned when Dante is depicted with a spirit guide, such as the winged figure of love in *Dante's Dream* (fig. 92) or Virgil in *Paolo and Francesca di Rimini* (fig. 94).



Fig. 60 Elizabeth Siddal and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Quest for the Holy Grail*. Watercolour, 27.9 x 23.8cm. Private Collection (c.1859).

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<sup>117</sup> Rossetti uses the same devise in *Beatrice Meeting Dante* (fig.3.). Note, Dante's kneeling position is very similar to *The Quest for the Holy Grail*.

Annexed to Dante's deep poetic feeling is the inferred celibacy of unrequited love, a consequence of the unanswered nature of his passion for Beatrice; a characteristic shared with Siddal's cipher of alternate maleness, Sir Galahad, for whom virginity is a foundational component of an unorthodox masculinity. In a series of preparatory sketches Siddal forms and reforms the meek, kneeling form of the nobleman, culminating in the collaborative Siddal-Rossetti watercolour *The Quest for the Holy Grail*. The title references Tennyson's poem of the same name, which asserts the chastity and might of the "maiden knight":<sup>118</sup>

My strength is as the strength of ten  
Because my heart is pure.<sup>119</sup>

Sexual purity is here annexed to military prowess – while Galahad rejects the passions of the flesh, his "tough lance thrusteth sure".<sup>120</sup>

Described by Jan Marsh as "an image of faith surrounded by gloom",<sup>121</sup> this Galahad is humble, tentative, and afraid. Sword and helmet lie dormant beside him, his clothing bears no chivalric heraldry or colour (unlike the vibrant Sir Galahads generated by Rossetti), and he seems vulnerable and exposed in the face of divine recognition. Behind him, entombed in stone, is the figure of a deceased knight in full armour, hands held in prayer. Galahad, being pure, will select the moment of his death as an apotheosis.

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<sup>118</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Sir Galahad' in *Poems*. Vol. II. (London: Edward Moxon, 1842), pp.174-178, p.177, stanza 6.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p.174, stanza 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Jan Marsh, "Knight and Angels: the Treatment of 'Sir Galahad' in the Work of Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and William Morris" in *Journal of the William Morris Society*, vol.8, no.1, Autumn 1988, pp.14-23, p.18. <[https://morrissociety.org/wp-content/uploads/AU88.8.1.Marsh\\_.pdf](https://morrissociety.org/wp-content/uploads/AU88.8.1.Marsh_.pdf)> [Accessed 9 September 2023].

The knight's virtue is both born of, and complicated by, his own illegitimacy. According to legend, he is the son of Sir Lancelot and Princess Elaine of Corbenic, whose brief tryst was the result of Elaine adopting the appearance of Guinevere. Lancelot, furious to discover the treachery, spares Elaine's life but refuses to marry her; father and son are only reunited years later. So created, Galahad becomes a cipher of uncorrupted chastity born of duplicity and iniquity, his unblemished state atoning for the sins of his parents. The equation of virginity with the maiden, and of subsequent purity which can blot out prior corruption, combine to make him a hybrid of masculine and feminine qualities, and perhaps even a symbol of redemption from sexual indiscretion.

Siddal's poem 'True Love' repeats this idyll of masculinity that exhibits gentle courage. Describing the deceased knight Earl Richard as "tender and brave",<sup>122</sup> the speaker's adoration seems at least partially founded on Richard's empathy – an idea echoed as the bereaved expresses that they will one day return to his tomb "hopeful and brave".<sup>123</sup> Hopeful, presumably, of divine reunion.

By generating alternative masculinities through the antique figures of Dante and Sir Galahad, the artists propose a vision of maleness that isn't new, but rather references a forgotten historic model – one that, perhaps, enjoys greater fidelity to nature, unincumbered by the strictures of Victorian modernity. These exemplars of masculine enterprise are constructed through the synthesis of feminine and masculine attributes, and disseminated to promote a model for being that is an amalgam of the intellectual and creative but also the emotional, compassionate, and sexless.

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<sup>122</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, 'True Love' in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.92, l.2.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, l.13.

## Brothers and sisters

When the work is further advanced send a tracing over to me again... for I LOVE HELPING YOU and it is kind of you to pretend I can.

- Edward Burne-Jones, letter to Marie Spartali Stillman, c.1890.<sup>124</sup>

Perhaps the vision of artistic, empathetic masculinity embodied by Dante and Galahad was familiar to Spartali and Siddal. Their proximity to supportive men of profile and (at least some) means facilitated their careers and secured their legacy to date. Rossetti advocated for them both, acting on their behalf to secure patronage, sales, and profile; Spartali had (to a greater or lesser extent) support from her father Michael Spartali, Charles Fairfax Murray, Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, and William Stillman; and Siddal was patronised by Ruskin, for all his misgivings about female artistry. Both, too, were guided and inspired by their male colleagues – just as they, in turn, guided and inspired them. Spartali sent tracings of *The Vision of the Good Monk Soffiano* (1893) to Edward Burne-Jones for his feedback and advice, a process he delighted in; emotional, excitable, and self-effacing letters from Burne-Jones (and kept by William Stillman) evidence the exuberance with which he offered his help.

Spartali and Siddal's resolve to be respectable art-makers within the strictures of Victorian propriety is testament to their tenacity and their desire to participate fully and meaningfully in the artistic movement of which they formed a part. Spartali's determination to be a professional artist was profound and unrelenting, exhibiting works in London and overseas nearly every year from the 1860s. Her surviving *corpus* is

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<sup>124</sup> Edward Burne-Jones, Letter to Marie Spartali. (1890?). William James Stillman Collection, WJS53. Schaffer Library, Union College, Schenectady.

remarkable for its size and in the breadth of genre; while this thesis is primarily occupied with her portraits, many technically brilliant, dynamic landscapes and still lifes survive, alongside embroidered garments and painted screens. Siddal's body of pictorial and textual work, while smaller in number, equally demonstrates a keen desire to articulate and represent female experience, providing an illuminating and uniquely informed alternative perspective amidst the wider Pre-Raphaelite *milieu*.

The variance in the quality, number, and prominence of their respective *oeuvre* is indicative of their differing lifespans and of fiscal pressures, which operated in tandem with prejudicial attitudes towards gender. Siddal's comparatively modest *opus* is partially the result of limited funds, which reduced opportunities for formal training, as well as her early death. Spartali, who came from wealth, was able to learn as a young woman the skills that would eventually support her family, her career as an artist becoming enmeshed with her labours as a wife and mother.

Operating in the margins of the professional art world, the picture frames of Spartali and Siddal's works inscribe a boundary that – like the perimeter wall of home and garden – reference containment and transgression while making a case for the value of female-produced work more broadly. Perforating the margin, both generate works that covet and prize their relationship to femininity, as neatly signified in Spartali's motto 'de ipsa fecit'. For these artists, 'woman' – as represented subject and representee – is no longer simply a signifier divorced from its signified, but radically connected with and to it.

“To the eyes of the (wo)man of imagination, nature is imagination itself”<sup>125</sup>

The conclusion to chapter two reflects on the methods Marie Spartali and Elizabeth Siddal devise to perforate the boundaries levied upon them and their othered subjects. It considers the border generated by the signifier itself, exploring how the female artists circumnavigate phallogocentric representational modes by adopting natural symbolism, deriving semiotic power from its indeterminacy.

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<sup>125</sup> William Blake, “Letter [To] Revd Dr Trusler, Englefield Green, Egham, Surrey August 23 1799” in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 702-3, p.702. Alteration to gender mine.



Fig. 61 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Love's Messenger*. Watercolour, tempera, and gold paint on paper, mounted on wood. 81.3 x 66cm. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (1885).

This World Is a World of Imagination & Vision... but Every body does not see alike.... Some See Nature all Ridicule & Deformity & by these I shall not regulate my proportions, & Some Scarce see Nature at all But to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination Nature is Imagination itself.

- William Blake, letter to Revd. Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799.<sup>126</sup>

One might well wonder if women are closer to the vegetable world than to the animal world, as was claimed by certain ancient philosophers... Woman's receptivity would not be restricted to her relation to man alone but would extend to the natural economy, especially the cosmic one... her so-called passivity would not then be part of an active/passive pair of opposites but would signify a different economy, a different relation to nature and to the self that would amount to attentiveness and to *fidelity* rather than *passivity*... a moment of growth that never ultimately estranges itself from corporeal existence in a natural milieu. In which case, becoming is not cut off from life or its placing... It remains attentive to growth: physiological, spiritual, relational.

- Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*.<sup>127</sup>

Depicted in profile beside an open window which looks out to a wood-and-water realm of liberation beyond, the anonymous subject of Marie Spartali's *Love's Messenger* feeds a dove that she has tamed to carry missives to a clandestine correspondent. Tethered by a thin strand of red thread and compelled by hungry need, the bird is as much a captive to desire as the woman, a co-dependency established between inmates. A red rose is attached her dress in close alignment with the letter, the dove's rein, and her heart, signalling her affection for the absent party; the letter's contents are intuited through its relation to these symbolic modifiers. In the foreground is an embroidered figure of a winged cupid-like figure, an art-object forged by the isolated subject. Encased in a vase on the windowsill are blood-red wallflowers, while a familiar frond of clinging ivy creeps through the window into the inner chamber.

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*. Trans. Alison Martin. (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.37-38.

Confined to the domestic interior by the intersecting perimeter of her home, the subject has ingeniously devised a method to lacerate the boundary, exploiting the permeable gap afforded by the open window. As her letter crosses the divide in the custody of the bird, so the visual significances of her embroidery allows an element of her interiority to cross into the representation, mirroring the meaning generated through the manipulation of watercolour as it crosses the border of *Love's Messenger's* picture frame itself. Together, they generate a highly suggestive image of stymied love.

Prevented from acting on her desires and denied normative methods of self-expression, the subject communicates through the representational modes sublimated into the painting. That the anonymous, voiceless woman weaves a blindfolded figure in her embroidery is particularly evocative, exemplifying the process of representative art-making as a method to articulate meaning while inscribing the cupid-like being with notions of the unseen, of constraint, and of divinely ordained erotic love. Is it blinded by love, the systems that oppress that love, or both?

Adopting and adapting a new idiolect, the female subject innovates methods of message-bearing that are evocative and indeterminate. In the process, she creates “complex and mysterious ties between human figures and the natural world... while foregrounding the importance of art itself – including art (in this instance, embroidery) produced by women”.<sup>128</sup> The trials of isolation and illicit love must be parsed and negotiated using lateral, reflexive sign-systems wrangled from nature and laboriously reorganised as works of textual (the letter) or visual (the embroidery) art.

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<sup>128</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, “The Victorian Art Scene in 2016: Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists and Marie Spartali Stillman’s Overdue Retrospective in the UK” in *Victorian Literature and Culture*. Vol. 45, no.1., 2017, pp.221-227, p.223. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26347307>> [Accessed 12 June 2024].



Fig. 62 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Florentine Lily*. Gouache and watercolour on paper, 73.5 x 43.5cm. Private collection (1894-5).

This sense of discursive message-bearing recurs in Spartali's single portraits, often discovered in the subject's display of single stems of symbolic *flora*. The subject of *Florentine Lily* is depicted in the interior of her home, the open window of the background looking out over Florence's Palazzo Vecchio. Holding up an iris – specifically, an *iris*

*Florentine*, a subtype of the genus *iris germanica* – she imbues the bloom with considerable interpretative *gravitas*. Irises particularly are indicative of a message, a tradition stemming from their use in annunciation scenes and their connection to the Greek goddess Iris, messenger to Hera. The plant communicates the sitter’s fidelity to the land and to nature, the three entities sharing a deep-rooted harmony and deriving symbolic power from mutual association.

Victorian floriography is a thorny issue. Academics have endeavoured to designate specific meanings to floral symbols in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s works, investing much in the assertion – misattributed to Walter Pater<sup>129</sup> – that “to the initiated [a] flower speaks parables; to the ignorant (the many) it is an obtrusive enigma”.<sup>130</sup> Taken from William Sharp’s 1882 work *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study*,<sup>131</sup> Julie Whyman has recently amended the record, confirming that the quote’s source is the comparatively obscure William Tirebuck.<sup>132</sup> Surviving archival materials suggest Rossetti only occasionally referenced the meaning of his plant symbolism himself, and even then he seems relaxed about other interpretations. Writing about *Proserpine*, he reveals that “the ivy-branch... may be taken as a symbol of clinging memory”,<sup>133</sup> although he does so in a missive to a patron, suggesting the assertion may be motivated by commercial concerns.

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<sup>129</sup> Including Debra Mancoff and Sarah Phelps Smith. See Debra N. Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers*. (London: Prestel Publishing, 2012), p.7. and Sarah Phelps Smith, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Flower Imagery and the Meaning of his Painting*. 1978, University of Pittsburgh, PhD Thesis, p.4.

<sup>130</sup> Mancoff, p.6.

<sup>131</sup> William Sharp, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study*. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1882), pp.116-7.

<sup>132</sup> Julie Whyman, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Language of Flowers*. 2019, University of York, PhD Thesis, p.42.

<sup>133</sup> D.G. Rossetti, letter to William A. Turner c. late 1877, *Correspondence: VII The Last Decade, II. 1875-1877*. 77.182, p.477.

While it is generally accepted that “flower symbolism”<sup>134</sup> is “abundantly employed”<sup>135</sup> in Spartali’s paintings, attributing definitive meaning to *flora* is impossible – and that’s probably the point. In moving away from a phallogocentric method of presenting femininity (even as she adopts Rossetti’s sensual lens), plant matter is imbued with a profound but obscure meaning, pushing the boundaries of the signifier itself. A new borderland is generated as the artist crosses into a new symbolic language with no certain lexicon; that it references flowers strengthens its association with femininity, drawing on a deep-rooted literary and aesthetic tradition.

Both Spartali and Elizabeth Siddal utilise natural symbolism to express othered experiences. The power derived from these symbols, like the power traditionally extracted from nature by witchcraft, is potent because of its impenetrable mystery. The female subject’s relationship to the natural world is, as Irigaray points out, indicative of a different symbolic economy which is both grounded in, and relational to, the material world on both an earthly and a cosmic scale.

Siddal’s natural symbolism moves beyond the earthly to reference the supernatural. The speaker of ‘O mother open the window wide’ is a dying woman who calls on her mother to care for her son and prepare her for burial, unsealing the window of the home to allow her spirit to escape. That her mother is tasked with entering into the kirkyard to clandestinely “hide”<sup>136</sup> her corpse suggests perceived sinfulness precludes the speaker being publicly interred.

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<sup>134</sup> Julia Straub, *A Victorian Muse: The Afterlife of Dante’s Beatrice in Nineteenth Century Literature*. (London: Continuum Publishing, 2009), p.28.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, ‘O mother open the window wide’ in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), pp.68-9, p.69, l.32.

Readers have variously attributed the speaker's sin to suicide, pre-marital sex, the illegitimacy of her living son, or perhaps that she may be pregnant with another ("Tell I died of my *great* love"<sup>137</sup> may suggest 'great' with child),<sup>138</sup> but the truth is deliberately concealed, making the cause of her condition "all the more poignant for comprising, without specifying, some combination of abandonment, disgrace, and biological/procreative misfortune".<sup>139</sup> Despite her ostracisation, the poem presents the doomed speaker attempting to "control the outcome of a situation – the aftermath of their imminent death – by resorting to a significant object".<sup>140</sup> The object is always a natural one, bearing folkloric potency in alignment with the ballad tradition the poem is based on. The mother is instructed to lay a twig and fresh cut grass on the deceased's empty bed;<sup>141</sup> to burn three red berries at the cock-crow to prevent the spirit from walking;<sup>142</sup> and to break a willow wand to determine if the soul has reached heaven.<sup>143</sup>

Whether these acts are undertaken is unknown, but it is clear the subject derives a sense of autonomy from providing these instructions to her mother, "the one in whom she has the most faith... not a father or lover".<sup>144</sup> Both understand that it is through these small, esoteric, parochial actions that they can derive some form of emancipation wholly separate from the social and cultural constructs that otherwise govern their reality. These strictures, unseen and immovable, are particularly unnatural and ephemeral when contrasted to the arcane powers of the women's natural, physical apparatus.

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, l.27.

<sup>138</sup> Constance Hassett, "Elizabeth Siddal's Poetry: A Problem and Some Suggestions" in *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1997, pp. 443–70, p.451. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002261>> [Accessed 18 September 2023].

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p.452.

<sup>140</sup> Reeve, p.80.

<sup>141</sup> Siddal, 'O mother open', ll.13-15.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.17-20.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.21-24.

<sup>144</sup> Woolley, p.132.

Each microcosmic act forms an image indicative of a macrocosmic psychological concern: the empty bed, littered with the twig and grass, signifies the critical absence of death and mortality, the body transported from home to grave; the three berries, burning as the cock crows, stands in for the three generations torn apart by grief, the crying bird emitting a howl where the women and child cannot; the snapped willow wand, shown to the absent partner (and presumably father of the child), signifies his own irrevocable splintering when he discovers his loss. In many ways, the mother's actions become a form of witchcraft, an arcane and critically female labour in which she and her daughter defy hegemonic forces. Ingenuity compels this new, resourceful relationship with nature, in which organic matter is granted symbolic potential that overcomes disenfranchisement: an inversion of the conventional alignment of femininity and vegetable matter as limiting, oppressive, or facile.

Throughout the works of Siddal and Spartali perimeters generate both borderland sites of female occupation and reference their transgression, offering new and enfranchising hermeneutic possibilities while querying the limitations levied upon them. The walls that delimit home and garden in turn gesture to the worlds beyond, including the picture frame or page of poetry. Physical and conceptual dividing lines can be towed, crossed, or perforated, querying the legitimacy and limitations of what Blake dubbed "mind-forg'd manacles".<sup>145</sup> Yet while transgression can open up the possibility of (partial) freedom, in both a spiritual and a representative sense, it is a perilous act, and one that can – particularly for Siddal – lead to aberration. Control of nature can cause mutation, euphoric visions of early love turned to monstrous and wasting consumption,

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<sup>145</sup> William Blake, 'London' in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp.26-27, p.27, l8.

the intractable obstruction of the garden wall – like the social limits it reflects – guaranteeing subversion.

Devising new languages forged within the natural world, detectable and profoundly suggestive but never coherent, Spartali and Siddal's poetry and illustration is semiotically powerful because of its evocative uncertainty. Walter Pater, in his *Studies of the History of the Renaissance* (1873), summarises the approach: "the very perfection of [lyric] poetry often appears to depend, in part, on a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject, so that the meaning reaches us through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding, as in some of the most imaginative compositions of William Blake".<sup>146</sup> So in the evocative, renewed vocabularies of Siddal and Spartali, an act of imagination creates a new method of expressing a marginal position from within an exclusionary representational mode.

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<sup>146</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.126.

### 3. Rupture: the desiring mind

Chapter three moves beyond considering the delimited spaces occupied by the female subject to consider states of being in the artists' works. Looking at the consequences of desire on the psyche, it explores the use of perception and imagination to create dreamlike, reality-adjacent worlds which express and threaten consciousness. The introduction and conclusion deepen reflection on how the ideas of William Blake and Dante Alighieri might have influenced different approaches.

## Dante, Blake, and hallucinatory realism



Fig. 63 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Madonna Pietra degli Scrovigni*. Watercolour and gouache on paper, 78.7 x 61 cm. National Museums, Liverpool (1884).

For Man cannot unite with Man but by their Emanations  
Which stand both Male & Female at the Gates of each Humanity

- William Blake, 'Jerusalem'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Blake, 'Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion' in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 144-258, p.246, Chapter IV, Plate 88, ll.11-12.

Standing amidst the subdued tones of wintry vegetation, Marie Spartali's *Madonna Pietra degli Scrovigni* doesn't quite return the viewer's gaze. A single portrait in which a lone female subject grasps iconographic *flora* and an esoteric, transparent globe that depicts a winged figure, the work's connection to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *oeuvre* has long been established (particularly, Jan Marsh notes, his *Veronica Veronese*).<sup>2</sup> A tribute to Rossetti created in the wake of his death,<sup>3</sup> the painting is entrenched in the concept of artistic legacy, (re)inscribing connections between Dante, Rossetti, and Spartali herself.

Spartali described the work, with characteristic self-deprecation, as "just a lady clad in green in a green stony landscape"<sup>4</sup> when it was purchased by subscription for the city of Liverpool in 1884, a remark at odds the work's complex symbolism and intertextual, intertemporal referents. The subject is taken from Rossetti's translation of a sestina by Dante, which Rossetti named 'Of the Lady Pietra degli Scrovigni' in *Early Italian Poets* (1861). Jointly informed by Dante's original verse and Rossetti's transmuting lens, Spartali's portrait galvanises a number of influences from the medieval, Renaissance and Pre-Raphaelite, generating a painting that is both steeped in the ideas of her predecessors and wholly her own work.

Intersecting this aesthetic complexity is *Madonna Pietra*'s liminal state between barren stone and radiant passion. She is impassive but elicits great desire, "utterly frozen"<sup>5</sup> while emitting a "sunshine"<sup>6</sup> so profound that "nothing can give shade".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Marsh, "Madonna Pietra degli Scrovigni" in *Poetry in Beauty*. (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2016), pp.98-99, p.98.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, Cat. 50, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), p.133.

<sup>5</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "XI. Sestina *Of the Lady Pietra degli Scrovigni*" in *The Early Italian Poets* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1861), pp.324-6, p.324, l.7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.325, l.23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Compounding this semiotic contradiction is the introduction of the “winter flora”<sup>8</sup> of blackthorn, hellebore, and ever-green oak. These emblems are Spartali’s own invention, and evidence her intuitive but indeterminate natural symbolism; Dante describes only “a crown of grass”<sup>9</sup> in the source poem. Their inclusion offers the subject a sense of obscure authority, a consequence of engaging in a new language with no certain lexicon.

Both Dante’s poem and Rossetti’s translation are explicit in identifying Madonna Pietra as the embodiment of “my longing... which talks and hears as though a lady”,<sup>10</sup> a personification of desire closely associated with the colour green. Omitted from the landscape (“we see no colour in the grass”)<sup>11</sup> but manifested in the fecundity of the speaker’s yearning (“my longing loses not its green”),<sup>12</sup> this “lovely green is profoundly sinister, because it is the color of Dante’s desire, and not nature’s green at all”.<sup>13</sup> Spartali differentiates these tones in watercolour and gouache, imbuing the landscape with a blue and brown-toned naturalism in contrast to the more lurid, chartreuse palette used for the subject’s dress.

Spartali completed her *homage* to Rossetti by pairing the portrait with the last three lines of his translation, creating an informal double work. Presented alongside the painting at exhibition, these lines move away from describing ‘Lady Stone’s’ hard, frozen beauty to emphasise her status as both a part of nature and its disruptor:

How dark soe’er the hills throw out their shade,  
Under her summer-green the beautiful lady

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<sup>8</sup> Jan Marsh, “The Old Tuscan rapture’: the response to Italy and its art in the work of Marie Spartali Stillman” in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers and Artists in Italy*. Ed. Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.159-182, p.169.

<sup>9</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Lady Pietra’, p.325, l.13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.324, ll.4-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.324, l.3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.324, l.4.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom, *Poets and Poems: Bloom’s Literary Criticism 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection*. (United States of America: Chelsea House, 2005), p.6.

Covers it, like a stone cover'd in grass.<sup>14</sup>

At once as solid and sure as hill and rock, and as vibrant and transient as the season and its verdancy, she is both substantial and ephemeral, organic and arcane. Spartali's representation resists notions of stupefaction or disinterest, and instead prioritises a sense of near-cosmic independent subjectivity that is both evocative and remote.

Elizabeth K. Helsinger suggests that Dante's poetics offered Rossetti the ability to "profoundly challeng[e] the representational conventions of realism in the nineteenth century... reinvent[ing] for his own age the techniques of hallucinatory realism"<sup>15</sup> – in part, a consequence of the artist's "extraordinarily vivid visual imagination".<sup>16</sup> In adopting and adapting Rossetti's approach, Spartali sublimates the same ideologies into her own works, with enfranchising results. Her Madonna Pietra is not an apathetic beauty, but a highly suggestive vision of consciousness that eludes definition; a female subject that is semiotically powerful due to the reality-adjacent authority of arcane allusion.

Hallucinatory realism – Burkhardt Lindner's "dream-analogous authenticity"<sup>17</sup> – is characteristic of the works of Spartali, Rossetti, and Elizabeth Siddal, albeit used in very different ways. Gesturally referencing reality through the creation of dreamlike worlds, each artist offers insight into subjectivity's complex relationship with the material world and itself. Each artist derives representational power by drawing on discursively referenced ideas, their knowing subjects drawing attention to something

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<sup>14</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Lady Pietra', p.326, ll.37-40.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth K. Helsinger, "How They Met Themselves: Dante, Rossetti, and the Visualising Imagination" in *Dante und die bildenden Künste: Dialoge – Spiegelungen – Transformationen*. Ed. Maria Antonietta Terzoli and Sebastian Schütze. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), pp.243-260, p.243.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.244.

<sup>17</sup> Burkhardt Lindner "Hallucinatory Realism: Peter Weiss' Aesthetics of Resistance, Notebooks, and Death Zones of Art" in *New German Critique*, no. 30, 1983, pp.127-56, p.151. JSTOR, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/487836>> [Accessed 31 May 2024].

without explicitly defining what it is. In the process, they test notions deemed transgressive. Sexual desire, subjugated identities, and representational limits are all obliquely teased within the artists' hallucinatory worlds.

Primacy of imagination, joint use of text and image, and revelation attained through a renewed relation to the interior and exterior worlds are all central tenets of William Blake's visionary philosophy. Rossetti had purchased *The Note-book of William Blake* in 1847 (sometimes called the 'Rossetti Manuscript') and with his brother transcribed it into a fair copy.<sup>18</sup> The pair would later contribute to Alexander Gilchrist's posthumously published *The Life of Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus'* (1861), which provides useful insight into nineteenth-century perspectives of Blake's approach:

Blake saw spiritual appearances by the exercise of a special faculty – that of imagination... a faculty which busies itself with subtler realities, *not* with fictions... his belief in what he himself “saw in a vision”, was not as in a material, but a spiritual fact – to his mind a more real kind of fact.<sup>19</sup>

Rossetti's kaleidoscopic, interdisciplinary double works enter into the same sensual-and-spiritual relation with the material world, using the aesthetics and poetics of the dream-hallucination to evoke a profound reality.

Both Blake and Dante were treasured by Rossetti for the belief that “art's *poiesis* brings revelation, not creation: not to make things, but to make things happen”<sup>20</sup> – an attitude equally applicable to the works of Siddal and Spartali. Simultaneously connected to, and freed from, the constraints of reality, these ideologies offer and

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<sup>18</sup> Now owned by the British Library. Blake was relatively unknown at the time. See W.M Rossetti, *His Family Letters*, p.111.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake, "Pictor Ignotus"*. Vol.1. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1863), pp.320-321.

<sup>20</sup> McGann, *The Game That Must Be Lost*, p.4.

legitimise a new, reality-adjacent symbolic economy; a “counter-authority of images and dreams [that] not only perforate the normality of the world... and... the dogmatism of experienced reality”<sup>21</sup> but also “remains as a separate authority threatened by the pull toward self-dissolution”.<sup>22</sup> Where Rossetti adopts the aesthetics of the dream to explore desire and its consequences, Spitali and Siddal discover a method to discursively represent othered subjectivity, pointing to a realm of experience that sits outside of conventional artistic and poetic modes.

There’s no conclusive evidence that the female artists were familiar with Blake’s philosophies, or that they reference them in their own works. Academics have puzzled out vestigial indicators of his influence in Siddal’s poetry; Constance Hassett suggests a relationship between a line of ‘Ope not thy lips’ – “thou art like the poisonous tree”<sup>23</sup> – and Blake’s ‘A Poison Tree’,<sup>24</sup> for example, citing W.E. Fredeman’s *Books from the Libraries of Christina, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael Rossetti* (1973) as evidence that *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789) was in the Rossetti family’s possession. The edition noted by Fredeman, however, was published in 1866, four years after Siddal’s death;<sup>25</sup> she can’t have read it.

That said, given Rossetti’s fervour for Blake and his demonstrable enthusiasm for exchanging artistic ideas with Siddal, it is likely she would have come into contact with Blake in some form. Certainly her esoteric spirituality, emphasis on imagination over empiricism, and idiosyncratic figure studies seem to share correlations with his works;

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, ‘Ope not thy lips thou foolish one’ in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.80, l.19.

<sup>24</sup> Hassett, p.466. See note 24.

<sup>25</sup> W.E. Fredeman, *Books from the libraries of Christina, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti*. (London: Bertram Rota Ltd., 1973), no.145.

*The Note-book of William Blake* contains many sketches of human and angelic bodies with linear, locked arms in expressive, experimental poses, redolent of Siddal's *Studies of Flying Angels* or sketches of *Jephthah's Daughter*.

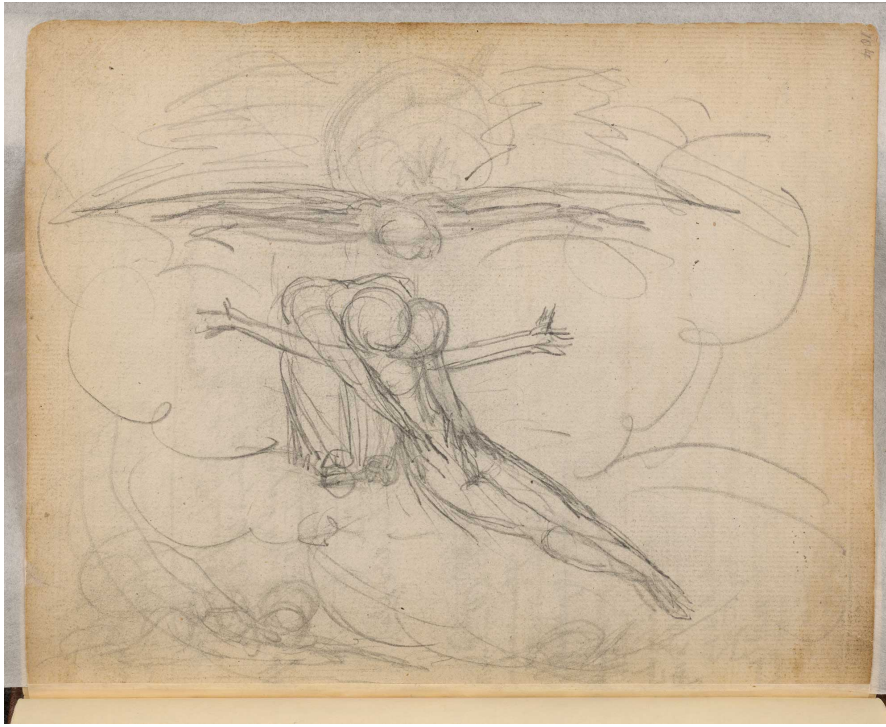


Fig. 64 William Blake, page 96 of *The Note-book of William Blake* (the 'Rossetti Manuscript'). The British Library, London. Manuscript. (c.1793-1818).

Spartali, who had a less intimate connection with Rossetti, may or may not have been aware of Blake and his impact on her friend; certainly her own works evidence only direct engagement with Dante. Traces of Blakean ideology discerned in Spartali's works, therefore, are potentially the consequence of her engagement with Rossetti's methods, and subsumed by aesthetic osmosis.

This chapter explores the delusory, illusory relationship between subjectivity and the material world in the artists' works, discovering how reality-adjacent, dreamlike sign-systems are used to present revelatory, evocative poetry and illustrations. The first half of the chapter examines liminal states of being in Rossetti and Siddal's works,

discovering that Rossetti's erotic female subjects oscillate between binary positions, Algernon Swinburne's "divine contraries of life".<sup>26</sup> For Siddal, subjectivity occupies an asymmetrical state at the intersection of reality, memory, and dream. Disassociated and disenfranchised in both a symbolic and a real sense, reality becomes stupefying and strange, while retreat into the mind offers some semblance of clarity and, perhaps, hope.

The second half of the chapter considers how refracted elements of subjectivity are discursively manifested in Rossetti's double works and Spartali's single portraits, before examining how consciousness in Rossetti and Siddal's poetic and pictorial works becomes ruptured, collapsed, or suspended. Powerful, mysterious, and in some cases near-uncontrollable, the mind's relationship with the world is asserted through the obscure comfort of the dream, or the narcotic menace of the hallucination.

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<sup>26</sup> Algernon Swinburne, 'Genesis' in *Swinburne, Selected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. John D. Rosenberg. (New York: Modern Library, 1968), pp.188-190, p.189, l.32.

## “Faces of Arcane & Inexhaustible Meaning”:<sup>27</sup> Rossetti and the liminal female subject

The first section of chapter three explores liminality in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s double works. It discovers how the female subject’s oscillating state between binaries generates a dreamlike world wherein the desiring psyche mistakes an embodied fragment of itself as other.

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<sup>27</sup> “It seemed a face created to fire his imagination, and to quicken his powers - a face of arcane and inexhaustible meaning. To realise its features was difficult; to transcend its suggestion, impossible”. William Michael Rossetti describing the influence of Jane Morris’ appearance on his brother. W.M. Rossetti, *His Family Letters*, p.244.



Fig. 65 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *La Pia de' Tolomei*. Oil on canvas. 105.4 x 120.7cm. Spencer Museum of Art, Kansas (1868-1880).

The whole creation will be consumed, and appear infinite and holy whereas now it appears finite & corrupt.

This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment...

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

- William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', p.39, plate 14.

If patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the limit or border-line of that order. From a phallogocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos.

- Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine".<sup>29</sup>

Hunched over as if constricted by the shape of her canvas, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's crowded depiction of *La Pia de' Tolomei* is a riddle of contradictions. The third soul to encounter Dante and Virgil in Dante's *Purgatorio* Canto V, the virtuous Pia calls on her visitors to remember her before elliptically revealing that she has been the victim of either uxoricide or marital neglect, stating only that "Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma".<sup>30</sup> Rossetti, who represents Pia with all his customary signifiers of eroticised femininity, imagines her in a state of suspense between binaries.

In accordance with the source material, Pia is in purgatory, caught between life and death, the mortal world and divine salvation, imagined by Rossetti as the ramparts of the fortress of Maremma – the site of her demise. Surrounded by earthly tendrils of ivy and fig which cling to the grey stonework of a rampart, the subject is neither inside nor outside, neither a prisoner nor free, but occupies a liminal space between the two, entombed in the memory of her ruinous marriage and violent end.

Medieval apparatus surrounds Pia, rendered impotent by its transition from the material to a medial realm. The sundial, casting no shadow, cannot measure time;

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<sup>29</sup> Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine" in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 117- 132, p.127. The title of Moi's essay relates to the three categories of women's writing in the nineteenth century according to literary critic Elaine Showalter in 1977.

<sup>30</sup> "Siena made – Maremma unmade – me". Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy. Purgatorio*. Canto V, l.134. Petrocchi Edition. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. *Digital Dante*. <<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/purgatorio/purgatorio-5/>> [Accessed 18 November 2023].

spears lie dormant; a banner lies semi-furled on the ground, signalling the breakdown of the chivalric dignity. Pinching the “fair jewel”<sup>31</sup> by which she “was ringed and wed”,<sup>32</sup> she draws the viewer/reader’s attention to the vacillation of her socio-sexual status, too. In life she had transitioned from maid to wife, but in death her husband has broken his vows – as he “in his inmost heart well knoweth”<sup>33</sup> – rupturing the sacred bond of matrimony. She now exists in a third state, her wedding ring problematising her marriage and obliquely querying if the union can be considered eternal in such circumstances.

Like Elizabeth Siddal’s *The Maid of Lochroyan*, Pia’s position on an axis between the intersecting interstices of life/death, inside/outside, wife/non-wife,<sup>34</sup> prisoner/free, and heaven/earth compounds the sense of tension discovered in her embodied depiction. The discomfort of her physical contortion humanises and accentuates the semiotic strain of the work’s symbolism, and she huddles somewhere between sitting and lying, unable to rest.

Rossetti’s double works all position the erotic subject on a threshold between binary positions. These are not the borderlands delineated by perimeters, as explored in chapter two, although they offer the same precarity; rather, this is the embodiment of a state of being, wherein the female subject comes to represent the perimeter itself. Undulating, ever-flexing symbolic potential is discovered in the spaces formed in the uncertain realm of ‘in between’, thrusting the viewer/reader into shifting hermeneutic territory. The cumulative effect of conjuring these overlapping, layered intersections is a

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<sup>31</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘La Pia’. 1880. Collection of Mark Samuels Lasner. Manuscript. *Rossetti Archive*. <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/19-1880.lasnerms.radheader.html>> [Accessed 18 November 2023].

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Note, not virgin or maid – this is a third, undefined state of being.

glimpse of William Blake's inward-looking, imaginative infinite – of understanding beyond that which is perceived by the senses.

Rossetti's erotic subject acts as both the catalyst to capture the attention of her would-be lover – an entity that encompasses her narrative lover, the poet-painter, and the viewer/reader – and to pull them into her orbit. Caught, the *voyeur* is drawn into her liminal world, wherein a sense of inescapable momentum moves toward – and then beyond – the female subject. In doing so, she both occupies and forms the marginalised, threshold position 'between man and chaos' identified by Toril Moi, becoming a mechanism which provokes and precipitates a specific experience for the consciousness that enters into relation with her. Entrapped, it is *through* her that some understanding beyond the material can be accessed; a consequence of entering her liminal realm.

Overlapping States of In-Between



Fig. 66 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *A Sea Spell*. Oil on canvas. 109.2 x 90.8cm. Fogg Museum, Harvard University (1877).

Rossetti's erotic subjects are often positioned in a physical site between interior and exterior – an approach replicated and problematised by Marie Spartali, as discovered in chapter two. *Bocca Baciata*, *Venus Verticordia*, *The Blessed Damozel*, *Mnemosyne*, and *La Pia* are all sandwiched between a background of vegetation and a

foreground featuring a low obstacle, a device Spartali adopts for works like *Self-Portrait*, or *On A Balcony*, *Beatrice* and *Cloister Lilies*.

But where Spartali uses the barrier to create a sense of partial confinement, Rossetti employs the architecture of a wall or table to generate a tantalising hurdle. Simultaneously containing, exposing, and protecting the erotic subject, its obstruction must be negotiated to reach her, even in instances where the lover occupies the same space. In *Fazio's Mistress*, the dressing table demarcates a separate territory within the *boudoir* itself, an island of femininity which Fazio can see into but not easily enter.

Conceptual binaries intersect with these physical delineations. The sibyl of *Sibylla Palmifera* (fig. 92) and the sea nymph of *A Sea-Spell* are neither human nor divine, but straddle the physical and metaphysical realms. Both are 'mediums', conduits that translate mysterious thoughts from another world to the earth using transient means; the sibyl mediates through speech, while the sea-nymph makes music.

The sibyl sits beneath "the arch of Life",<sup>35</sup> her shrine a passageway between worlds. The threshold is pictorially represented by a blindfolded cherub with a wreath of roses on one side and a skull with to a circlet of poppies on the other. Sitting between them, she grants the blind (a form of) sight, and the dead a voice. The sea-nymph conjures meaning "between [the] chords"<sup>36</sup> of the melody she plays, the sound rebounding between a "netherworld gulf"<sup>37</sup> that only she can perceive and the "midmost main"<sup>38</sup> on earth, where mariners succumb to her siren song. She sits on the land, "her

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<sup>35</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Soul's Beauty' in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis and White, 1881), p.239, l.1.

<sup>36</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'A Sea-Spell' in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed. William M. Rossetti. (London: Ellis, 1911), p.211. l.3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, l.6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, l.11.

lute hang[ing] shadowed in the apple-tree”,<sup>39</sup> between an inscrutable otherworld and the ocean.

While Alan Davison suggests that, in each case, “a beautiful woman creates objects in isolation from the external world”,<sup>40</sup> it is vital to note that the female subjects are interpreters, not creators; their power resides in reforming ideas in word and sound. A new binary therefore emerges between the ephemeral, dissipating vibrations of noise and the emotional response that it elicits in each subject’s lover, a potent reaction between materiality and immateriality.

Another favoured intersection applied in the double works is that discovered between life and death, deepening the joint sense of access and distance. Julian Treuherz points out that Fiammetta, depicted amidst “mid Spring-flushed apple-growth”,<sup>41</sup> is discovered in “the brief moment between life and death... a representation of female allure [and] at the same time... an image of death and of love that lasts beyond the grave”.<sup>42</sup> Her imminent departure to the next world is signalled by Rossetti in the inky black of the background, the portentous red bird overhead, and the angel within her halo.

That the poetic component of the double work describes her appearance as both “a presage and a promise”<sup>43</sup> overlays another dichotomy on to the representation: that of imminent threat and reassuring certainty, the “death and love”<sup>44</sup> referenced by Treuherz. This same sensation of ominous surety is found in ‘The Blessed Damozel’, as

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, l.1.

<sup>40</sup> Alan Davison, “Woven Songs and Musical Mirrors: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘symbolic Physiognomy’ of Music” in *The British Art Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2012, pp. 89–94, p.93. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43490576>> [Accessed 5 November 2023].

<sup>41</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Fiammetta’, l.2.

<sup>42</sup> Julian Treuherz, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti” in *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Masters: the Andrew Lloyd Webber Collection*. (London: Royal Academy of Art, 2003), pp.27-43, p.31.

<sup>43</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Fiammetta’, l.13.

<sup>44</sup> Treuherz, p.31.

the damozel (like Fiammetta) is neither on earth nor wholly contained in heaven, flesh nor spirit, alive nor completely dead. Rossetti abruptly changes the atmosphere in the closing lines of the 24-stanza poem, shifting from a vision of the lovers' blissful reunion in heaven to an image of the damozel weeping, an unexpected expression of agony in Elysium.



Fig. 67 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *La Bella Mano*. Oil on canvas. 157.5 x 106.6cm. Bancroft Collection, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (1875).

Rossetti's earthly women also exist between coordinates. *La Bella Mano's* cleansing implies two states of being – sensuality and chastity – which are signalled through simultaneous reference to Venus and the Virgin. The double work's poem stresses the subject's "pure and proper"<sup>45</sup> nature, a consequence of her embodiment of "a flower of Venus' own virginity";<sup>46</sup> an idea re-emphasised in the picture's iris and the lemon tree (the Virgin), the scallop-shaped basin (Venus) and the rose (both Venus and the Virgin).<sup>47</sup> Rossetti's conjoining of the immaculate mother of Christ and the hedonistic goddess of carnal love offers a nuanced perspective of femininity more broadly, suggesting a transitional and performative attitude toward sex rather than an irrevocable, life-defining state of being.

Rossetti compounds these symbolic complexities, whereby the erotic subject roams in the uncertain and volatile semiotic space between multiple and intersecting *spectra* of binary positions, while "operating at another threshold, at the intersection of words and images themselves".<sup>48</sup> The extra dimension introduced by invoking simultaneous and often dissonant media propels a sense of meaning formed in a middle space, as a hermeneutic gap opens between the written word and visual motif.

'Proserpina', the poetic component of the double work *Proserpine*, describes the beleaguered goddess' entrapment in the chilling "Tartarean grey"<sup>49</sup> of Pluto's underworld, yet the painting offers a square of warming, earthly light, suggesting closer proximity to the living. Schisms further erupt between the English and Italian iterations of the poem (in this case forming a triple work), both through the change in language and

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<sup>45</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'La Bella Mano', l.2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, l.10.

<sup>47</sup> Alicia Craig Faxon, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), p.207.

<sup>48</sup> Donnelly, p.5.

<sup>49</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Proserpina', l.6.

the detail of the description; the Italian iteration describes the “tartareo manto”<sup>50</sup> without any reference of its *colorazione grigia*,<sup>51</sup> for example. Overt contradictions arise in works like *The Blessed Damozel*, too; where the poem explicitly describes “hair... yellow like ripe corn”<sup>52</sup> the painting imagines a figure with auburn locks. Leaning on the interpretative potentiality offered by a dual text-and-image approach, Rossetti deepens hermeneutic complexity by deliberately embedding inconsistencies within the art-object.

That cognitive faculties cannot parse both of the sonnets in *Proserpine*’s frame and the visual component simultaneously broadens a sense of disjointed allusion; of meaning being sequestered somewhere other than in the detail that the viewer/reader’s attention is given to at that moment. Able only to engage with one puzzle piece at a time, the cumulative effect of the whole seems to be something too great for sensory apparatus to bear; only in the imagination can the double work be made whole, further broadening potential meanings. Perhaps the effect is described by Proserpine herself, who reveals that “afar from mine own self I seem”.<sup>53</sup> In her flexing ambiguity a schism opens up between mind and body, her detachment exacerbated by the cognitive gaps created by her simultaneous presentation in two sets of text and an image.

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<sup>50</sup> “Tartarean mantle”. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Proserpina (Per un Quadro)’ in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis and White, 1881), p.332, l.6.

<sup>51</sup> Grey colouring.

<sup>52</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Damozel [Text B]’, ll.11-12.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, l.9.

The Chink of his Cavern



Fig. 68 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel*. Oil on canvas. 174 x 94cm. Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard (1875-8).

The cumulative effect of this flexing, intersecting state of ‘in between’ is a sense of inescapable allure, which manifests in a sense of curbed or changed direction. Once attention is captured, the erotic subject’s would-be lover falls into her orbit, as if magnetised imperceptibly towards her. All Rossetti’s *femme fatale* temptresses activate this inescapable pull: Astarte’s “love-freighted lips and absolute eyes... wean[s] / the pulse of hearts to the spheres’ dominant tune”;<sup>54</sup> Lilith, sitting weaving her mythical hair, “draws men to watch”<sup>55</sup>; the sibyl causes sky and sea to “bend” to her,<sup>56</sup> striking the onlooker with awe.<sup>57</sup>

The consequence of succumbing to the erotic subject’s gravitational pull is profound and non-specific, and manifests as the lover moves towards and then *beyond* her. This process intensifies the transience already asserted through the emphasis on the subject’s lips and attainment of the orifice beyond; as noted in chapter one, these motifs “are metaphors for the fluidity of the feminine, which in contrast to the masculine resists boundary and form”.<sup>58</sup> To enter the precarious, frontier dimension of the erotic subject is to cross her threshold and pass into a state of amorphousness.

The siren of *A Sea-Spell* summons the sailor through her enticing song, deviating his intended journey and causing a change within him that oscillates somewhere between life and death:

Till he, the fated mariner, hears her cry  
And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die?<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Astarte’, ll.7-8.

<sup>55</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Body’s Beauty’, l.7.

<sup>56</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Soul’s Beauty’, l.6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, l.3.

<sup>58</sup> Korsmeyer, p.142.

<sup>59</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘A Sea Spell’, ll.13-14.

While it is evident that his run-in with the sea-nymph has incited transformative change, the certainty of the outcome is undermined by the closing punctuation of an interrogative. Death, or at least a kind of irrevocable, organic death, is not definite, but rather stands-in for another sort of metamorphosis, understood as he succumbs to her power.

The same life-changing effects are discovered in the victims of Lilith and the sibyl. In 'Body's Beauty', the maligned youth is left with "one strangling golden hair"<sup>60</sup> around this heart, an indelible mark etched into the living symbol of love and passion. The sibyl's influence, while more subtle, is no less impactful; the rhythm of life-flow is disrupted as "the beat... of thy heart and feet"<sup>61</sup> changes pace as her admirer succumbs to her charms.

Both the lover and the cosmic energies of heaven are redirected by the damozel of *The Blessed Damozel*. Emulating Renaissance altarpieces and their veneration of the Virgin Mary<sup>62</sup> – and so obliquely referencing a meeting point between the human and the divine – the poem of the double work describes how the light of her celestial realm "thrill[s] towards her, fill'd / With angels in strong level flight".<sup>63</sup> Standing on the threshold of heaven, this illuminating divine energy pulls towards – and, by inference, *through* – her, to an unknown point within heaven itself, demarcated in the uppermost apex of the visual component by the holy dove.

Crucially, her influence is required to secure her lover a place in the afterlife, legitimising their relationship and facilitating an introduction to the divine. Imagining

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<sup>60</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Body's Beauty', l.14.

<sup>61</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Soul's Beauty', ll.11-12.

<sup>62</sup> Prettejohn, "Beautiful women with floral adjuncts", p.100.

<sup>63</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Damozel [Text B]', p.15, ll.136-7.

their reunion in heaven, the damozel reveals that she will “take his hand and go with him”<sup>64</sup> to meet the Virgin Mary and God, securing approval for their love; without her, he would “fear, haply and be dumb”,<sup>65</sup> his isolation preventing salvation.



Fig. 69 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Joan of Arc*. Oil on canvas, 52.7 x 45.7cm. Musée des Beaux Arts de Strasbourg (1863).

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13, l.75.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15, l.115.

This concept of the female subject functioning as a bridging device is, on a more basic but intrinsic level, communicated in Rossetti's choice of subjects. Muses, oracles, classical goddesses, dead and promiscuous women (within the context of a culture that prizes virginity till marriage and monogamy thereafter) all connect the lover in the present with a complex, unknown, fascinating third party or entity – be it creative genius, the gods, eternal realms, or other sexual partners.

The only exception within the *corpus* of double works is the unfinished *Joan of Arc*, the written component of which Rossetti abandoned, writing in a letter that that “I don't see my way with her. No critical situation is intimate enough, and the burning is too horrible”.<sup>66</sup> The fragments of the incomplete poem speak of a familiar attempt to position the subject in a liminal space (“mid the budding branches' sway”)<sup>67</sup> in a search for access to the unknown (“Where spirits go, what man may know?”)<sup>68</sup> but Rossetti reveals that he cannot locate them “from the ashes of Joan the Maid”.<sup>69</sup> Adopting an approach to Joan that shares more with Christine de Pizan's hagiographic account (1429) than Voltaire's bawdy *The Maid of Orléans* (1762), Rossetti seems unable to destabilise Joan's “imperial image of Eternity”.<sup>70</sup>

Whether rendered inaccessible because of her purity, the brutality of her murder, her rejection of then-current ideas surrounding femininity, or some combination of all three, Joan does not seem to offer Rossetti the necessary narrative and symbolic connotations required to create an eroticised, frontier figure. She may appear as an

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<sup>66</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to Frederic James Shields 6 March 1881, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: IX The Last Decade IV 1880-1882*. 81.102. Ed. William E. Fredeman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), p.428.

<sup>67</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Joan of Arc' in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed. William M. Rossetti. (London: Ellis, 1911), p.245.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, l.9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, l.13.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.245.

“androgynous knight”<sup>71</sup> that suggestively kisses a sword in the 1863 oil painting (an action remarkably similar to Siddal’s *Clerk Saunders*), but she does so while fervently beholding an effigy of the crucified Christ, redirecting sexual interest to the human form of the Christian god; there is no room in her attention for anyone else. Stability replaces fluidity, and her direct, intractable connections to God and to France lead always to a flinty end-stop, a “tombless fossil of deep buried days”.<sup>72</sup>

Positioned on a precipice of intersecting, interstitial axes, Rossetti’s phantasmic erotic subjects simultaneously invoke the carnal and the divine,<sup>73</sup> the living and the dead, the interior and the exterior, reality and dreamlike imagination. Schrödinger’s erotic subjects, they embody both and neither dualism simultaneously, becoming an aesthetic superposition which draws her would-be lover into her orbit and on through her kaleidoscopic realm.

The depicted subject’s precarity creates both the opportunity and the method to reach something else – she is a frontier, *through* which the independent imagination travels. What lies on the other side is tantalising, known to exist, cosmic in scale, and transformative; to encounter it is to undergo a profound experience, perhaps to know something akin to Blake’s “infinite”.<sup>74</sup> So positioned, the erotic figure of the double work fulfils the function of the “narrow chink in [man’s] cavern”,<sup>75</sup> the fissure through which the finite can be left behind.

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<sup>71</sup> Clare Broome Saunders, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.80

<sup>72</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Joan’, p.245.

<sup>73</sup> Although not, notably, heaven and hell. Hell doesn’t exist in Rossetti’s aesthetic worlds.

<sup>74</sup> Blake, ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, p.39, plate 14.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Within this paradigm, the eroticised female subject operates as a mechanism by which the authorial, sexualising participant in an erotic exchange can transition between states. She is a necessary but illusory tool, occupying and fulfilling Toril Moi's threshold between the earthly, fixed and finite and an eternal, turbulent, and ever-changing realm that man can perceive through her, a critical component of her allure.

The Irresistible Emanation

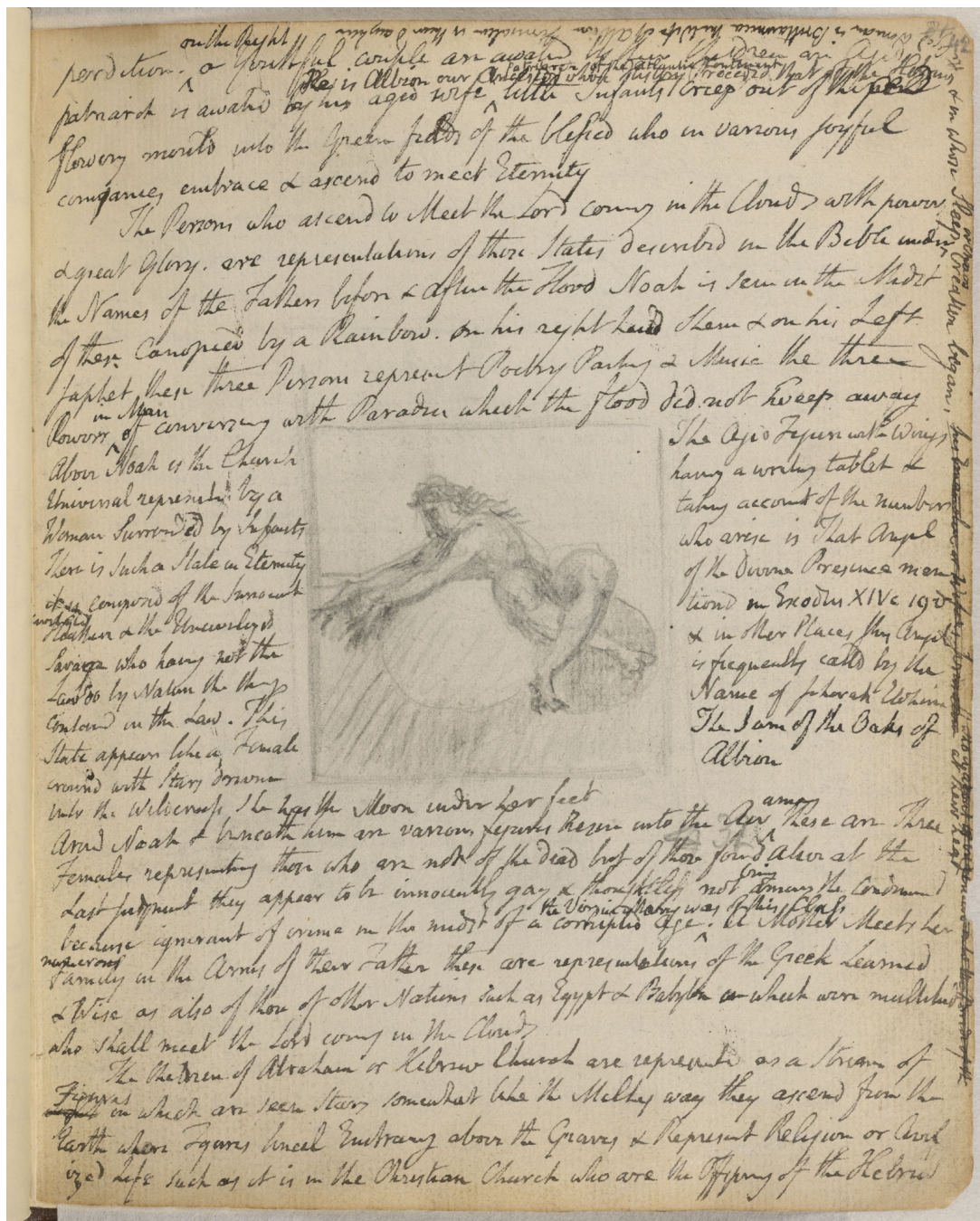


Fig. 70 William Blake, a page from *The Note-Book of William Blake* (the "Rossetti Manuscript"). c.1793-1818. MS49460, f.42. The British Library, London. Manuscript.<sup>76</sup>

In Eternity Woman is the Emanation of Man; she has No Will of her own. There is no such thing in Eternity as a Female Will

- William Blake, 'A Vision of the Last Judgment'.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> The central sketch is for a figure on the title page of 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion'.

<sup>77</sup> William Blake, 'A Vision of the Judgment' in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 554-567, p.562.

A central precept of Blake's mystic philosophy is the joint existence of 'creation' and 'emanation', in which an errant off-shoot of a host entity turns back to confront its creator – a phenomenon that is expressed in profoundly gendered terms. To Blake, "creation... is the emergence of the fallen world through separation or division in the process of emanation from an original eternal state",<sup>78</sup> an event he describes in his 'A Vision of the Last Judgment', a draft of which is included in *The Note-Book of William Blake*. Albion, the ancestor and representative of (patriarchal, masculine) humanity, enters into a state of creation, during which a fragmented portion of himself comes into being as his wife, embodied in the city of Jerusalem.

Both formed of and oppositional to Albion, Jerusalem's genesis is akin to Adam's lateral conception of Eve from a rib, or Athena's gestation from the body of Zeus. So produced, this self-aware and deviant issuance is at once both male and female, in contrast to the masculine, prime antecedent. Blake posits that harmony and divine redemption can only be achieved through the reunification of the eternal host entity and its unruly, earthly shard, a coming together equated to heterosexual coupling.

So Rossetti's erotic female subjects come into existence as wayward splinters of the desiring mind. Both male and female in origin, wherein the male host psyche generates the female other from the self, their inescapable allure is profound. She disrupts and redirects his energies, drawing him toward and through her liminal realm. Embodying a perimeter, she borders man and something else.

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<sup>78</sup> Rachel V. Billigheimer, "Conflict and Conquest: Creation, Emanation and the Female in William Blake's Mythology" in *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2000, pp. 93–120, p.93. *JSTOR*, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3195432>> [Accessed 17 September 2023].



Fig. 71 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Pandora*. Oil on canvas, 130.8 x 78.7cm. Private Collection, (1871).

These ideas are neatly manifested in *Pandora*, the first woman created by Hephaestus. A figure synonymous with irresistible allure and irrevocable mischief, she begins to lift the lid of her infamous box. Spirits pour out in a dense, unstoppable vapour that arcs around her head and imbues her senses, lending the work a sense of narcotic inhalation; the outlines of winged figures, unleashed on to the world, can be discerned amidst the smoke of this aberrant halo.

An erotic female subject formed of a nexus of fixed, abbreviated bodily motifs, her corporeal form offers sufficient semiotic *terra firma* for the viewer/reader to enter into a flexing world of potential meanings produced within a liminal space designated 'in between'. Straddling the human and the divine, good and evil, order and chaos, her state between binaries compounds her magnetism, drawing all to behold her.

Critically, Pandora is asserted as the product of her makers, and irrevocably connected to their desires – a kind of Blakean emanation. Rossetti's casket is an ornamental box forged of metal, rather than the customary *pithos*, inscribed "nescitur ignescitur".<sup>79</sup> Conceived in the flames of Hephaestus' forge and the passionate fires of Rossetti's creative mind, she is generated in flesh by the God of fire and in word-and-image by the poet-painter. Together, their masculine creative forces are the joint creators that manifest her errant emanation.

Algernon Swinburne identified the dangers Rossetti's "perfect and exalted"<sup>80</sup> doubled representation of Pandora signals, describing her "Godlike terror and imperial trouble of beauty"<sup>81</sup> enhanced by the "smoke and fiery vapour of winged and fleshless

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<sup>79</sup> "Born of flames".

<sup>80</sup> Algernon C. Swinburne, *Essays and Studies*. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), p.90.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

passions”.<sup>82</sup> The threat of her otherness is underscored by her status as divinely wrought yet unmistakably human, figuring “something radically different from ‘men’”<sup>83</sup> despite her origins in his imagination.

Crucially, Pandora “gave mankind sexual and gender difference, as well as sexual desire, and with them a plethora of pains and illnesses”:<sup>84</sup> she is man’s progeny and his destroyer, and he craves both. The poem of the double work, fraught with anxious interrogatives, opens with an indirect acknowledgement that her uncontrollable insurgency may have been the confection of her architect: “Was it thine, / The deed that set these fiery pinions free?”.<sup>85</sup> Her nonchalant, perhaps even insolent, painted expression compounds a sense of self-destructiveness, her maker’s unruly erotic impulses creating the conditions for chaos to be unleashed.

For Pandora, desire is an inevitable curse, divinely ordained. Hesiod’s ‘Works and Days’ reveals that she was created on the instructions of Zeus as punishment for Prometheus’ fiery larceny; she is built to be a “precipitous, unmanageable trap”.<sup>86</sup> As discovered in *Lady Lilith*, the lines of victim and perpetrator are redrawn, problematising the extent of her maker’s liability – where Eve succumbs to sinfulness, Pandora is designed to incite man’s downfall.

So portrayed, control is situated everywhere but in the begetter who designed her, who – even as he generates her image and imbues it with his own desirous, self-destructive sensuality – is entrapped by his own desires, inescapably drawn in. Her

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Sanna Karkulehto and Ilmari Leppihalme, “The Pandora Myth and its Feminist Revisions” in *Deviant Women: Cultural, Linguistic and Literary Approaches to Narratives of Femininity*. Ed. Tiina Mäntymäki, Marinella Rodi-Risberg, Anna Foka. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), pp.69-112, p.72.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Pandora’ in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis and White, 1881), p.333, ll.1-2.

<sup>86</sup> Hesiod, ‘Works and Days’ in *Theogony and Works and Days*. Trans. M.L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.35-62, p.38.

analgesic smoke has to be absorbed, because breathing is imperative to life; as a result, none are capable of resisting her magnetism. She is a “deadly thing”,<sup>87</sup> jeopardising herself and her maker.

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<sup>87</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Pandora’, l.7.

## Power and Imperfection: Siddal and asymmetry

Having established that Rossetti's female subjects occupy an interstitial space between binaries, the dissertation now turns to the asymmetrical liminality of Siddal's visual and textual works. It discovers a disordered relationship between subjectivity and reality, which is perceived as an uncontrollable, hallucinatory realm of impressions.



Fig. 72 Elizabeth Siddal, *St. Agnes' Eve*. Gouache on paper. 165 x120mm. National Trust, Wightwick Manor. (c.1855-1860).

Isaiah answered: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception: but my senses discovered the infinite in everything; and as I was then persuaded, and remained confirmed, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote."

- William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', p.38.

We now seem to be interiorizing our existential aches and angst, smirking knowingly at them, and numbing ourselves to maintain our nonchalance. Let's call it dissociation feminism.

- Emmeline Clein, 'The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating'.<sup>89</sup>

Pressing against the walls of a dark, recessed space, the subject of Elizabeth Siddal's *St. Agnes' Eve* appears caught between the two realms discerned through the apertures of window and doorway. Open but impassably narrow, the window offers a view of icy mountaintops and clear blue sky, the secular, flesh-and-blood world outside of the subject's cell bright and frozen. The doorway below leads to a confined subterranean space superintended by a large crucifix, a cavern-like void of devotional love that emits a comforting amber glow. Wedged between the two, it is the diminishing view of the frozen exterior that holds the subject's attention.

Where Rossetti might incur the neat, linear binaries of the earthly and the divine, liberty and confinement, warmth and cold, Siddal skews the relationship between signifiers. Rather than existing as a straightforward dichotomy of "two doors to freedom",<sup>90</sup> the options presented in *St Agnes' Eve* are complex. Liberty, normally correlated to notions of expansion and joy, is annexed to an unrestricted space of barren cold. Ecclesiastical life, which might be associated with divine revelation, is equated to an isolating, restricted site illuminated by seemingly unnatural means, relative to the daylight of the exterior. Uneasy, asymmetrical affiliations emerge between the signifiers

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<sup>89</sup> Emmeline Clein, "The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating". *Buzzfeed*, 20 November 2019. <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emmelineclein/dissociation-feminism-women-fleabag-twitter>> [Accessed 15 October 2023].

<sup>90</sup> Serena Trowbridge, "Gender and Space in Pre-Raphaelite Paintings of 'The Eve of St Agnes'" in *Poetry in Pre-Raphaelite Paintings*. Ed. Sophia Andres and Brian Donnelly. (Peter Lang: New York, 2018), pp.17-28, p.25.

of secularism, exteriority, freedom and frigidity on the one hand, and religiosity, interiority, confinement and warmth on the other.

Intersecting this uneven liminality is an equally distorted sense of the subject's identity. Jan Marsh recognises Tennyson's 1837 poem 'St Agnes' Eve' as the image's source,<sup>91</sup> and Siddal produced a number of illustrations for the proposed Moxon edition of his poetry in 1855. But Tennyson's verse tells the story of a young woman eagerly reflecting on her imminent entry into a convent in erotically charged terms. In the painting, Siddal's introduction of the aureole adds the possibility of the figure being the saint herself, the Roman child whose refusal to marry led to violent martyrdom.

Both and neither, the subject – conjured in Siddal's customary sculpted, linear form – communicates tension as she stands between unbalanced options. Do her awkward, interlaced hands indicate excited anticipation, apprehensive self-doubt, or resignation? Is this a vision of the nun-to-be caught in sensual reverie, deriving pleasure from commitment to God, or does she reflect on what she will miss in secular life? Equally unclear is the question of agency. Does she have a choice? Or is this an image of a nun who made her decision long ago, and reflects on what might have been?

The only certainty seems to be the figure's reverie, and its association with the aperture to secular life. Gazing through the window, her head at a sufficiently obtuse angle to suggest the view is not her priority, the subject looks but does not see. Disengaged from the present, she seems to have retreated into an interior realm.

This dissociative state is a recurrent theme of Siddal's poetic and visual works, and shares characteristics with William Blake's emancipatory prioritisation of cosmic,

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<sup>91</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Artist*, p.63.

revelatory imagination over sensory function. In ‘Marriage of Heaven and Hell,’ the prophet Isaiah renews his perception of the finite world, discovering both God and representational liberation in the process. Isaiah 35, Blake’s biblical source, imagines the redeemed empowered in the apocalyptic space, as “the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.”<sup>92</sup> Perhaps in *St Agnes’ Eve*, too, Siddal’s subject deepens her connection to divinity and discovers some form of authority within the crucible of the mind, even if she is displaced in her present.

Throughout Siddal’s visual and poetic works, information received through “finite organical perception”<sup>93</sup> is alienating and strange. Poetic speakers are plagued by destabilising, incongruent images and ideas, while pictorial subjects are gripped by trance-like inertia. Meaning isn’t tantalisingly pooled between dualisms, but proliferates in uncontrolled ways as it shifts between affiliated signifiers, as a series of disorienting dream-sequences radically undermine consciousness. The material is rendered immaterial as lovers become wraiths that haunt the mind through shadow, and as consciousness separates from the body. Reverberations of seismic experiences are distantly perceived, and the disassociated psyche reconnects with the corporeal only in visions of death, as the body is reformed in heaven.

Unable to forge connections or generate stable representational power, Siddal’s subjects retreat into the mind. It is there that lucidity, colour, and meaningful affinity can be understood, and spiritual questions probed. Disconnected from her present, the subject of *St. Agnes’ Eve* stands in the anteroom between a fading potential future and the near-certainty of another. But in her day-dreaming she can imagine multifaceted,

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<sup>92</sup> *The Holy Bible*, King James Version. (London: Robert Barker, 1611). Isaiah 35:5-6.

<sup>93</sup> Blake, ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, p.38.

complex possibilities, discursively implied but inaccessible to the viewer; “the restricted space may press in on her, but it cannot restrict her mind”.<sup>94</sup>

Self-consciously detaching from reality while wryly winking at its constraints, Siddal adopts an approach akin to what Emmeline Clein dubs ‘dissociative feminism’. In disengaging from the oppressive strictures of the material space, Siddal’s othered subjects exercise a reflexive function of power. Blake’s mistrust of the senses, which offer a near-nullifying window onto a world deemed insignificant relative to the imagination, is here transposed not as a method of gaining spiritual ascendancy, but to cast off the limitations of reality. In the consequent, near-narcotic instability, perhaps the subject gains some semblance of liberation – even if challenge and failure are certain.

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<sup>94</sup> Trowbridge, “Gender and Space”, p.27.

Between Asymmetrical Positions



Fig. 73 Elizabeth Siddal, *Study for St. Agnes' Eve*. Pencil, pen and brown ink. 12.8 x 9.8cm. Private collection (c.1855).

For the sainted nun of *St Agnes' Eve*, “a tortured being, not one longing for a rapturous heavenly marriage”,<sup>95</sup> the ice of secular life is more compelling than the warm

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<sup>95</sup> Woolley, p.202.

comfort of chastity and the convent. Serena Trowbridge points out that “in the Bible, mountains often indicate a space where one may be closer to God, both spiritually and physically... a place of safety and blessing”,<sup>96</sup> yet Siddal seems to equate it with mortal concerns, blurring the lines between heaven and earth.

This veiled reference to the division of sensuality and religiosity is further emphasised in one of Siddal’s studies for *St. Agnes’ Eve* (fig.73), in which biblical scenes etched into the anteroom’s walls correlate to each portal. Juxtaposed to the window is an image of Mary kneeling beside the infant Jesus, the image of mother and child a reflection of what secular life might have held. Beside the doorway Jesus bears the cross and crown of thorns, his gaze looking into the monkish cell where a bed is clearly discerned. Referencing the subject’s status as the bride of Christ, the avenue is associated with sacrifice; yet, standing with her back to the suffering Jesus, the nun seems reluctant to engage with his torment.

Further distorting this intersection of divinity/virginity and secularism/sexuality are the relative positions of each access point. The gateway to civilian life is at the top of the image, a space typically allied with heaven and transcendence. Entry to convent life is a pathway leading down, a direction conventionally suggestive of hell. This disrupted directional pull adds a further imperfection to the threshold the figure finds herself in, positioning her somewhere between sex/ice/ascension and chastity/warmth/descension (in addition to the dichotomies of exterior/secularism and interior/religious). Each of these ideas are connected but associatively flawed,

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<sup>96</sup> Trowbridge, “Gender and Space”, p.25.

culminating in an irresolvable uncertainty within the subject's world despite the apparent inevitability of convent life.

Siddal's creation of precarious frontiers formed between imperfectly related signifiers is most evident in her poetry, wherein speakers offer a mistrustful relationship with reality through irreconcilable imagery. The opening stanza of 'Life and night' positions the subject in the destabilising hinterland between life and death, yet rather than retaining the relative symbolic stability of binary opposites, Siddal undermines interpretive surety by creating a threshold between related asymmetrical positions:

Life and night are falling  
from me, Death are  
opening on me  
Where ever my footsteps  
come and go life is a  
stony way of woe<sup>97</sup>

Dissecting the fissure between 'life' and 'death' with the further bifurcation of 'night', Siddal critically destabilises the hermeneutic cohesion of the poem by immediately establishing a disordered, jarring experience of the present. The lexeme 'night' is the inverse of 'day' and perhaps 'light', as opposed to 'life', although it is no coincidence that life/light/night all share considerable similarities in length and phonetics.

Four logical symbolic pairings – life/death, day/night, life/light, and night/dark – are generated and aborted in the process, a disruption reinscribed in "the internal rhym[e]... [that] help[s] to integrate contrasting ideas so that they might pass without comment".<sup>98</sup> Through this uneasy opening stanza the speaker's perception of the living world is understood to be anaesthetised; waking eyes darkened by a lack of physical light

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<sup>97</sup> Siddal, 'Life and night', p.49, ll.1-6.

<sup>98</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.53.

and metaphysical clarity. A bright, meaningful death is asserted in antithesis, hinting at a kind of divine salvation that the speaker cannot wholly grasp – the opposites of life/night/death are death/daylight/life.

So disruptive is this lexical rebellion that regulating poetic features become distorted, doubling down on a sense of disorientation. The regular trochaic metre established in the first line falters over the words ‘opening’ and ‘where ever’, seeming to emphasise the speaker’s stumbling confusion and, perhaps, the enormity of death itself. These deviations offer disorderly hermeneutical possibilities, creating a prismatic interpretive landscape that reinscribes the speaker’s precarious, delusory experience of reality.

Within a few words, Siddal effectively communicates a relationship to the present that is a kind of sensory hallucination, where multiple potential meanings emerge in uncontrollable, unpredictable ways. It is critical to note that these significances are no less potent for their flawed connection; rather, their incomplete interrelation heightens their representational effectiveness.

The destabilising, disenfranchising impact of the hallucination on subjectivity is expressed in the closing stanzas of ‘It is not now’. Recalling a lost lover, the speaker begins to mix up memory, sensory perception, and imagination, describing an esoteric dream-sequence that fuses past and present in an oppressive cycle:

The river ever running down  
between its grassy bed  
The voices of a thousand birds  
That clang above my head  
Shall bring to me another dream  
When this sad dream is dead<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Siddal, ‘It is not now’, ll.19-24.

Although Siddal adopts the traditional metrics of ballad form – alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter – her imagery distorts the conventions of romance poetry. Partially related, contradictory signifiers proliferate, multiplying potential meanings and resisting single interpretation. Rapid movement (‘running’) is corresponded to rest (‘bed’), and birds, rather than emitting song or communicating love-messages,<sup>100</sup> are granted humanlike voices that unmelodically ‘clang’. The perpetual motion of the river and the sheer number of birds lends the poem a portentous resonance, evidencing the inescapable trials experienced by the speaker as one nightmarish dream melds into another.

Notably, the sexually experienced speaker of ‘It is not’ isn’t victimised by a single beloved, but a series of lovers, opening up the possibility that their torment is either self-inflicted or enacted by love itself. Stefania Arcara indicates that the speaker (who Arcara assumes is female) “refuses the conventional role of woman as love-victim by strategically taking refuge in a remote space of resistance and isolation”;<sup>101</sup> perhaps the subject of *St Agnes’ Eve*, whose contortion speaks to “earthly containment and fear rather than spiritual liberation”,<sup>102</sup> equally separates herself in an act of self-imposed suffering. In the process, the subject discovers power and potency in the refusal to adhere to social and poetic convention, while simultaneously hinting at self-sabotage.

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<sup>100</sup> Hassett, p.459.

<sup>101</sup> Stefania Arcara, “Sleep and Liberation: The Opiate World of Elizabeth Siddal” in *Sleeping Beauties in Victorian Britain: Cultural, Literary and Artistic Explorations of a Myth*. Vol.33. Ed. Béatrice Laurent and J.B. Bullen. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), pp.95-120, p.117.

<sup>102</sup> Woolley, p.203.

## Between Presence and Absence

As Siddal's subjects disassociate from reality, the profoundly influential entity of the lover loses their materiality, leaving only their shadow in their wake. The affronted speaker of 'Ope not thy lips' commands their now despised companion to "take thou thy shadow from my path";<sup>103</sup> the sycophantic wooer of 'To touch the glove' craves only "To touch her shadow on the sunny grass";<sup>104</sup> the new lover in 'It is not now' is signalled by a "shadow"<sup>105</sup> that "falls along the grass / and lingers at my feet".<sup>106</sup>

This use of the shadow to stand-in for a powerful third party gives Siddal's poetry a sense of haunting, as the bodies that surround the speaker adopt an apparitional quality. Without substance but substantive, the imprint of the human silhouette laterally asserts the manifest somethingness of the lover through the blocked light, while the emptiness of the outline creates – through literary negative space – an acute, powerful, and potentially threatening presence nullified by the subject's refusal to acknowledge their corporeal form.

Closely annexed to the motif of the shadow – and equally as unreliable, hermeneutically speaking – is the concept of memory. The speaker of 'It is not now' is unable or unwilling to generate clear images of their past interactions with their lover, recalling the environment that framed the interaction rather than the detail of the interaction itself:

Still it is but the memory  
of something I have seen

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<sup>103</sup> Siddal, 'Ope not', l.5.

<sup>104</sup> Siddal, 'To touch the glove', l.5.

<sup>105</sup> Siddal, 'It is not now', l.7.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.7-8.

In the clammy summer weather  
When the green leaves came between  
The shadow of my dear loves face  
So far and strange it seems<sup>107</sup>

Amorphous, obscuring impressions of weather and environment distort reminiscence, the act of remembering granted limited representational importance – it is ‘but’ the memory, vestigial and distant. Unable to trust the mind to regenerate specifics of a past event, the speaker articulates their presence as *voyeur* rather than as accomplice in the romantic liaison (it is ‘something I have seen’).

Uneasiness further imbues the stanza as the speaker resists the semiotics of romance. Idyllic summertime, the conventional setting for love, is recalled as uncomfortable clamminess, an awkward intersecting state between heat and water (as opposed to hot/cold and wet/dry). The recollection is remote and ‘strange’, and the shadowy lover’s face is concealed by the obstacle of foliage, as if the psyche can’t bear to reconstruct its features. Interpretive spaces once again open up between volatile signifiers, and the subject is left in the schism between the somethingness of the past and the hollowness of the memory; or, perhaps, the passion of new romance and the vacuum left after its end. Tangentially implied in the lingering, clammy unease is a suggestion of repressed or frustrated sexual desire, unable to be expressed or pursued.

Perception is as fragile and unreliable in the past as it is in the present, as faculties of sense offer an illusory, stupefied experience of reality in which the speaker remains in a hypnagogic state. Describing an act of retrospection, the speaker of ‘Life and night’ appeals to divinity to help with remembrance:

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<sup>107</sup> Siddal, ‘It is not now’, ll.13-18.

I am gazing upwards to the  
sun Lord Lord remembering  
my lost one  
Oh Lord remember me<sup>108</sup>

It is unclear if the subject fears being forgotten in death or in their living isolation, but the triangulation of remembrance between the speaker, the lost person, and God asserts the importance of memory to maintain representational value. The profound impact of ‘my lost one’ is (paradoxically) reflected in the brief simplicity of the line, leaving a void that communicates *gravitas* through absence. The speaker seems to fear suffering the same fate as the obscured lover – or, perhaps, of not even casting a shadow upon the world.

So the lost lovers of Siddal’s poetic speakers are known through eclipse, their cosmic influence blacked out by the subject’s inability or refusal to grant them materiality. The process imbues the absent party with considerable potency. Distanced from the perceiving mind, they become indefinite, shadowy shapes, an insubstantial echo of a greater, powerful, profound entity, their trace remnants detected in deflections and reflections in a sensory process akin to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. For Siddal, the shadow – a signifier that connotes presence as nonmaterial and passive – asserts the reverse: an efficacious, cogent, material being whose impact on the subject exists not only in the physical realm, but reverberates through the psyche, leaving its darkening traces within the recesses of the mind.

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<sup>108</sup> Siddal, ‘Life and night’, p.50, ll.23-26.

## Between the Real and Imagined

Deborah Cherry describes ‘Life and night’, with its echoing appeal to god for remembrance, as somewhere between “a devotional poem, a hymn, and a prayer... [that] dwells on mid-century anxieties besetting Christian faith”,<sup>109</sup> an idea traced in the anaphoric variations of the refrain “Lord may I come to thee”.<sup>110</sup> Yet the primary concern of the poem is a sense of overriding disconnection from reality, a space in which the speaker can neither discern nor enact representational power:

My outward life feels sad  
and still like lilies in  
a frozen rill<sup>111</sup>

Identifying themselves as an entity that extends into, and exists within, an ‘outward’ world (and so asserting an ‘inner’ world in contrapositive), the speaker expresses hesitancy in sensory function. External *stimuli* ‘feel’ strange (rather than explicitly ‘being’ strange), diminishing the power of empirical faculties. Accurate comprehension of reality is neither feasible nor, perhaps, desirable. Instead, a superficial experience is described through the simile of the frozen lily, mirroring beautiful but suspended humanity, which is in turn structured with the performative regularity of internal rhyme and iambic metre.

So deployed, the poetic devices of the petrified lily and rill deputise for the speaker’s numbed experience of material space. Shaped by, and filtered through these

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<sup>109</sup> Deborah Cherry, “Review of ‘Three Books about Elizabeth Siddall’s Poetry’” in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*. vol 20, no.3. (Autumn 2021) <<https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.3.11>> [Accessed 15 October 2023], pp.167-181, p.173.

<sup>110</sup> Siddal, ‘Life and night’, p.49, l.11.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, ll.20-23.

figurative conventions, the speaker's experience of the world is marked by falsity and uncertainty. It might have the appearance of reality, but is demarcated by an unreality born of partially formed, sedated significances.

Vitaly, the differentiation between an outer and inner world in 'Life and night' suggests an internal panopticism, wherein the speaker has a detached but keen awareness of their own and others' perception of themselves. Michel Foucault interrogates the psychological consequences of Betham's panopticon – a prison building designed to allow guards to covertly watch the incarcerated, without the prisoner ever knowing when and if they are observed – in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975):

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power... the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action... the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.<sup>112</sup>

Internalising the concept that they are relentlessly observed, the subject becomes the agent of their own subjugation, watching themselves and – in the process – perpetuating the standards and ideals of their oppressor. Even after release, the prisoner feels the watch of the guard, and modifies their behaviour accordingly.

Foucault's analysis of this method of incarceration can be applied to Siddal's disenfranchised subject, who attempts to withdraw from an alienating world which seems to have a different relational understanding of their subjectivity. This conceptual, rather than architectural, panopticon "is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen

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<sup>112</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p.84.

dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing.”<sup>113</sup> Siddal’s speaker firmly occupies the peripheric ring, jointly trapped within the body and the trope of the frozen lily. Cognisant of perspectives that mark them as other, they become alienated, entering into dissociative relation with reality and their own materiality.

Any suggestion of a Cartesian dualism between mind and body in Siddal’s ‘Life and night’, however, is problematised as the body holds no representational power within the physical world. Life and meaning are generated within the mind, despite their co-dependency; “without a body, there is no self”.<sup>114</sup> In other words, while the mind is divorced from the physical, the physical is very present with the imaginative realm, where it is granted significant importance. Calling upon God, the speaker of ‘Life and night’ envisages heaven as a space of somatic connection:

How is it in the unknown  
land do the dead wander  
hand in hand  
give me trust in thee

Do we clasp dead hands  
and quiver with an endless  
joy forever  
good be unto thee<sup>115</sup>

Reader expectation is confounded as the posthumous life of deceased lovers is imagined with vivid, tangible certainty, the visionary realm offering physical human presence within the poem for the first time.

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>114</sup> Joan C. Chrisler and Ingrid Johnston-Robledo, *Woman’s Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image*. (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2018), p.4.

<sup>115</sup> Siddal, ‘Life and night’, p.50, ll.27-34.

As G.N.A. Vesey notes, “we can imagine a disembodied mind having visual experiences but not tactile ones. Sight does not require our being part of the material world in the way which feeling by touching does”,<sup>116</sup> yet Siddal depicts everlasting devotional connection through the image of touching hands. This symbol of unity sets the reunited lovers apart from the spirits “circling / round and round”,<sup>117</sup> the bodily apparatus allowing profound emotional response that can be detected echoing through the ‘quiver’, which speaks of an inner euphoria.

So presented, humans in the earthly realm are intangible, unemotional, disassociated; in death, the speaker discursively imagines a reconnection to the body and powerful emotion. The discovery of energetic, tactile interaction in the afterlife offers another lopsided threshold that sits between living death and life in death (as opposed to simply life/death). That the description is framed by an interrogative (“do the dead wander / hand in hand”)<sup>118</sup> indicates both continued uncertainty and a deep-seated desire to reconnect with the material self. Anxiety surrounding reconnection in death recurs in Siddal’s works; in her poem ‘O grieve not’ the dying speaker asks their lover to search them out in the afterlife, when “I will take thee by the hands / and know thee mine as last”,<sup>119</sup> their union only proven if they are materially recoupled in eternity.

Sylvie Thode determines Siddal’s glorification of death to be “a manifestation of a certain Christian mysticism... a form of self-renunciation that Simone Weil has termed

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<sup>116</sup> G.N.A. Vesey, “Vision” in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Vol.8. Ed. Paul Edwards. (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1967) pp.252-253, pp.252.

<sup>117</sup> Siddal, ‘Life and night’, p.50, ll.36-7.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.28-29.

<sup>119</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, ‘O grieve not with thy bitter tears’ in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.66, ll.11-12.

“decreation”<sup>120</sup> – that is, a process of unmaking (as opposed to annihilation) demarcated by a rejection of the self. While an esoteric religiosity can be detected within Siddal’s works, it appears more closely related to an ability to signify in the spiritual/imaginative space *versus* the challenges of existing within the corporeal/physical space. While the speaker of ‘Many a mile’ cannot recollect the return of their lover from overseas with any surety, they can recall divinity in vivid detail: “Ah I remember my God so well”.<sup>121</sup> Within a poem that is demarcated with sluggish rhetoric and petrified, frozen descriptors, it is this line that erupts with comparative emotion. Whether the interjecting ‘ah’ signifies distress or pleasure is ambiguous, but the determiner ‘my’ articulates a deeply personal relationship to God comprehended through the highly individual, interior act of imagination, unrepresented in a figurative space but known to exist within the mind. For a brief moment, liveliness and warmth interjects the otherwise stupefied poem, conjured by imaginative memory.

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<sup>120</sup> Sylvie Thode, “Form Unformed: Elizabeth Siddal’s Poetics of Decreation” in *Victorian Poetry*. Vol. 59, No.4 (Winter 2021), <<https://doi.org/10.1353/vp.2021.0030>> [Accessed 16 October 2023], pp.453-476, p.455.

<sup>121</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, ‘Many a mile over land and sea’, in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), pp.57-58, p.57, l.13.

Between Hallucination, Memory, and Imagination



Fig. 74 Elizabeth Siddal, *The Holy Family*. Watercolour, gouache and metallic paint on paper. 19.6 x 15.2cm. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington. (c.1856).

day dreams sad and holy  
Coming to me only  
Through the mist of years

- Elizabeth Siddal, verse fragment.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Siddal, 'Fragments', p.100, ll.4-6.

Mary, clutching the new born Christ as if he were still ensconced in the womb, appears to gaze out of the window of the stable in Siddal's *The Holy Family*.<sup>123</sup> Like *St. Agnes' Eve*, the tilt of the female subject's head suggests she doesn't look through the aperture, but beyond it, her mind exploring an otherworldly sky rather than a physical one. Detached from her present, she is observed by an attendant angel, the divine presence mirroring and reasserting watchfulness. Mary, like the speaker of 'Life and night', is dissociated from her immediate environs, appearing captivated by an imaginative realm. Depicted without her customary halo, Mary's daydreams seem human rather than divine, and she appears disconnected from the seraphic being beside her.

Her reflections could be described by the vision of 'sad and holy' reverie articulated in Siddal's verse fragment, in which the speaker references an interior world shaped by the clouded accumulation of time. The speaker's relationship with memory, as with the present, is demarcated by an alienating, hallucinatory distance veiled by obfuscating haze. While fundamentally spiritual, the experience is marked with a wistful melancholy correlated to an erosion enacted over years, the corrosive consequence of lived experience and the loss of innocence. Hushed, soporific acceptance imbues the languishing phonetics of the verse, suggesting a tranquilised speaker, just as the quiet, homely comfort of the interior of the stable sees Mary huddled with her baby, at rest. Siddal's painting is a far cry from the active new mother of Rossetti's pencil sketches created around the same time, where the new mother is preoccupied with devotion to her child.

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<sup>123</sup> Jan Marsh points out "that the winged and haloed musician is not St Joseph, so the 'Holy Family' title is inappropriate". See Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Artist*, p.54.



Fig. 75 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Sketch of the Virgin and Child*. Pencil on bluish writing paper. 9 x 8.8cm. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham (c.1852).<sup>124</sup>

For Siddal, desire's impact on subjectivity ruptures meaning. Adopting an approach that is destabilising and strange, off-kilter aesthetics form an impression of the world that is uncontrollable, disenfranchising, and difficult. This isn't the relative comfort of the dream, but the volatile realism of the hallucination, wherein shadowy figures and potent, fragmented impressions torment consciousness. The only escape is enacted through self-reflection, as the subject moves away from the disordered vision of reality to retreat into the mind – although this space, too, has its challenges.

In her explanation of 'dissociative feminism', Emmeline Clein cites twenty-first century artist Juliana Huxtable's preference to communicate a self that can't discover

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<sup>124</sup> See also Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Sketch of the Virgin and Child*. Pencil on paper. 9.2 x 6.5cm. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham (c.1852).

stability in any persona.<sup>125</sup> Deprived of the mechanics of self-representation, works come to adopt a “schizophrenic voice... that doesn’t even permit a predictable relationship between subject and verb”,<sup>126</sup> the language of schizoanalysis acting as “clinical designations of structures of thought that at this point are inherent to the social and epistemological conditions we’re in”.<sup>127</sup> The consequences for Huxtable’s subject are as crippling as they are expansive: watching the self from the panopticon of the mind as it tries, and fails, to generate coherent and stable meanings within the material space, the possibilities for the imaginative world are redoubled as signifiers open up multiple possible interpretations (and resist any single, stable meaning).

Perhaps the same lens could be adopted for Siddal’s works, where perception and representation are jointly alienating, disruptive processes that intrude and restrict consciousness. Any sense of autonomy is derived from withdrawal into the self, an unrepresented realm that defies expression. As the subject of *St. Agnes’ Eve* enters an “unknown and unknowable reverie”<sup>128</sup> she gains “a mysterious ambiguity which imbues the figure with a status she could not otherwise have attained”,<sup>129</sup> so psychic processes, discernible but inaccessible, grant her an impenetrable dignity, autonomy generated by her enigmatic, uncertain representation.

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<sup>125</sup> Clein, “The Smartest Women I Know”.

<sup>126</sup> Juliana Huxtable, Interview by Alex Fialho. *Art Forum*. 9 May 2017.

<<https://www.artforum.com/columns/juliana-huxtable-talks-about-conspiracy-and-her-show-at-reena-spaulings-234044/>> [Accessed 25 October 2023].

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Trowbridge, “Gender and Space”, p.27.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Self as Eternal, Changeable, and Annihilable

Having explored the dreamlike liminality of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the disenfranchised, hallucinatory uncertainty of Elizabeth Siddal, the thesis now considers the cumulative impact of delusory aesthetics on the subjectivities presented in the artists' works. It discovers fragments of consciousness refracted through the depicted female subject in the works of Rossetti and Marie Spartali, and discovers that – for Rossetti and Siddal – subjectivity collapses.



Fig. 76 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*. Oil on canvas, 95.25 x 81.28cm. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (1868).

Judge then of thy Own Self: thy Eternal Lineaments explore,  
What is Eternal & what Changeable, & what Annihilable?  
The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself.

- William Blake, *Milton*.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> William Blake, 'Milton' in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 95-143, p.132.

Man is everlastingly in search of an object outside of himself but this object answers the innerness of the desire... In human consciousness eroticism is that within man which calls his being into question.

- Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*.<sup>131</sup>

Determinedly oblivious to the beholder who encounters her in her *déshabillé*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* presents a doubled representation of image-curation. Absorbed in the reflection in her hand-held mirror, she brushes her "enchanted hair",<sup>132</sup> but there are hints that this seemingly organic, private act of re-order is a performance of disorder. The deliberate fanning-out of tousled locks reflects the adjacent, triangulated expanse of exposed shoulder, which is extended towards a *voyeur* that Lilith clearly perceives.

Lilith's pose is identical in both iterations of the painting. Rossetti's original model was Fanny Cornforth, but the face was painted over with Alexa Wilding's to diffuse perceived sexual potency.<sup>133</sup> Surviving watercolour and gouache copies of the Cornforth original<sup>134</sup> show only minor deviations from the 1868 oil (fig.76): the dress is paler, there's blue fabric on the chair, and Lilith's gaze appears to slip over the top of the hand-held mirror. Less absorbed in her reflection, the watercolour Lilith appears even more aware of her watcher.

In both cases, Lilith's narcissism is an image she curates to lure in the viewer/reader, who retraces the steps of the naïve youth of the double work's poem

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<sup>131</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.29.

<sup>132</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Body's Beauty', l.4.

<sup>133</sup> Bullen, *Painter and Poet*, p.185. Wilding's features were considered less provocative than Cornforth's rounder proportions.

<sup>134</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*. Watercolour and gouache, 51.3 x 44cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1867).

‘Body’s Beauty’. Text and image work in tandem to entice would-be lovers into her soporific domain: the painting introduces the tactile luxuries of fur and velvet, while the verse is littered with the protracted phonetics of complex vowel sounds and alliterative fricatives. Both offer the opiate of the poppy, reflecting the narcotic beauty and threat of the female subject herself, who sits ready to engulf the mind and senses in euphoria or delusion or both.

The creation of languorous stupor is so thorough that Lilith’s subsequent assault is nearly imperceptible, gradually overpowering “heart and body and life”.<sup>135</sup> What remains of the predated lover in the wake of this seduction is not described in verse, but rather fills the line break between the sonnet’s octave and sestet. In this gap, space discursively references the absent subjectivity of the captured youth. His return is unsteady and faltering, re-emerging in negative interrogative disrupted by enjambment: “where / is he not found”.<sup>136</sup> He will recover, but not unscathed; the closing line of the sonnet describes Lilith’s ineradicable trace imprint, the “one strangling golden hair”<sup>137</sup> that binds his heart. The image lingers in the viewer/reader’s mind, mirroring Lilith’s everlasting influence on him.

Falling prey to the sensory delights of the rebellious, transient, erotic emanation of the desiring psyche, the culmination of the youth’s interaction with Lilith results in the momentary suspense of representation, of subjectivity, and of meaning itself. This temporary loss of subjectivity fulfils Bataille’s criterion that humanity seeks an “object outside of itself... [that] answers the innerness of the desire”,<sup>138</sup> but in doing so ‘calls his

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<sup>135</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Body’s Beauty’, l.8.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, ll.9-10.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, l.14.

<sup>138</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.29.

being into question'.<sup>139</sup> Compounding the erotic female subject's threat and allure, the joint symbolism of text and image has culminated to a point of saturated collapse, absence denoting both the fulfilment of desire and its reinstatement.



Fig. 77 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Mia Suora Rachel*. Watercolour and gouache with gum Arabic, 68.6 x 61cm. Private Collection (1887).

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

Rediscovered in 2025, Marie Spartali's *Mia Suora Rachel* offers a response to *Lady Lilith* that incorporates the artist's customary revisions to Rossetti's erotic female subject. Retaining much of Rossetti's composition (including, Jan Marsh notes, the "scarlet ribbon on the looking glass handle"),<sup>140</sup> Spartali's absorbed subject is beautiful and feminine yet poised and active, entering into a different relational exchange with the mirror. This is not a performance to draw the viewer into a thrilling erotic trap, but it isn't an exercise in vanity, either. Spartali's Rachel "is absorbed not in narcissism but self-reflection",<sup>141</sup> a process which references and prioritises her independent subjectivity.

The image's source is Dante's *Purgatorio*, in which Rachel is described by her sister Leah, who appears to Dante in a dream: "My sister, Rachel, never moves from her mirror, and sits there all day long. She is as happy to gaze at her lovely eyes, as I am to adorn myself with my hands: action satisfies me: her, contemplation."<sup>142</sup> Referencing the biblical Rachel and Leah, Dante's allegorical sisters represent the active and contemplative life respectively. Both Rossetti and Spartali create paintings entitled *Dante's Vision of Rachel and Leah* (Rossetti in 1855, Spartali in 1887), in which a purple-clad Rachel gazes at her reflection in water; perhaps further evidence of Spartali mirroring Rossetti's works.

In *Convivio*, Dante expresses Platonic-Ciceronian prioritisation of cerebral activity over action, citing Aristotle's *Ethics* as he explains that "the contemplative life... is more excellent and more divine".<sup>143</sup> Within this paradigm, contemplation is not a sinful

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<sup>140</sup> Jan Marsh, "Catalogue note for *Mia Suora Rachel*." *Bonham's*.

<<https://www.bonhams.com/auction/30631/lot/18/marie-spartali-stillman-british-1844-1927-mia-suora-rachel/>> [Accessed 26 March 2025].

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII: 94-114.

<sup>143</sup> Dante, *Convivio*, Trans. Richard Lansing. Book 2, Chapter 4. *Digital Dante*.

<<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/text/library/the-convivio/book-02/#04>> [Accessed 26 March 2025].

exercise in vanity but a necessary and worthy process of understanding, divine in its origins. Seeming to adopt the same ideology, Rossetti's louche Lilith has been reformed by Spartali into a vision of introspection, wherein the act of gazing at the exterior self reflects the subject's scrutiny of interiority.

A cosmotheological enterprise that seeks God as manifested in humanity, Rachel's act of reflection could be interpreted as a profoundly individual, pious activity which brings her closer to higher knowledge. Rooted within this allegorical representation can be traced themes of temporality and decay, too: Lilith has endured for millennia, her erotic authority enduring; Rachel is human, her beauty – like the plucked anemones she holds – fleeting.

Two profoundly different images of reflection thus emerge through these portraits. For Rossetti, the erotic female subject is an errant emanation of the self that the self mistakes for an other, succumbing to a self-sabotaging sensual trap. Spartali's poised feminine consciousness, meanwhile, asserts and explores itself, gesturing to intellectual and spiritual capacity in the process. In both instances, Blake's 'eternal lineaments' are explored with radically different consequences, although the primacy of imagination is granted precedence throughout.

This final section of chapter three examines the representation of the self. It starts by considering how subjectivity is refracted through the symbolism of Rossetti and Spartali's works, be that the consciousness of the constructing, desirous (and putative male) perspective that forges the erotic subject in Rossetti's double works, or the subjugated, obfuscated but profoundly suggestive female subjects in Spartali's portraits. It then considers the collapse of subjectivity in the dreamworlds of Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, demarcated through gaps and spaces.

Rossetti's Erotic Subject as Refracted Remnant



Fig. 78 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Day-Dream*. Oil on canvas, 158.8 x 92cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (1880).

A Blakean emanation of the sexualising psyche constructed by desire itself, the erotic subjects of Rossetti's double works act as refracted fragments of a gynophilic host consciousness. Lilith's feigned self-absorption is a construct of the authorial lover in relation to her, and so she only has the appearance of subjectivity: the viewer/reader doesn't perceive reflections in Lilith's mirrors, because Lilith herself does not see. Rather, the mirror becomes a prop to reflect neuroses harboured by the would-be lover – and so Lilith's creator – back at themselves, lessening any sense of malevolent intent. As Swinburne expresses in his 1868 review of the image, "Of evil desire... she knows nothing... she is indifferent, equable, magnetic".<sup>144</sup> The corrupting influence Lilith possesses is equal to her charm, presenting the comfort and danger, the allure and fear, of the mind itself.

'Body's Beauty', the double work's sonnet, opens with narrative description of Lilith's mythology and a reminder that what is known of the Judeo-Christian woman is unverifiable: "it is told".<sup>145</sup> While suggesting some caution, the mystery of her origin compounds her allure, and her admirer is pulled into her orbit "almost as if he has been drawn gradually into the painting and suddenly discovers that he is confronting the living Lilith".<sup>146</sup> The inescapable phenomenon of attraction is experienced by all who encounter her, and who relive the ensnarement of the sonnet's curious youth. While her motivations are initially unclear, through the poem her desires become increasingly

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<sup>144</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Notes on Some Pictures of 1868" in *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne: Poetical Works*. Ed. Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise. Vol.5. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), pp.196-216, p.212.

<sup>145</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Body's Beauty', l.1.

<sup>146</sup> Lucien L. Agosta "Animate Images: The Later Poem-Paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti" in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1981, pp. 78–101, p.97. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40754635>> [Accessed 28 May 2023.]

monstrous: it seems she must entrap and consume her victims to survive, her existence dependent on their attraction.

Yet rather than being “endow[ed]... with a solipsistic consciousness”,<sup>147</sup> as Lucien Agosta identifies, any remnant of subjectivity detected within the double works is the construct of her desirer. Lilith may be “subtly of herself contemplative”,<sup>148</sup> but no trace of cognisance can be detected in either painting or poem, and the act of narcissism itself is diminished by the revelation that it is a ploy to “dra[w] men to watch”<sup>149</sup> her. Building on J. Hillis Miller’s influential analysis in his article “The Mirror’s Secret”,<sup>150</sup> Martin Danahay has identified that Lilith “functions both as a mirror of masculine desire and as a threat to the imaginative unity and coherence of the masculine subject”.<sup>151</sup> Existing as a wraithlike echo of the fraught desires of her maker, Lilith embodies the mirror, reflecting back the gynophilic perspective that constructs her, its associated sexual neuroses generating her emasculating threat.

Even Rossetti’s erotic subjects that directly engage with self-reflection are presented without independent subjectivity. *The Day-Dream*, a work that explores the roaming mind engaged in introspection, is empty of any reference to the dreaming woman herself. Seated in the “thronged boughs of the shadowy sycamore”<sup>152</sup> the sonnet’s ekphrastic opening octave describes the exterior, natural world in which the sitter finds herself. Within this idyllic scene her being is reflected in elements of the

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Body’s Beauty’, l.6.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, l.7.

<sup>150</sup> J. Hillis Miller. “The Mirror’s Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Double Work of Art” in *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1991, pp. 333–49. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003000>. [Accessed 7 May 2023.]

<sup>151</sup> Martin A. Danahay, “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation” in *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1994, pp. 35–54, p.41. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003078>.> [Accessed 7 May 2023.]

<sup>152</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘The Day-Dream (For A Picture)’ in *Ballads and Sonnets*. (London: Ellis and White, 1881), p.330, l.6.

organic matter that surrounds her; her voice, never heard, is obliquely and incoherently echoed through the doubled image of the “embowered throstle”<sup>153</sup> whose “urgent wood-notes soar / through summer silence”.<sup>154</sup> The exigency of the sound signals an inarticulate, frenetic mind, the crescendo of the ‘soaring’ noise generated within the natural landscape suggesting the culmination of an animal encounter. Coupled with the penetrating noise is the rejuvenation of the peaceful scene’s “young leaflets”,<sup>155</sup> whose recurrence long after their season echoes the sexual renewal of *Bocca Baciata* and *La Bella Mano*.

The sestet that follows suggests that dreams, like the leaves themselves, “even may spring till autumn”,<sup>156</sup> the crowded lexemes and the double meaning of ‘spring’ signifying different moments of time that disrupt the poem’s chronology. Rather than granting the subject “a memory, a mind, consciousness, a spirit”,<sup>157</sup> her experience is understood through negative, lateral comparison: “none be / Like woman’s budding day-dream”,<sup>158</sup> which directionally moves “tow’rd deep skies, not deeper than her look”.<sup>159</sup> The speaker fails to provide insight into her mind, but makes shadowy assumptions derived from information gleaned in the exterior world. Distant and inaccessible, it is unclear if the depicted figure day dreams, or if she is a day-dream formed by the speaker.

Jerome McGann has suggested that Rossetti’s “portraits of ladies are mirrors of a transcendental Venus and of the higher order she embodies: *alma Venus genetrix*, which in this case means *poesis*”,<sup>160</sup> yet the erotic subjects of the double works are not

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<sup>153</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘The Day-Dream’, l.5.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, ll.5-6.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, l.2.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, l.10.

<sup>157</sup> Agosta, p.91.

<sup>158</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘The Day-Dream’, ll.10-11.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, l.12.

<sup>160</sup> McGann, *The Game That Must Be Lost*, p.156.

originators with any independent power to create. Rather, as J.B. Bullen has identified, they are “a projection, and a reflection, of male anxiety”<sup>161</sup> within a heteronormative framework. She is “imprisoned in a false concept of self, a self that is irrevocably staged by the artist”:<sup>162</sup> their subjectivities are errant offshoots of a host antecedent, a disconnected splinter whose powers, while godlike in their ability to craft meaning, are not omnipotent. So crafted, they present the desiring mind with an avenue to interact with a part of itself; an exploration of ‘eternal lineaments’.

Many such examples of the female subject ensconced in a selfhood that is inorganically forged by her creator can be discovered throughout the double works: *The Blessed Damozel* and *The Last Vision of Fiammetta* are figures imagined by their recently bereaved lovers; *Bocca Baciata* and *Fazio’s Mistress* are constructed through the libidinous lens of their amorous paramours; *Mnemosyne*, the siren of *A Sea-Spell*, *Venus Verticordia* and *Astarte Syriaca* all appear as destabilising, portentous guides that bridge the worlds of the natural and supernatural.

Illusory entities that reflect back the desires of their summoner, Rossetti’s erotic female subjects offer threat because of their inextricable connection to the desire that constructs them, transforming them “from an external method of aesthetic validation into a hetero-narcissistic reverie that is both a dream and a nightmare”.<sup>163</sup> Lilith may exhibit, like Rossetti’s other *femme fatales*, “the castrating possibility of consummation”,<sup>164</sup> but the “spectres which haunt the mind of their creator”<sup>165</sup> are the product of the mind that created them – she is a ghoulish of desire’s own creation. Refracted

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<sup>161</sup> Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, pp.146-7.

<sup>162</sup> White, p.21.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>164</sup> Bullen, *Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p.147.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

through her irresistible form is the familiar yet mystifying power of the mind itself, the desiring psyche succumbing to its own irresistible and self-destructive impulses.

## Spartali and Refracted Identities



Fig. 79 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Gelsomina*. Watercolour with gouache and pastel, 45.7 x 30.5cm. Private Collection (1888).<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Sold at Sothebys on 15 December 2021, lot 10. *Sotheby's*.  
<<https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2021/european-british-art-2/gelsomina-jasmine>>  
[Accessed 29 December 2023].

As Marie Spartali adopts and reshapes Rossetti's aesthetic, she too refracts elements of consciousness through the represented subject – but rather than discursively manifesting emanative fragments of a host psyche, these detectable slivers of self manifest elements of the represented person. Adopting the arcane power of nature symbolism, the subject's renewed relationship with emblematic apparatus distils and describes her othered identity; Irigaray's cosmic natural economy, its unorthodox representative power directly correlated to femininity and indeterminacy.

Spartali's *Gelsomina* re-emerged for sale at Sotheby's in 2021, having not been in seen in public since its inclusion in the inaugural exhibition of The New Gallery in London in 1888. The catalogue described the work as “a single half-length study of a Pre-Raphaelite model with floral accessories”<sup>167</sup> – a remark reminiscent of William Michael Rossetti's reference to Rossetti's women “with floral adjuncts”<sup>168</sup> – yet Spartali's title, and the eponymous flowers' crowning position, suggests a more direct and complex relationship between the identity of subject and plant.

Named for, and crowned with, jasmine, a partial assertion of the subject's identity is discursively refracted through the signifier of the plant and its associated qualities. That strong fragrance is a particular characteristic of jasmine intensifies a sense of obfuscated but profound significance: a powerful, but critically absent, sensory force is known to emit from the subject but cannot be discerned by the viewer, heightening a sense of mysterious substance to her being.

Compounding this attribution of subjective characteristics to the displayed *flora* is the labour undertaken by the subject to create and display her symbolic apparatus.

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> W.M. Rossetti, *His Family-Letters*, p.203.

Where Rossetti's languid erotic subjects idly toy or lounge beside foliage, *Gelsomina* holds up a branch of white roses, just as *Madonna Pietra* undertakes the effort of displaying the blossoming blackthorn and orb. Stymied potential and individual effort are articulated through these cut-off limbs: the sweet-smelling blossom of *Madonna Pietra's prunus spinosa* will not bear sloe fruit, just as *Gelsomina's* cut roses will wither and die. Industry is further evidenced in the onerous stance held in each image, a labour for both model and subject, redoubling a sense of effort in the expression of identity.



Fig. 80 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Hera*. Size unknown. Watercolour, gouache and possibly waterglass on paper. Historic New England, Boston (c.1889).

Human faculties of cognisance are required to generate the suggestive associations derived from this plant-language – as Blake points out, “where man is not nature is barren”<sup>169</sup> – and the intersection seems to evoke identities which are individual and profound. Standing beneath the boughs of a pomegranate tree, Spartali’s *Hera* is bestowed with the imperial regalia of flower crown, pomegranate orb, and peacock feather sceptre. This is a radically different power to the sensuousness of Rossetti’s

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<sup>169</sup> Blake, ‘Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, p.38.

erotic portraits; Spartali's chief goddess of Olympia is vulnerable, youthful, demure, her curation of her own iconography (pomegranate and peacock feather are signifiers associated with her mythology) generating a message to the viewer that offers fidelity to nature and organic sovereignty. That the held pomegranate is open could denote sexual knowledge, fertility, passion, prosperity, or some combination of all four.

For *Madonna Pietra* especially, mystery is a foundational narrative crux of her identity. Rossetti notes, on his translation of Dante's original verse, that:

I have headed it with the name of a Paduan lady to whom it is surmised by some to have been addressed during Dante's exile; but this must be looked upon as rather doubtful conjecture. I have adopted the name chiefly to mark it... as not referring to Beatrice.<sup>170</sup>

A cipher of femininity comprehended only as 'not-Beatrice', and understood in the source text (as Harold Bloom notes) as the embodiment of man's longing for a disinterested, unobtainable lover – Lacan's *objet petit a* personified – Spartali elects to wrangle the competing, effacing ideologies of anonymous object-of-desire and flesh-and-blood female subjectivity to generate a meaningful, but near-indecipherable, image of a person.

That she achieves this by wrangling nature evidences the ingenuity and potency of natural message-making, as the female subject curates and reorders intersecting emblems to enter into a wordless discourse with her viewer – a labour undertaken to circumnavigate restrictions on female self-expression. Just like *Hera, Love's Messenger*, and *Gelsomina*, *Madonna Pietra* adopts signifiers from the plant and animal world to

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<sup>170</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Lady Pietra', p.324. See Rossetti's footnote.

assert a highly suggestive, individual, and abstract relationship to both sign and signified, deriving representational value(s) from indeterminate plant matter.

Spartali's approach offers the heartless, nameless Madonna Pietra renewed vivacity, independence, and – for all her stony coolness – hope. All of her plants – blackthorn, hellebore, and wallflowers – flower just before spring. This sense of turning seasons and renewal critically undercuts the ice of Dante's original poem, and is compounded by the fiery vision of divinity reflected in the orb. The warmth of humanity imbues this image of the not-Beatrice, granting her subjectivity and life-blood in a manner denied her Rossettian sisters. If the image in the orb is an annunciation, it promises new life; if the embodiment of love, enlivening emotion; if an angel greeting the departed, the afterlife.



Fig. 81 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Portrait*. Black and red chalk, 83.8 x 64.8cm. Private collection, Tokyo (1869).

What, then, is the consequence of refraction on Rossetti's subjects within the double works? What happens when emanation and host-creator meet? Academics have often perceived Rossetti's bringing together of the erotic subject and the covetous onlooker as a union, of two halves forming a whole. Alicia Faxon suggests that Rossetti "attempt[s] to portray a moment, both temporal and eternal, when flesh and spirit are wed",<sup>172</sup> a concept preceded by Stephen Spector's suggestion that these works

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<sup>171</sup> A reference to Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author."

<sup>172</sup> Faxon, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p.144.

articulate “man’s overarching desire to be united with something outside of himself”.<sup>173</sup> Yet within the works there is no neat symbiosis offered by the consolidation of subject and object, male and female, desired and desirer. Rather, the desirer fragments into nullity, subjectivity evaporating in the trance-like interaction with the erotic subject.

This collapse is discovered in the rifts and spaces that begin to emerge between text and image. The silence of *Lady Lilith’s* volta is pictorially echoed in the empty reflection in the dresser mirror, vegetation occupying the space the viewer/reader should be. Achievement of *La Bella Mano’s* lips (and so the longed-for cavity which lies beyond) initiates the pregnant pause of the volta, too, the space in the poem as empty of human thought as the bedroom reflected in the painting’s convex mirror. Consciousness has dispersed within these representational voids, sublimated into the landscape.

*A Vision of Fiammetta* stresses the transformative enormity of the nullifying process gesturally referenced through absence. The sonnet intensifies through the seventh and eighth lines before reaching a pinnacle at the line break, the gravity of the event undertaken in the gap in verse revealed in the next line, which reveals – succinctly and elusively – that “All stirs with change.”<sup>174</sup> The impact of the discursively referenced metamorphosis is echoed in the brief surety of the statement, its potency bearing a near-apocalyptic weight.

Vocal exclamations also draw attention to, but never describe, the *denouement* of an unrepresented event. ‘The Day-Dream’ uses “Lo!”<sup>175</sup> to point the viewer/reader “tow’rd deep skies”<sup>176</sup> without conveying what might be found there, and to denote an

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<sup>173</sup> Stephen L. Spector, “Love, Unity and Desire in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti” in *ELH*, vol.38, no. 3, 1971, pp.432-458, p.438. *JSTOR*, <[www.jstor.org/stable/2872228](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872228)> [Accessed 12 September 2018].

<sup>174</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Fiammetta’, l.9.

<sup>175</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘The Day Dream’, l.12.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

event that unfolds just before the speaker vanishes amidst forgetful dreaming. Entranced, the interaction with the desired figure has caused the desirer to lose all sense of self. For the youth of 'Body's Beauty' a return to the senses is achieved with a declamatory "Lo!",<sup>177</sup> indicating the moment that Lilith's "spell went through him".<sup>178</sup> Shock is communicated in a declarative that has a sense of direction – it guides awareness *toward* something – but without being able to articulate what it is. Brief and all-consuming, Lilith's profound effect on the youth can only be abstractly referenced in the aftermath, winked at by the inarticulate shout.

The sight of Astarte triggers a mysterious epiphany in *Astarte Syriaca*, an inscrutable atmosphere of awe initiating the "lo!" in the first two words of the poem. The inarticulate cry is couched in space created by punctuation, a colon and exclamation mark cause a stiling rupture within the verse:

Mystery : lo! betwixt the sun and moon <sup>179</sup>

Subjectivity is omitted, replaced by a spaciousness that signals, but never articulates, a profound event.

Line breaks, non-descript cries, and references to unspecified proceedings create the same effect in the sonnet 'The Portrait', two (non-sequential) lines of which were included on the frame of Rossetti's 1869 chalk drawing of Jane Morris:<sup>180</sup>

Even of her inner self the perfect whole:

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<sup>177</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Body's Beauty', l.12.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, l.13.

<sup>179</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Astarte', l.1. See also Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Astarte Syriaca". Ashley Collection, Ashley 1420. British Museum Library, London. Manuscript.

<sup>180</sup> Both *Beata Beatrix* and *Mrs Morris in a Blue Dress* have also been connected to this poem, but the association between text and image asserted by inclusion of part of the poem on the original frame make this the most likely pairing.

The very sky and sea-line of her soul.<sup>181</sup>

While the pictorial element of this double work is unusually austere for the more widely accepted series of double works, Rossetti's selected lines emphasise a cosmic potential implied by the subject's beauty. Interaction with her looks precipitates access to a vast interior horizon, comprehended as a joint vision of the natural and material (sky and sea) and of an immaterial, mysterious essence (soul).

The full sonnet reveals that only "he who seeks her beauty's furthest goal"<sup>182</sup> – the amorous portraitist himself, who acts on behalf of all those who desire his sitter – may achieve knowledge of the metaphysical revelations she embodies. That the epiphany is reached through engagement with her looks is again proven to be a mirrored reflection, a "refluent wave"<sup>183</sup> of her lover's own desire, and is demarcated by breaks in the architecture of the poem created by space and punctuation:

The very sky and sea-line of her soul.

Lo! it is done. Above the enthroning throat<sup>184</sup>

Again "Lo!" operates as a deictic reference that gestures to, but can't or won't describe, an event narratively understood as the completion of the painter's portrait.

Punctuation is most effectively used to denote absence in 'The Blessed Damozel', which epitomises the process of the dreaming mind constructing the beloved only to lose

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.* D.G. Rossetti, 'The Portrait', l.4 and l.8.

<sup>182</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'The Portrait', l.5.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, l.7.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.8-9.

itself in the process. The desirer's first interjection into the poem is discovered in the fourth stanza, indicated by parentheses:

(To one, it is ten years of years.  
...Yet now, and in this place,  
Surely she lean'd o'er me – her hair  
Fell about my face....  
Nothing: the autumn fall of leaves.  
The whole year sets apace.)<sup>185</sup>

The damozel's lover, who exists simultaneously in the present (where he imagines the damozel in heaven) and in the past (as he remembers his earthly time with her), compresses time to merge fantasy and memory, reliving a moment that might have occurred decades or moments earlier. What he recalls – perhaps imperfectly, the ambiguous “surely”<sup>186</sup> suggests – is her physical presence above him.

The culmination of this interaction is not articulated in image or word, but in ellipsis, which varies in length subject to manuscript copy. The 1850 iteration of the poem frames this moment between the lovers with eight full stops before ‘yet now’ and a further nine after ‘my face’;<sup>187</sup> it is in the later 1870 version (published in *Poems* and used here) that the poignancy of the pause is indicated by fewer symbols, although both versions utilise the most stops at the end of the fourth line. Lost in dream-like reverie, the reminiscence cannot be represented in words, but is laterally implied through a string of punctuation.

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<sup>185</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Damozel [Text B]’, p.12, ll.19-24.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, l.21.

<sup>187</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘The Blessed Damozel [Text A 1850]’ in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Collected Writings*. Ed. Jan Marsh. London: J.M. Dent, 1999, pp.8-11. See also Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘The Blessed Damozel’ in *The Germ*. No.2. February. (London: Aylott & Jones, 1850), pp.80-83, p.80.

The failure of signification emerges in tandem with the lover's failure to signify, and he merely experiences 'nothing'. The process of memory and imagination has peaked to a point of non-entity, to semiotic collapse which momentarily disperses the self before returning to the present 'autumn fall of leaves'. So constructed, the lover has imaginatively interrogated his desires, conjured the ever-changing, transient object of his affections in word and image, encountered her in her liminal realm, and achieved a momentary state of non-existence.

Rossetti's interrupted subjectivities occupy simultaneous positions on a spectrum: their momentary lapse of consciousness iterates both the absence of meaning and its culmination to a point of engulfing saturation. In *Pandora*, the subject overwhelms the senses by opening the repository of human woe, a catastrophic superabundance of significance emitting from the box as the analgesic smoke of the painting engulfs the mind. The poem's speaker knows that the outcome of the irresistible act will be a cessation, a death, anxiously asking in the first lines of both octave and sestet, "What of the end?".<sup>188</sup> An encounter with the sibyl of *Sibylla Palmifera* equally compels drawing in "beauty enthroned... as simply as my breath".<sup>189</sup> An inescapable reflex, the sensory assault undertaken in an esoteric environment of "love and death, / Terror and mystery"<sup>190</sup> becomes evident as first person referents change to the second person.

Once the viewer/reader and the poetic speaker are one, both become adrift in the helpless pursuit of the oracle, lost in time and space while "following her daily... how

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<sup>188</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Pandora', l.1. and l.9.

<sup>189</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Soul's Beauty', ll.3-4.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, ll.1-2.

many ways and days!”<sup>191</sup> What is said and done to praise her is forgotten, the act known only through its trembling aftermath; in the end, all that is understood is that “thy voice and hand shake still”.<sup>192</sup> In the wake of the narcotic trance, in which all have succumbed to the subject’s sensory delights, a rupturing event is known only by its aftershock.

A revelation demarcated by loss of consciousness within a dream-sequence recurs throughout Rossetti’s *corpus*. Dante in *Dante’s Dream* “walks conscious but absorbed, as in sleep”,<sup>193</sup> a triangulated state of engrossed wakefulness discovered within a dream. The Dante of *Francesca da Rimini* is so affected by the sight of Francesca’s adulterous love for her brother-in-law that he is “seized, like death, in swooning-fit”,<sup>194</sup> the faint repeatedly compared to death: “even as a dead body falls, I fell.”<sup>195</sup> In witnessing the desired female subject, in entering into relation with the embodiment of desire, subjectivity ruptures, overwhelmed by the manifestation of a near-cosmic saturation of meaning.

Foucault suggests that concentrated abundance of meaning leading to nothing is a core tenant of gratification, that “the intensities of pleasure are indeed linked to the fact that you desubjugate yourself, that you cease being a subject, an identity.”<sup>196</sup> For Rossetti, the indulgences of his double works, expressed as the prismatic fecundity of symbolism and sexualisation, crescendo to a momentary state of nothingness which “calls his being into question”.<sup>197</sup> As an autoerotic manifestation of sexual infatuation

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<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, ll.12-14.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, l.10.

<sup>193</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Dante’s Dream’.

<sup>194</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Francesca da Rimini’ in *Poems. A New Edition*. (London: Ellis & White, 1881), pp.293-294, l.30.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, p.294, l.31.

<sup>196</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Gay Science” in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, Trans. Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith. *JSTOR*, <<https://doi.org/10.1086/659351>> [Accessed 26 November 2023], pp.385-403, pp.399-400.

<sup>197</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.29.

itself, the momentary loss of self she facilitates perhaps references some form of reconciliation with the self. Within the living world, however, the reunification is a momentary event comprehended in the dizzying realm of the dream; a moment of lost subjectivity that restarts the process of desiring.

Siddal: Lost in Nature



Fig. 82 Elizabeth Siddal, *Sir Patrick Spens*. Watercolour on paper. 24.1 x 22.9cm. The Tate Gallery, London (1856).

Rupture in consciousness is also discovered in Elizabeth Siddal's works as oppressed, othered subjectivities try and fail to gain a foothold in representational modes. This is not a refracted portion of self distilled and discursively articulated through specific *genera* of flowers, as discovered in Spartali's works; here, consciousness is

discovered echoing across the surrounding landscape – interiority reverberated through the everyday and nonspecific foliage of trees and open fields.

Siddal's evocative watercolour *Sir Patrick Spens* imagines a scene from an ancient Scottish ballad, in which the eponymous Sir Patrick – a sailor of considerable celebrity – is enlisted by a King to rescue his daughter from Norway. Rather than depicting a scene from the heroic quest, the artist illustrates women and children on a rocky shoreline, awaiting the return of the men from the sea. Most huddle together, seeking comfort in each other, but one stands alone, rigid and apart – this solitary woman, with her auburn hair and pale features, is widely accepted to have been modelled by Siddal herself. Maggie Berg interprets her bearing as “dignified... reminiscent of Beatrice in Rossetti's *Beatrice Meeting Dante*”,<sup>198</sup> yet the contortion of the upper body wrought as the arms awkwardly entwine, coupled with the tilt of the head, speaks to a tense inertia.

She, like so many of Siddal's subjects (including those of *St. Agnes' Eve* and *The Holy Family*) appears locked in a day-dream, her physical form a pressurised, material echo of a greater psychic realm. Her relationship to the green-blue scenery and to her fellow watchers is one of difference, rather than assimilation, rendered through self-absorption; othering herself, she intensifies a sense of falsity in the present. Behind her, a set of rocky steps leads away from the beach, referencing her readiness to leave, a physical route out mirroring her mental departure from the present.

Like Spartali's female subjects effortfully displaying their emblems, Siddal accentuates female labour in the scene. The original ballad repeats that “O lang, lang

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<sup>198</sup> Maggie Berg, “Review of ‘A Neglected Voice: Elizabeth Siddal’” in *The Dalhousie Review*, vol. 60, no.1., 1980, pp.151-156, p.155. *Dalspace*.  
<[https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/60242/dalrev\\_vol60\\_iss1\\_pp151\\_156.pdf](https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/60242/dalrev_vol60_iss1_pp151_156.pdf)>  
[Accessed 25 October 2023].

may the ladies sit”<sup>199</sup> in their watch, re-emphasising the tedious effort of waiting through expansive phonetics. Jill Ehnenn has noted Siddal’s particular critique of femininity’s traditional role of patient attendants waiting on their lovers and families; in the absence of any male figures, attention is drawn to the steadfast but weary women whose “faces... are dutiful... they seem bored with their task; so it is the bodily strain of their laborious stasis that impresses the viewer”.<sup>200</sup> Siddal’s isolated figure seems reluctant to participate in their efforts, like an actor unwilling to play her part.

Siddal’s poem ‘Many a mile’ perhaps exposes further interrelations between the inert, frozen subject and their landscape. While not a double work, the poem has been linked to *Sir Patrick Spens* due to its narrative of a man returning from the sea:

Many a mile over land and sea  
Unsummoned my love returned to me  
I remember not the words he said  
But only the trees moaning over head

And he came ready to take and bear  
The cross I carried for many a year  
But words came slowly one by one  
from frozen lips shut still and dumb

How sounded my words so still and slow...

My brain lie dumb in a frozen spell<sup>201</sup>

Despite the returning lover’s evident compassion for the speaker, his homecoming sparks a crisis of representation figured as emotional and semiotic impotence. Unable

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<sup>199</sup> ‘Sir Patrick Spens’ in *The Scottish Ballads*. Ed. Robert Chambers. (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1829), pp.3-8, p.8.

<sup>200</sup> Jill Ehnenn, “Strong Traivelling: Re-visions of Women’s Subjectivity and Female Labor in the Ballad-work of Elizabeth Siddal” in *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2014, pp. 251–76, p. 261. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43592688>> [Accessed 23 April 2024], p.261.

<sup>201</sup> Siddal, ‘Many a mile’, p.57, ll.3-14.

to parse or generate meaning, the biological apparatus of brain and lips become stupefied as the speaker attempts to communicate. Instead, they perceive ‘only the trees moaning overhead’, consciousness and emotion deflected onto, and transmitted through, an element of their environment. A ricocheting pang of feeling echoes through the personification of plant matter, reverberating through ‘moaning’ branches which communicate a difficulty that the speaker cannot articulate.

The same process is repeated in the fourth stanza, as the speaker “look[s] away from my lovers face / to watch the dead leaves that were running apace”.<sup>202</sup> Like the stony pathway that leads out of the beachside scene of *Sir Patrick Spens*, the subject allies themselves with environmental signifiers denoting freedom and departure. That the plant detritus is dead deepens the sense of nullification, of emotional detachment, and of living death – expired, the leaves are pushed along by an inescapable driving force, a metaphor for the erased remnants of the speaker pushed along by the restored presence of the man.

Even in poems where no third party is present, Siddal depicts subjectivities rebounded and sublimated into natural scenery. In her poem ‘Autumnal leaves are falling’, the female subject – this time physically deceased, as well as conceptually defunct – is discerned through environmental features that embody elements of the human faculties of meaning-formation:

Autumnal leaves are falling  
About her new made grave  
Where the tall grass bends to listen  
To the murmur of the wave<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 15-16.

<sup>203</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, ‘Autumnal leaves are falling’ in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018), p.33.

In remarkably few words, the scene depicted – a grave of a lone woman, somewhere beside the sea in autumntime – is entirely constructed by circuitous references to environmental details, focusing on one intrinsic element of a greater whole. Siddal doesn't reference the sea, but a wave; not a tree, but a leaf; not a meadow or graveyard, but the grass.

While Trowbridge discovers in the work “Siddal's familiar trope of depicting a scene in which nature is sympathetic to human life and death, here with the leaves dropping like tears while the grass swaddles the grave”,<sup>204</sup> the pathetic fallacy that annexes human sentiment to the deceased seems disrupted and incomplete. The listening grass and murmuring waves seem to speak about her, not for her, and the fall of leaves evokes a general, rather than a specific, sadness. The speaker, seeing or picturing the scene, is almost totally camouflaged behind the vegetation, suggesting they could be either a mourner or the dead woman herself, imagining the world after she has departed it. So depleted is the sense of self that humanity is all but dissipated, its mannerisms and muted expression of interior experience rebounding through the movements of organic matter.

So Siddal's subjects, denied the privilege of Rossetti's lusting creators, rupture as a consequence of representational disenfranchisement. Unable to articulate their thoughts and feelings, echoes of self are filtered and reverberate through the landscape, reflecting feeling back to be understood through empirical faculties. As discovered within Spartali's Aestheticist portraits, some semblance of othered individuality can be found in the reciprocal relationship between humanity and nature. Where Spartali offers

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<sup>204</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.33.

a sense of substance and meaning through absence and atmosphere, Siddal offers collapse, with wraithlike remnants of broken consciousness laterally comprehended through echoes rebounding off leaf and branch.

“What of the end?”<sup>205</sup>



Fig. 83 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Bonifazio's Mistress*. Pen and brown ink, 19.4 x 16.8cm. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham (1856).

It is possible to think of the sexual as, precisely, moving between a hyperbolic-sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self.

- Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?'.<sup>206</sup>

In the short story *Hand and Soul*, sometimes considered to be Rossetti's artistic manifesto in his approach to art and art-making, the thirteenth-century protagonist

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<sup>205</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Pandora', l.1.

<sup>206</sup> Leo Bersani. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *October*, vol. 43, 1987, pp. 197–222, p.218. *JSTOR*, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>> [Accessed 18 November 2023].

Chiaro becomes obsessed by a need to represent his own soul. After considerable self-reflection Chiaro's soul appears to him as a beautiful woman, and on seeing her Chiaro immediately realises that "the first thoughts he had ever known were given him as at first from her eyes, and he knew her hair to be the golden veil through which he beheld his dreams".<sup>207</sup> She bids him to paint her, which he dutifully does; on finishing, "he lay back where he sat, and was asleep immediately",<sup>208</sup> a consequence of an interaction that rendered him "weak and haggard; like one just come out of a dusk, hollow country, bewildered with echoes, where he had lost himself".<sup>209</sup>

Ciphers of gynophilic desire, Rossetti's erotic subjects – formed of a series of relational, amplified bodily motifs that occupy a prismatic liminal threshold – confront their desirous creator, an entity which encompasses the female subject's narrative lover; the painter-poet; and the viewer/reader themselves. An errant fragment of the sexualising psyche generated through imagination that the self mistakes for an other, the erotic subject comes to embody Blake's "eternal lineaments"<sup>210</sup> and offers a route for her architect to interrogate what of the authorial mind is "eternal, changeable, and annihilable".<sup>211</sup> In doing so, she endangers the sexualising psyche that conjured her, threatening oblivion to her maker: Bersani's hyperbolic sense of self giving way to loss of all consciousness of self. This phenomenon it is not, as Bataille would have it, "a fusion, fatal to both, of two separate beings",<sup>212</sup> because the erotic subject does not exist independently of the authorial mind, but rather is a product of it.

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<sup>207</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Hand and Soul*. (London: Strangeways and Walden, 1869), p.14.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*, p.18.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>210</sup> Blake, 'Milton', p.132.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>212</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.14.

Rossetti's approach distances both desirer and the representation of the desired from the 'stunner' model herself, as the process of art-making becomes an exercise in externalising interior processes. *Bonifazio's Mistress* imagines an extreme case of the desirer's detachment from the flesh-and-blood inspiration behind erotic revelation, depicting an artist who has so become wholly immersed in his painting that he hasn't noticed the sitter has passed away. Her death severs any connection the art-object had to actual, othered subjectivity, and her portrait endures as a distilled relic of a distantly connected being.

It is this obfuscated female subjectivity that Spartali seeks to (re)introduce through her reformative approach to Rossetti's methodology. Innovating new, discursive and effortful methods of self-expression by entering into a renewed relation with the symbolism of the portrait, her female subjects seek to illustrate a suppressed sense of self. Reworking phallogocentric conventions and actively engaging with their status as sign, they are knowing representations of othered subjectivity that offer beauty, fidelity to nature, femininity, and inaccessible, intelligent profundity.

Spartali's subtle approach overturns the subject's status as emanation. Where in Rossetti's works "listening or gazing or touching seems to be directed toward the barely perceptible or even what is absent: figures in the paintings strain to hear in silence, look fixedly into apparent emptiness, or appear lost in thought",<sup>213</sup> Spartali's subjects are remarkably present, aware of their observers, and lend their symbolic paraphernalia considerable resonance. It is this atmospheric, indeterminate intentionality that generates the appearance of subjectivity, sublimating the sense of lyricism into her

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<sup>213</sup> Elizabeth Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p.28.

works. Evocative and profound, her portraits elude any definitive grasp on their meaning while retaining a keen sense of individuality.

The collapse of subjectivity in Rossetti's double works, occasioned by the desiring psyche encountering its errant emanation, raises a question the poet-painter addressed himself: if raptness and oblivion are equivalent. Writing to William Bell Scott, Rossetti reveals a resistance to the concept of irrevocable extinction, but rather presents the concept of the removed self (re)joining a greater, unknowable whole:

I cannot suppose that any particle of life is extinguished, though its permanent individuality may be more than questionable. Absorption is not annihilation; and it is even a real retributive future for the special atom of life to be re-embodied (if so it were) in a world which its own former ideality had helped to fashion for pain or pleasure.<sup>214</sup>

Annihilation, Rossetti suggests, is only the *appearance* of a greater phenomenon as understood within the material realm. Semiotic and subjective nothingness – communicated as the conscious mind (briefly) ceases to signify, overwhelmed by its imaginative capabilities and exceeding its representational faculty – may, in fact, signal assimilation with something that exists outside of the system of signs.

Siddal's frozen, inert subjectivities equally experience rupture and collapse, but not as a consequence of self-annihilation or absorption; rather, they have been nullified by suppression within the material realm. Locked in a panopticon, wherein they are disassociated from the body and its sensory function, they become subjugated in a symbolic and a real sense. Stifled feeling seeps out and rebounds in the landscape surrounding them, self-expression experienced obliquely in the material space through

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<sup>214</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Letter to William Bell Scott in *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott*. Ed. W. Minto. Vol. 2. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), pp.154-156, p.155.

running leaves or moaning branches. The intensity of interior experience is communicated by omission, existing as neither a hyperbolic sense of self nor a loss of consciousness; either state suggests a steadiness wholly absent from Siddal's works. Rather, Siddal offers a realm of distorted confusion in which subjugation has rendered any sense of certainty uncertain, wherein the self has little hope of salvation, either in this world or the next.

## *Aspecta Medusa* and the sublime authority of stupefaction

In summarising the analysis of fragmented subjectivity undertaken in chapter three the conclusion returns to Marie Spartali and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's respective depictions of Madonna Pietra. It draws comparisons between the stony woman of Dante's sestina and the Medusa, exploring the significance of the Gorgon in relation to the embodiment of desire and the desire for representation.



Fig. 84 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Madonna Pietra*. Chalk on paper, 90.8 x 64.8cm. Kōriyama City Museum of Art, Kōriyama (1874).

Poetically, [Dante's] degradation is Sublime, and can be said to mark a limit for the erotic Sublime... Dante's sestina spares neither the Lady Pietra nor himself. She is stone, not flesh, and utterly frozen, as much a victim of the Medusa as the Medusa herself. You cannot flee from Pietra, her icy sunshine penetrates every covert place, and so allows no shade.

- Harold Bloom, *Poets and Poems*.<sup>215</sup>

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's visual representation of *Madonna Pietra* emerged in 1874, part of a proposed double work that was never realised. What survives of the pictorial component of the work are two preparatory drawings: a chalk nude with the face of Alexa Wilding (fig.84) and an ink sketch of the intended composition (fig.85). Both suggest a subject typical of Rossetti in its evocation of erotic femininity. The pose is somewhat awkward in the arrangement of the left arm and hand, which undertakes the unobtainable touch craved by her admirer. In her right hand she clutches a large, featureless sphere.

Rossetti explains his decision to include the curious prop – which is notably absent from Dante's sestina – in a letter to patron Clarence Fry dated 21 April 1876:

The crystal globe in the lady's hand was to reflect a rocky landscape surrounding her and symbolising her own pitiless heart.<sup>216</sup>

Describing a detail never realised in the drafts, Rossetti elucidates on the function of the globe as a means to reflect both the subject's self-interest and her environment in a manner functionally similar to the Arnolfini-inspired convex mirror of *La Bella Mano* or the dresser mirror of *Lady Lilith*. The sphere's cold, hard, smooth rigidity was intended to

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<sup>215</sup> Bloom, p.6.

<sup>216</sup> D.G. Rossetti, letter to Clarence Fry 21 April 1876, *Correspondence: VI The Last Decade, II. 1875-1877*. 76.74, p.265.

discursively manifest Madonna Pietra's callous but sexually potent subjectivity, its chasmal rockiness echoing and reinforcing her unforgiving, inflexible nature.

Yet the petrifying stupefaction both threatened and embodied by Madonna Pietra is a product of self-destructive desire, her otherness a reflection of the otherness of the self. As an emanation of narcissistic desire her power is, as Harold Bloom points out, the power of the Medusa; she imperils both, becoming "as much a victim of the Medusa as the Medusa herself"<sup>217</sup> as she reflects vacuous rock.

Both monster and quarry, this cipher of the 'not-Beatrice' comes to occupy another frontier in Rossetti's bisecting dualisms: that which exists between the controllable and uncontrollable aspects of the consciousness, between humanity and inhumanity, between self-love and self-loathing. Throughout Rossetti's double works, an encounter with the erotic subject culminates in the cessation of subjectivity, the dalliance resulting in critical nothingness – just as the Medusa turns her victims to stone.

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<sup>217</sup> Bloom, p.6.



Fig. 85 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Madonna Pietra*. Ink on paper, 18 x 10.1cm. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham (1874).

That Marie Spartali's *Madonna Pietra* adopts Rossetti's globe motif evidences close relational ties between the works,<sup>218</sup> a clear indication that Spartali likely saw Rossetti's *Pietra*, probably while sitting for *A Vision of Fiammetta* in the winter of 1874. Comparison between the motifs evidences the profound divergence in approach: where Rossetti's is a large and burdensome reflective barrier, Spartali's small sphere – with its indistinct but arcane scene of divine, fiery exchange – asserts and broadens Pietra's substance and mystery, presence in lieu of Rossetti's absence. The hand-sized orb in Rossetti's oil *Mary Magdalene* (1877) is also a pale, luminous blank, its reference to the miracle of the resurrection communicated in a different form of bright, hard emptiness.

Resisting ownership by the desiring mind, Spartali's *Pietra* is compelled to innovate a distinctive, separate symbolic rubric to express her subjectivity. Her petrifying monstrosity therefore becomes relational to her inscrutability, generated as she is severed from orthodox modes of representation; effacement is a fate she endures, rather than threatens. Adopting a language that incorporates both organic matter and supranatural paraphernalia, she speaks to the viewer in a redolent dialect that can be steeped in connotation but never definitively understood.

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<sup>218</sup> Marsh, 'Pietra' in *Poetry in Beauty*, p.98.



ASPECTA MEDUSA.

Fig. 86 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Aspecta Medusa*. Pencil. Unlocated. (c.1865).<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Reproduced in H.C. Marillier's *Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life*, p.109. Other sketches of the same subject have been located, but this iteration published in Marillier is the most complete.

The battle for and with representation, in which an artist must accept the limitations levied upon them in pursuit of revelation and truth, is dramatised in another of Rossetti's proposed – but never finished – double works: *Aspecta Medusa*, which survives as a nine-line poem and in reproductions of a pencil study (fig.86). Once again the treacherous face of the Gorgon typifies the challenges of figuring and beholding consciousness. Andromeda is driven by a compulsion to behold the Medusa's face, a desire her husband Perseus fulfils by holding the monster's decapitated head over a pool of water, allowing Andromeda to safely observe the reflection.

The narrative is entirely of Rossetti's own concoction,<sup>220</sup> and appears closely bound up in ideas of the artist as mediator and translator of potent thoughts, transmuting a revelatory signified through a series of disarming signifiers. As discovered in *The Parable of Love*, the concurrent phenomenon of gazing is explored as Perseus simultaneously witnesses Andromeda's gaze (both looking down at the pool, and up in her reflection) and the mirrored gaze of the Medusa.

Rossetti explicitly advocates for discursive allusion in the poem 'Aspecta Medusa', highlighting the impossibility of successfully confronting the macrocosmic reality that the mirrored face represents in microcosm:

Let not thine eyes know  
Any forbidden thing itself, although  
It once should save as well as kill: but be  
Its shadow upon life enough for thee<sup>221</sup>

Within the physical world fulfilment of desire – achievement of the 'forbidden thing' – can only ever be partial, and the subject must be content with its repercussive, lateral

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<sup>220</sup> Bullen, *Painter and Poet*, p.192.

<sup>221</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Aspecta Medusa (For a Drawing)' in *Poems*. (London: F.S. Ellis, 1870), p.176.

‘shadow upon life’ or risk death and the end of all meaning. Andromeda’s self-destructive compulsion to view the Gorgon’s head becomes the pursuit of a terrible, unknowable atrocity that can only be safely parsed in echo.

As discovered in Siddal’s use of shadows, the emblem denotes profound substance while referencing its own immateriality, a relic of an unrepresented, unrepresentable somethingness comprehended in a vacuum. The horrible power enshrined in the Medusa is an enormous potency inextricably linked to her looks – although it is unclear if it is hideous ugliness or ferocious beauty that turns the viewer to stone<sup>222</sup> – while at the same time being closely affiliated in the “close identity”<sup>223</sup> experienced between Andromeda and the dismembered *visage*. Andromeda’s inescapable curiosity could be a narcissistic death-drive, in which the depersonalising threat of the monster is a confrontation with the self. The only safe way for the psyche to interact with its own enormity is to generate a fragment that exists as a kind of reproduction, diluted through the limitations of its own representational powers.

So *Aspecta Medusa* encapsulates the process undertaken by Rossetti throughout his erotic double works, as the artist (Perseus) mediates a relationship between the instinctively desirous and self-destructive psyche (Andromeda) and an errant, abbreviated, reflected part of itself (the Medusa). In cutting down and reflecting back the feral, freezing face of the Gorgon, Perseus simultaneously neutralises her threat and laterally communicates the oblivion she offers. In appropriating and dismembering her, he exposes the profound annihilation that she represents.

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<sup>222</sup> Jerome J. McGann, “The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology.” in *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1972, pp. 3–25, pp.3-4. *JSTOR*, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/25599824>> [Accessed 15 June 2024.]

<sup>223</sup> Bullen, *Painter and Poet*, p.192.

It is interesting that Perseus has no creative power, but acts as a butcher, reflecting a less potent facsimile of the original. If he is adopted by Rossetti as a cipher for the artist, it is an unflattering portrayal that shares some of the sentiment expressed by Christina Rossetti in 'In An Artist's Studio': "every canvas means / The same one meaning, neither more or less. / He feeds upon her face by day and night".<sup>224</sup> Brutal and banal, ideas of hackneyed appropriation, repetition, and consumption imply a unusually self-denigrating perspective for the poet-painter.

Matthew Potolsky points out that, "Although it seems at first glance to be a poem about the danger of forbidden knowledge, 'Aspecta Medusa' is in fact a poem about the necessity of representation. Andromeda does not renounce her desire to see the Medusa's head, but accepts limitations on how she can see it."<sup>225</sup> So too, Spartali and Siddal refuse to renounce their desire to create, but negotiate restrictions enacted on their art-making by developing and deploying a new idiolect, in which subjectivities – rendered mute by a system of representation unable to grant them the tools to articulate their othered experience – are refracted through symbolic paraphernalia or their environment. Rossetti is complicit in the perpetuation of a phallogocentric representational mode that omits the othered subjectivities of Siddal and Spartali's works: as Jerome McGann identifies in *Aspecta Medusa*, the painter-poet makes clear "that in the pursuit of the ideal some sort of betrayal is inevitable".<sup>226</sup>

Stood on the precipice of flexing, threshold realms, the female subjects of Rossetti, Siddal and Spartali's works exist in a 'dream-analogous', reality-adjacent

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<sup>224</sup> C.G. Rossetti, 'In An Artist's Studio', ll.7-9.

<sup>225</sup> Matthew Potolsky, "The Substance of Shadows: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Mimesis" in *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2012, pp. 167–87, p.178. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41698843>> [Accessed 4 June 2024.]

<sup>226</sup> McGann, "Medusa", p.22.

realm. For Rossetti, this frontier space is created by the erotic subject to form an access point that, through the saturation of vivid, kaleidoscopic potential meanings, culminates to a point of nothingness. Nullity points to something that exceeds both itself and the system of signs: the sexualising psyche generating and confronting an errant shard of itself, and so disintegrating.

For Spartali, picking up Rossetti's methodology, the subject enters into renewed relation with her own depiction, effortfully wrangling its evocative symbolism to generate a sense of othered subjectivity. The adjacent reality is consciousness itself, laterally gestured to through reformed connection to phallogocentric Aestheticist sign-systems. These visions of consciousness remain dreamlike and profoundly feminine, but offer knowing, muted resistance to any connection to a separate, authorial mind, instead making a case for their own individuality.

For Siddal, existence on the threshold is not a neat oscillation between diametric opposites, but a disorienting flux between imperfectly related, asymmetrical signifiers. Denied semiotic stability, her subjects are compelled to reject the material realm and its incoherent representational values, and instead roam within the mind, wherein consciousness takes partial refuge in discursively accessed spaces around the human form. Outwardly rigid and cold, as if stupefied by the Medusa herself, emotional distress is detected in frost, leaves, and waving grass, subjectivity ruptured and discovered only in the residue left in the landscape.

## 4. Transcendence: the desire to exceed representation

Chapter four considers the limits of representation in the works of Elizabeth Siddal, Marie Spartali, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It demonstrates how each artist gestures to a realm of experience that defies aesthetic expression – a manifestation of sublimity, wielded to profoundly different ends.

“He and She and the Angels Three”:<sup>1</sup> gesturing the sublime



Fig. 87. Elizabeth Siddal, *Angel with cymbals*. Pen and brown ink and brown wash with graphite. 18.1 x 22.7cm. The British Museum, London (c.1855).

The Sublime does not so properly persuade us, as it ravishes and transports us, and produces in us a certain Admiration, mingled with Astonishment and with Surprise... it gives a noble Vigor to a Discourse, an invisible Force, commits a pleasing Rape upon the very Soul of the Reader.

- John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, 1704.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Siddal, ‘Ruthless hands have torn her’ in *My Ladys Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal*. Ed. Serena Trowbridge. (Brighton: Victorian Secrets), 2018, p.84. l.9.

<sup>2</sup> John Dennis, “The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry” in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, Ed. Edward Niles Hooker. Vol.1. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), pp.325-373, p.359.

Face raised to the heavens, hands held wide in a joint gesture of celebration and surrender, Elizabeth Siddal's pen-and-brown-wash angel holds apart a small pair of unfinished cymbals. An arching movement of wings and fabric imbues the image with atmospheric dynamism even as the performance of devotional music-making is suspended, signalling the resonant, metallic noise of the percussion. A branch-bearing dove occupies the foreground, the biblical symbol of peace evoking tranquillity in contrast to the crashing promise of an ancient instrument described in the Old Testament: "praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals".<sup>3</sup> Wordless and ephemeral, the sonorous clamour the angel generates greets divinity with imprecise, cacophonous sound.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible*, King James Version. (London: Robert Barker, 1611). Psalms 150:5.

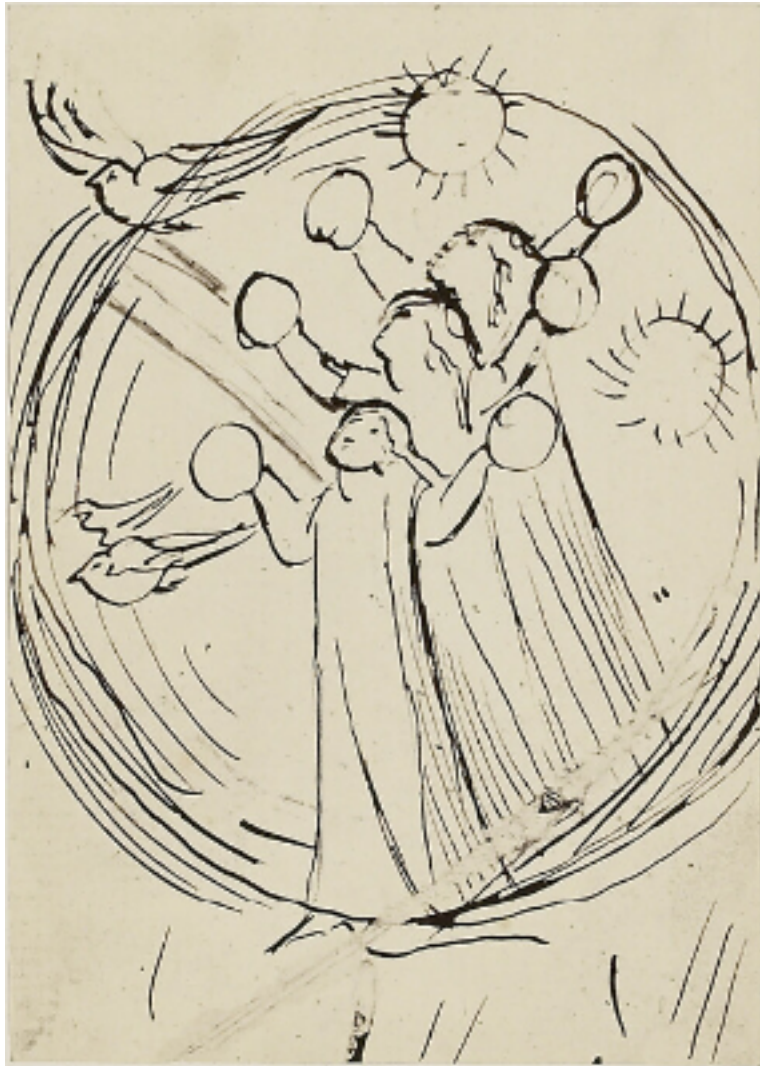


Fig. 88 Unknown photographer after Elizabeth Siddal, a photograph of sketches of angels. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1866).<sup>4</sup>

The drawing (fig.87) was attributed to Dante Rossetti until John Gere amended the record in 1994, pointing out that a photograph of another study of the same subject had written on it, in Rossetti's hand, "from designs and sketches by Elizabeth Eleanor Rossetti".<sup>5</sup> This earlier roundel features three stratified figures saluting the heavens with

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<sup>4</sup> This image is one of that forms part of a photographic sheet, held as part of the Bryson Collection at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

<sup>5</sup> J.A. Gere, *Pre-Raphaelite Drawings in the British Museum*. (London: British Museum Press, 1994), p.111.

cymbals upraised, while two birds fly before them and two suns radiate in the background.

Remarkably Blakean in its esoteric simplicity – Blake’s mythology contains a spiritual sun, associated with Los, and a material sun, associated with Urizen<sup>6</sup> – this vision of worship is notable for the exertion of its supplicants. Bodily strain intensifies a sense of pure, passionate emotion in the act of veneration, evocative even within the scant lines of the sketch. Ferocity of feeling is characteristic of Siddal’s works: both William Morris’ design for a cymbal-player, found in various stained glass creations by Morris & Co., and Edward Burne-Jones’ cymbal-playing *Aurora*<sup>7</sup> are comparatively impassive.

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<sup>6</sup> S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*. (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), p.419.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Burne-Jones, *Aurora*. Oil on canvas. Private Collection. Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane (1896). <<https://collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au/objects/1851>> [Accessed 11 August 2024].



Fig. 89 Morris & Co., William Morris, *Minstrel with cymbals*. Stained glass. 64.5 x 47.5cm. William Morris Gallery, London (c.1880s).

In both of Siddal's images of votive jubilation, divinity is discursively articulated through the effortful praise it inspires in the energetic votaries, but God and heaven sit outside of – and exceed – the representational capacities of the image. The crux of these drawings is therefore that which is gestured to, but remains unarticulated; the interrelation between the earthly and the divine, the delimited and the unbound, the physical world and that which lies beyond its edges. Perhaps another roundel design was intended to present further echoes of this celestial majesty: parts of an arc are discerned in the background of both sketches, clues that the studies might form part of a larger whole.

Coupled with the discursive expression of profound emotion in Siddal's works is an ongoing and irreconcilable challenge with meaning-formation itself, wherein signification is attempted, refracted and abandoned. Consistently reaching for something beyond the confines of page and canvas, Siddal's *corpus* is a stuttering, illusory campaign to articulate something outside of the capacities of both artist and subject, just as the cymbal-players obliquely reference God through their music-making.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Marie Spartali similarly test the limits of their semiotic tools, probing at literary-aesthetic methodologies to locate and express an experience that defies articulation. Rossetti's preoccupation with representational modes is evidenced in his lifelong infatuation with presenting word and text in tandem. What he sought to express through his double works sits in the spaces formed between textual and visual signifiers, where hermeneutic possibilities proliferate within sensual, kaleidoscopic worlds. Meaning pools within these unstable sites to be intuited by the viewer/reader but never definitively grasped, an abundance of potentiality pointing to that which exceeds the artist's means.

Despite an apparently straightforward aestheticist epigonism, wherein 'art-for-art's sake' stabilises the image and excuses it from loftier concerns, Spartali's single half-length portraits of female subjects are equally imbued with an indefinable elusiveness. Exclusively working with visual art – albeit with subjects deeply rooted in literary sources and occasionally accompanied by brief textual prompts – Spartali's subjects obliquely signal their own obfuscated, muted individuality and expose the intractable hegemonies of the symbolic frameworks that generate them. With acute psychological awareness they establish that it is lived experience of femininity which is

unrepresentable, its realities disconnected from (and impotent within) an accepted system of signs.

By looking into the space between the cognitive and the material, text and image, and sign and signified, each artist gesturally articulates something that exceeds the scope of their means. In doing so, they invoke the transcendent, unrepresentable sublime as both “the tension between a literary-aesthetic concept and [as] an experience with mystical-religious resonances... creating multilayered nexuses between religion, art, nature, and society”.<sup>8</sup> Discovering commonalities between God and signifier, life and art, each artist uses semiotic instability to explore (to greater and lesser extents) aesthetic, spiritual, and political concerns.

Brevity dictates that a full account of sublimity’s evolution and intricacies cannot be given here, but key concepts – and key contributors to the discourse – will be interpolated into the analysis of these closing chapters as the transcendent aesthetics of each artist is considered in turn. These will mostly come from historic sources, even to the artists themselves; there are only a handful of articles from modern theorists that consider Rossetti and Immanuel Kant’s sublime, while almost nothing exists on sublimity and the female artists.

Despite divergent priorities, it will be shown that Rossetti, Siddal and Spartali create works that fulfil the antique criteria for the sublime as first described in the fragment *Peri hypsous*<sup>9</sup> attributed to Longinus: that of the dual sensations of *thaumasion*

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.1.

<sup>9</sup>“On the sublime”.

(awe) and *ekplêxis* (astonishment) culminating in *ekstasis* – ecstasy, “literally: a going outside or beyond oneself, self-transcendence, rapture”.<sup>10</sup>

Whether or not the resultant *ekstasis* is notable for its euphoria or nullifying self-effacement varies, although the epiphany is always demarcated by profound, uneasy sensation. John Dennis, a late seventeenth/early eighteenth century translator and propagator of Longinus, was among the first to emphasise the centrality of powerful emotion to the sublime. That he described the significance of this intensity of feeling as a “pleasing rape upon the Soul”<sup>11</sup> speaks to the complexity of the experience, being at once violating and intimate, carnal and celestial, markedly physical and intensely metaphysical.

Universally relevant to the artists’ engagement with sublimity is Kant’s supposition that potent transcendence is a function of human cognition; “that true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject, and not in the object of nature that occasions this attitude”.<sup>12</sup> Whether actively sought or inadvertently rendered, the experience of the sublime is always undertaken within the crucible of the mind and is stimulated by external forces, which render the consequential fragmenting experience unrepresentable.

Positioning himself “as a votive at Art’s altar, a humble supplicant whose understanding cannot comprehend the goddess he serves, but whose heart holds some intuition of her meaning”,<sup>13</sup> Rossetti particularly evidences ecstatic sensation as a

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<sup>10</sup> Doran, p.10. Note, Longinus is commenting on the rhetorical sublime.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis, p.359.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *A Critique of Judgement*. Trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.86.

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn F. Austin, “Mastering the Ineffable: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘The Vase of Life’ and the Kantian Sublime” in *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2007, pp. 159–73, p.159. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40347014>> [Accessed 10 August 2024].

consequence of narcissistic cognitive processes. His erotic female subject – an emanation made of and by the desiring psyche – offers access to a space that exceeds the system of signs. Designated as an empyrean, celestial realm briefly comprehended through penetration, this is the discovery of God in sex, of euphoria within the orifice. A climax demarcated by momentary absence, the orgasm functions as Jacques Derrida’s transcendental signified, the vessel of the emanative subject granting momentary access to a brush with the infinite. So Rossetti eroticises Dante’s *trasumanar* – transhumanisation – rendering the *ekstasis* of the metamorphosis a perpetually rejuvenating autoerotic act in which sublime experience radically dislocates desire, which renews at the moment of fulfilment.

Siddal’s poetic subjects equally grapple with the rupturing consequences of love, the intensity of their passions so profound that they struggle to parse or articulate them. Rather than an aesthetics of sexual ecstasy, however, love – while joyful in its early phases – gives way to an acute state of suffering that often culminates in horror-filled nullity. This terror is not “the mind’s opportunity to transcend its ordinary limits and thereby recognise its own sublime dominion over even the worst threats”,<sup>14</sup> as Kant suggests; rather, it highlights the precarity of the subject’s impotence. Disenfranchised in both a symbolic and real sense, their experiences are sketched out by a series of impressions jointly forged of attraction and repulsion, terror and appeal.

Within Siddal’s poetry even death does not guarantee redemption, and heaven is a fraught space wherein salvation is contingent on reunification with a lost lover. Deprived of both human love and divine solace, and only able to enact a reflexive kind of

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<sup>14</sup> Terrence Des Pres. “Terror and the Sublime” in *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1983, pp. 135–46, p.141. *JSTOR* <<https://doi.org/10.2307/762250>> [Accessed 11 August 2024].

power by repudiating the present, tormented lovers crave both transcendence and self-expression, an obstructed pursuit with no certain conclusion. The “rape upon the soul”<sup>15</sup> is both irrevocable and demeaning, its enormity comprehended through the wordless cry to the heavens.

Like Siddal, Spartali’s female subjectivities are hindered by the notion “promoted by eighteenth-century theorists and the male Romantic poets, as well as by their myriad modern commentators”<sup>16</sup> that the Romantic sublime is “distinctly, if unwittingly, gendered. The sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment; its contrasting term, the beautiful... with an experience of feminin[ity]”.<sup>17</sup> Edmund Burke directly associates this heteronormative paradigm with modes of dominance, concluding that “I know nothing sublime, which is not some modification of power”,<sup>18</sup> specifically “the power which arises from institution in kings and commanders”.<sup>19</sup> Spartali disrupts this patriarchal standard as she adopts and reforms Rossetti’s approach, an imperfect campaign wherein contradiction self-reflexively iterates an othered experience.

Bestowing the female subject – a cipher created to provoke sublime experience in a masculinised, gynophilic *voyeur* – with something more closely resembling independent subjectivity, Spartali assimilates and reforms Rossetti’s transcendent aesthetics in her own works. Through a process of micro-revisionism, her poised,

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis, p.359.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.85.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. (London: Thomas McLean, 1823), Part II Section V, p.85.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90.

youthful female subjects both embrace and probe an established mode of representation, wherein they enter into relation with their own status as sign.

A nineteenth-century writer who equally grapples with the profound gender divisions of aesthetics is Vernon Lee, whose debut novel *Miss Brown* (1884) – a polemic attack on the Pre-Raphaelite set and its presentation of femininity – is explored in this chapter alongside Spartali's portraits. Considering "the mysterious importance, the attraction or repulsion, possessed by shapes, audible as well as visible, according to their empathic character",<sup>20</sup> Lee leans on viewers' personal experiences to evoke a joint physical-and-emotional reaction to an art-object, devising an approach to aesthetic experience steeped in individual understanding.

Jointly examining Spartali's portraiture and Lee's *Miss Brown*, an experience proximate to sublimity is discovered in the creatives' attempt to exploit and transcend symbolic apparatus to gesture towards a knotty, contradictory, disruptive vision of humanity veiled by aesthetic practice. This is not, as Anne Mellor would have it, a domestication of the sublime, wherein femininity is marked by a wholesale affinity and fidelity with nature,<sup>21</sup> but a disharmonised, difficult conflict between the realities of performing femininity and the knowledge of the performance.

For Spartali, awe-and-astonishment manifests as the joint, fracturing experience of joy in an ideal (feminine beauty) and the heartbreak of its unreality (voiceless, marginalised subjectivity). Ultimately, the contradictions inherent in existing as both copy and original iterates some kind of ontological truth; the simulacrum may be a falsity, but in that falsity lies some kernel of reality-adjacent symbolic power.

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<sup>20</sup> Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), p.74.

<sup>21</sup> Mellor, p.100.

Rossetti, Siddal and Spartali all innovate and deploy a kind of unrepresentable aesthetics in their works, but in highly individual ways. As a consequence, analysis will examine each individually in this final chapter. Despite differences in approach, it will be shown that all three grapple with ideas of transcendence, obscurity, annihilation, pleasure and terror in a quest for something that exists beyond the scope of the known world and its system of signs.

This gestural appeal to an unseen, unfathomable otherness is embodied in Siddal's angel, crashing together the blunt instruments of the cymbals to form a roar of noise that moves beyond the body to signal that which is absolutely great, beyond sense and beyond reason, be it divinity or the intransigent rules that govern Victorian reality. A profound expression of desire, it is an expression of sublimity that points to – and perhaps shakes the foundations of – its own delimiting framework.

## Rossetti, the orgasm and the transcendental signified

The first section of chapter four examines the use of orgasm as transcendental signified in the double works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as the interaction with the erotic subject culminates in a nullifying event which references as a brush with the infinite. This transformative experience is explored alongside Dante's concept of 'transhumanisation' and Immanuel Kant's philosophy of sublime aesthetics.



Fig. 90 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Astarte Syriaca*. Oil on canvas, 185 x 109cm. Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester (1877).

The eyes of Beatrice were all intent  
on the eternal circles; from the sun,  
I turned aside; I set my eyes on her.

In watching her, within me I was changed  
as Glaucus changed, tasting the herb that made  
him a companion of the other sea gods.

Passing beyond the human cannot be  
worded; let Glaucus serve as simile –  
until grace grant you the experience.

- Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso Canto I.*<sup>22</sup>

He listens to the cry of the flesh till it becomes proud and passes beyond the world where  
some immense desire that the intellect cannot understand mixes with the desire for a  
body's warmth and softness.

– W.B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil.*<sup>23</sup>

Standing on a precipice “betwixt the sun and moon”,<sup>24</sup> Astarte Syriaca emerges  
from an empyrean landscape. An esoteric goddess of love, “Venus Queen / ere Aphrodite  
was”,<sup>25</sup> her ancient divinity renders her remote, imperial and monumental. Archetypal  
red lips, the nucleus of the painting, generate an astral pull that “wean[s] / the pulse of  
hearts to the spheres’ dominant tune”,<sup>26</sup> the redirection of energies pictorially articulated  
in the swirling haze that arcs in orbit, like her otherworldly attendants, around her head.  
This inescapable, gravitational power mimics the profound desire she inspires, her  
ascendancy enacting bodily change as the rhythm of life-blood is reordered by her  
celestial influence.

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<sup>22</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto I, ll.64-72.

<sup>23</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil*. (London: A.H. Bullen, 1903), pp.70-71.

<sup>24</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Astarte’, l.1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.2-3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.7-8.

The poetic component of the double work makes clear that her beauty both signals and prophesies a greater, unknowable experience, although these supranatural powers are totemic, rather than inherent:

That face, of Love's all-penetrative spell  
Amulet, talisman, and oracle, –<sup>27</sup>

A mystic embodiment of love generated by the desiring psyche, wherein the goddess becomes the 'all-penetrative' object *through* which a greater experience is encountered, the sonnet culminates in an absence delimited by a dash. Punctuation gestures to, but cannot signify, a phenomenon known at the apex of an event. Achievement of the lips has caused a seismic transformation within the desirer, resulting in semiotic nothingness that references an unrepresentable experience comprehended at the moment of collapse – an intensity demarcated by oblivion.

Metamorphosis referenced by the failure of representation, wherein the sight of the desired initiates a revelation incommunicable within the known system of signs, is discovered in Dante's *Paradiso*. Distracted from his allegorical journey by the sight of Beatrice, Dante undergoes a transformation wherein he "pass[es] beyond the human".<sup>28</sup> The experience "cannot be worded",<sup>29</sup> and is only truly understood by those who have known its "grace";<sup>30</sup> Dante is compelled to make a comparison to Glaucus – a mortal turned ocean god by consuming a magic herb – to obliquely reference its profundity. Abstract, unrepresentable, and encompassing a magnitude so great that it exceeds reason, Dante's *trasumanar* evokes Immanuel Kant's aesthetic sublime, wherein the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.12-13.

<sup>28</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto I, l.70.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.70-71.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, l.72.

desired female subject functions as the object in nature which catalyses a revelatory interior response.

Rossetti both adopts Dante's indefinable, interior metamorphosis and deepens its association with erotic desire, melding cosmic revelation with the mechanics of sex. To achieve "the infinite boon / Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune"<sup>31</sup> embodied by Astarte Syriaca, one must gain access to "her twofold girdle",<sup>32</sup> which the pictorial component of the double work visualises as a phallic length of material. The signifier's alignment beneath "love-freighted lips"<sup>33</sup> completes the discursive allusion to the apparatus of 'Love's all-penetrative spell', pre-empting the physical union that culminates in the event denoted by the dash.

Throughout the double works, joint exploration of spiritual and sexual concerns builds through word and image, a flurry of symbolism peaking to a point of semiotic nullity. Presented as the apex of the encounter with the erotic subject, the concurrent loss of subjectivity denotes the *petit mort* of the orgasm. Circuitously referenced in the process is a momentary, transformative experience that is known to exist by that cannot be articulated; that "which in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier"<sup>34</sup> – Jacques Derrida's transcendental signified.

In generating this fleeting avenue to the eternal, Rossetti's erotic double works enact a cyclical, ever-rejuvenating quest in which the transcendental signified signals

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<sup>31</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Astarte', ll.4-5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, l.4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, l.7.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Seminology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva (1968)" in *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*. Ed. Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley and Alan Girvin. (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.241-249, p.242.

both the nullifying fulfilment of desire and desire's immediate reinstatement: a crescendo of meaning reaching an apex of nothingness, wherein divinity is briefly perceived and lost, before the process is started again, lack necessary to fulfil the criterion of desiring.

The terrible, irresistible power of this sex-and-death drive is astutely summarised by W.B. Yeats. Describing Rossetti's exploration of desire as that which "becomes proud and passes beyond the world",<sup>35</sup> Yeats concludes that the resulting phenomenon melds the physical and metaphysical in a way "that the intellect cannot understand"<sup>36</sup> – nor wholly isolate or express, even in the kaleidoscopic semiotic spaces that proliferate between text and image.

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<sup>35</sup> Yeats, p.70.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

Coming To Nothing



Fig. 91 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Mnemosyne*. Oil on canvas. 126.4 x 61cm. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington (1881).

Within Rossetti's interdisciplinary works the orgasm represents "a quick, banal end"<sup>37</sup> that holds cosmic – if fleeting – revelation, a consequence of its coexistence as a symbol of saturating excess and critical absence. As desire is foundationally "predicated on lack, and even its apparent fulfilment is also a moment of loss",<sup>38</sup> achievement of the orgasm resets the criterion of desiring, radically dislocating its own gratification. This hermeneutic complexity is "dialectically understood to figure simultaneously a number of apparently contradictory states or conditions that... play off each other, intersecting with and counterinforming each other"<sup>39</sup> as the psyche passes through its emanation to achieve a momentary state of apocalyptic oblivion.

*Mnemosyne* – a significant double work which bears considerable similarities to *Astarte Syriaca* – presents the goddess of memory holding a pair of suggestively shaped lamps. One, located beside the groin, is a yonic, circular receptacle with a concave centre, while the other's "shape and position... mime an erect phallus";<sup>40</sup> that the latter is proximate to the mouth recalls Rossetti's apparent interest in oral sex. Both emit hazy, otherworldly blue flames in the shape of wings, esoteric issuance discharging from the symbolic apparatus of human genitalia. Two sprout from the tip of the topmost lamp, forming an unusual halo, while a single, much larger flume emits from the lower – mundane, fleshly humanity consecrated with a potent sense of occult divinity.

The brief verse that accompanies the painting elucidates on the relationship between these two devices:

Thou fill'st from the winged chalice of the soul

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<sup>37</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*. Trans. Brian Singer. (London: Macmillan, 1990), p.22.

<sup>38</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Desire: love stories in Western culture*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp.38-39.

<sup>39</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Orgasmology*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p.215.

<sup>40</sup> Hillis Miller, p.346.

Thy lamp, O Memory, fire-winged to its goal<sup>41</sup>

‘Fire-winged’, the phallic lamp derives a ‘filling’ essence from the chalice-like referent of female genitals, its ‘goal’ unspecified but closely associated with the mechanics of sexual penetration. So presented, Mnemosyne does not simply denote “the emblem of the girl with the penis”,<sup>42</sup> but rather embodies a potential interface between the penis and the vessel it desires, both in a corporeal and mystic sense. The uncertainty of fulfilment heightens her allure: in her control of the lamps, Mnemosyne has the power to either bring them together or to hold them apart subject to her whim.

While *Astarte Syriaca* and *Mnemosyne* are fairly covert in their expression of desire for the orifice, couching the quest in celestial terms, there are more overt, fleshly examples in Rossetti’s *corpus* of double works. Fazio’s observations of Aurelia’s ablutions in *Fazio’s Mistress* cause him to “gai[n] full growth”<sup>43</sup> as he concentrates his attentions to the realm that exists “between her lips”,<sup>44</sup> a space “quite full of every dear and precious thing.”<sup>45</sup> Willing to give up “anything that I possess / Only to hear her mouth say frankly, ‘Yes’”<sup>46</sup> and so grant Fazio permission to penetrate her, the opening stanzas of ‘His Portrait’ are primarily concerned with seduction and the achievement of the orifice.

*A Vision of Fiammetta*, meanwhile, adopts the signifiers of secretion and softening. The muse “sways... branches with her hands”,<sup>47</sup> grasping elongated tree limbs

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<sup>41</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Mnemosyne’, ll.1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Hillis Miller, p.346.

<sup>43</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘His Vision’, l.22.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, l.23.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, l.24.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.32-33.

<sup>47</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Fiammetta’, l.3.

in a masturbatory grip and so loosening “the sundered bloom”<sup>48</sup> which “falls sheer / In separate petals shed, each like a tear”.<sup>49</sup> Dextrous interaction with the branches has resulted in a shedding of organic, lachrymiform material, depicted in the painting as a cascade of falling petals. Consequently, life is “shaken and shower’d and flown”<sup>50</sup> – the climax denoted as convulsion, draining, and soaring. Discovered alongside the signifiers of molten issuance is a change of material state; flaccidity and viscosity replacing solidity.

Liquefaction, and the sharing of fluid, is equally discovered in ‘The Song of the Bower’, wherein the encounter with the female subject of *Bocca Baciata* causes both physical and conceptual softening. Engaged in the kiss, the material world evaporates – “my mouth to thy mouth... the world melts away”<sup>51</sup> – while the aftermath of the sensual interaction leaves the speaker’s heart “droop[ed] like a shower-beaten flower, / Red at the rent core and dark with the rain”.<sup>52</sup> The potency of the phallus is replaced by an image of lubricated enervation, cowed and ‘rent’ by lashing waters coming from above, which are sufficiently impactful to alter both consistency and colour.

While this deluge of fluid may suggest mutual sexual gratification, the erotic subject remains a splintered phantasm of the desiring mind; any expression of pleasure belongs to the desirer. When the female participant in the sexual exchange does emit a wordless cry – manifesting sound without form – it heightens and references her potent allure. The mariner of *A Sea-Spell* cannot escape the siren when “her lips move and she

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, l.4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.4-5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, l.8.

<sup>51</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Song of the Bower’, l.24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.11-12.

soars into her song”;<sup>53</sup> the artist of *The Portrait* fixates on “the mouth’s mould”<sup>54</sup> which “testifies of voice and kiss”,<sup>55</sup> an idol to his unabating desires; and the subject of *La Bella Mano* produces, through bee-stung lips, “music-measured speech”<sup>56</sup> which pours forth like water.

The most overt example of the erotic subject’s voice as an autoerotic battle cry is discovered in *Venus Verticordia*, however. The goddess’ lust, awoken and burning within her, is communicated in seismic, sonant terms, reverberating through nature:

Those eyes shall flame as for her Phrygian boy.  
Then shall her bird’s strained throat the woe foretell,  
And her far seas moan as a single shell,  
And through her dark grove strike the light of Troy.<sup>57</sup>

Water and fire, light and dark demarcate a bolt of tectonic energy that, generated by ‘her Phrygian boy’, encompasses the fulfilment of Paris’s desires, the fall of Troy, and Venus’ own satisfaction. That the dumb exclamation of her ‘strained throat’ ‘foretells’ of a profound event suggests it both predicts and facilitates its revelation. Once heard, the desirer’s subjectivity evaporates; having “give[n] the fruit that works her spell”,<sup>58</sup> all second-person referents disappear, the desirer’s consciousness evaporating in Venus’ moaning seas.

As fluid, formless, nullifying transcendental signified, the orgasm is “devoid of form... [yet] by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with a super-

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<sup>53</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘A Sea-Spell’, l.10.

<sup>54</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘The Portrait’, l.10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.10.

<sup>56</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘La Bella Mano’, ll.7-8.

<sup>57</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Venus’, ll.11-14.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, l.10.

added thought of its totality”;<sup>59</sup> an invocation of Kant’s sublime. Contrary to the beautiful, which is a characteristic of form, Kant (and his translators) adopt familiarly suggestive rhetoric to describe this phenomenon: “the sublime is a pleasure... brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed all at once by a discharge”.<sup>60</sup> Both Kant and Rossetti unite the physical and metaphysical to express a moment of issuance and ecstasy, wherein abundance and absence briefly fall away into each other, resetting the conditions for desire.

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<sup>59</sup> Kant, p.75.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.75-76.

Orgasm and Eternity



Fig. 92 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Sibylla Palmifera*. Oil on canvas. 98.4 x 84.5cm. The Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool (1866).

What, then, is figured by the orgasm – to what does Kant’s unrepresented, unrepresentable sublimity point? Enconced beneath “the arch of Life, where love and death, / Terror and mystery, guard her shrine”,<sup>61</sup> the sibyl of *Sibylla Palmifera* incites a sexually-charged exchange that culminates in shuddering oblivion. Overcome by the analgesic, psychedelic opiates of poppy and incense, the worshipful desirer draws her “in as simply as my breath”<sup>62</sup> before succumbing to an event which is known only by its aftershock:

This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise  
Thy voice and hand shake still<sup>63</sup>

Just like the shaking, showering, flying consequences of interacting with Rossetti’s Fiammetta, the speaker is cognisant of a profound event even if they cannot recall the specifics. Instead, “Thy spirit understands”<sup>64</sup> the unspecified revelation, which leaves only a residual tremor in its wake.

Rossetti explicitly equates this known, unknowable epiphany with the infinite. Standing on the rampart of heaven, the damozel of *The Blessed Damozel* imagines her paradisial reunion with her lover in strikingly unorthodox terms:

We two will lie i’ the shadow of  
Occult, withheld, untrod,  
Whose lamps are stirr’d continually  
With prayer sent up to God;  
And see our old prayers, granted, melt  
Each like a little cloud<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Soul’s Beauty’, ll.1-2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, l.4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.9-10.

<sup>64</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Fiammetta’, l.7.

<sup>65</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Damozel [Text B]’, ll.79-84.

Melding pagan and Christian imagery, the damozel legitimises sex on earth by equating the act of benediction with the orgasm – the ‘old prayers’ that had been ‘granted’ soften, liquify and ‘melt’ to an insubstantial essence, a vapour that rises ‘each like a little cloud’. Isolated by commas and articulated with plosive and approximant phonetics, the lexeme ‘granted’ has a staccato *gravitas* which reverberates through the poem, deepening the poignancy of the carnal act. Sexual activity on earth is not sinful, suggests Rossetti, and may even be divinely ordained, overturning the sanctions of Matthew 16:19: “whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven”.<sup>66</sup>

Suggested through this conflation of orgasm and prayer, loss of self and divine knowledge, are several related ideas: first, that sexual gratification is either akin to, or the same as, divine gratification; second, that complete sexual and divine fulfilment can only be experienced in heaven (perhaps evoking the concept of delayed orgasm); and third, that the apex of sexual activity can be used as a method to access the eternal in both the human and spiritual realms.

That the transcendental signified references paradise is overtly stated by Fazio in the latter half of ‘His Portrait’. He calls upon himself to observe Aurelia with “the eyelids of thy mind”<sup>67</sup> – Blake’s elevated form of imaginative perception – recognising that she offers a method to “Open thy soul to see God’s perfect work”.<sup>68</sup>

...if such loveliness be given  
To sight here, – what of that which she doth hide?

Only the wondrous ride  
Of sun and planets through the visible heaven  
Tells us that therebeyond is Paradise.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *The Holy Bible*, King James Version. (London: Robert Barker, 1611). Matthew 16:19.

<sup>67</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘His Mistress’, l.43.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, l.73.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.44-48.

Fazio knows his mistress contains a route to celestial revelation, eliding her loveliness with a view of the cosmos. He relishes the prospect of the 'wonderous ride' through an interplanetary landscape, pre-empting the consequent cessation of self and vision of the infinite.

Aurelia is not alone in her ability to provide her lover access to the transcendental signified, articulated in the orgasm and its consequential cessation of self, assimilation with the other, and achievement of divinity-in-orifice. Rossetti's erotic subjects repeatedly provide an avenue to experience the infinite; Fiammetta's visionary appearance similarly precipitates change on a cosmic, meteorological scale, discovering "on Death's dark storm the rainbow of the Soul".<sup>70</sup>

The use of orgasm, explicitly comprehended as penetration of an orifice, privileges masculinity. The emanation of desire – a being that encapsulates both the male and female – is a subjugated entity, its otherness necessary to fulfil its revelatory function: "the ultimate meeting of mind-and-body plus self-and-other, the unification of (sexual) 'being' – albeit at the same time as the paradoxical disintegration of the self... is... phallogocentric."<sup>71</sup> This symbolic hierarchy mirrors a real order, evidencing Rossetti's artistic freedoms relative to his female colleagues; Siddal and Spartali are denied access to the same transcendental ideologies and suggestive aesthetic modes. Sexual revelation is a reflexive practice of power, and they, like Rossetti's phantasmic erotic subjects, are disenfranchised from it.

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<sup>70</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Fiammetta', l.12.

<sup>71</sup> Annie Potts, "Coming, Coming, Gone: A Feminist Deconstruction of the Heterosexual Orgasm" in *Sexualities*. Vol.1, Issue 1, Feb 2000. *Sage Journals* <<https://doi.org/10.1177/136346000003001003>> [Accessed 24 November 2023], pp.55-76, p.73.

## Trasumanar



Fig. 93 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante's Dream at the death of Beatrice*. Oil on canvas. 216 x 312.4cm. Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. (1869-71).

Annexed to this idea of male representational dominance is the concept of an elevated faculty of perception, wherein discovery of the revelation housed within the erotic subject requires a joint sense-and-imagination approach. Dante is specific about this method of engagement in his description of *trasumanar*, noting that the mysteries embodied by Beatrice are discovered after the sight of her was “fed by my eyes to my imagination”.<sup>72</sup> The experience of ‘transhumanisation’, a “distinctively cosmopoetic as well as incarnational transgression of the pagan ontological divide between humanity

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<sup>72</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto I, l.52.

and divinity”,<sup>73</sup> raises crucial questions about the origins and nature of God, particularly if its epiphany is discovered through human faculties.

The neologism is explicit in its relationship to the ‘umano’,<sup>74</sup> and Rossetti deepens its association with biological and cognitive function; both are required to comprehend its enormities. In the double works, the sublime epiphany encountered through the erotic subject – figured as orgasm, which functions as transcendental signified – is the revelation that “the other has really always been the self, that the other’s mystery and transcendental power is in fact one’s own”.<sup>75</sup> While incited by the ‘stunner’ model or adored muse, it is essentially an individual phenomenon undertaken within the mind.

This process of Lacanian extimacy, wherein the isolated individual externalises and others profoundly intimate elements of the self, is illustrated in *Dante’s Dream*. Dante, the (male) authorial consciousness, imagines an encounter with the deceased Beatrice. Although inspired by a living person, the *tableau* is entirely of Dante’s creation, wherein the female subject appears other but is an extension of the self; a vision of love as transmuted through the desiring mind.

The “scene is a chamber of dreams”<sup>76</sup> wherein the figure of Love leads Dante to behold Beatrice, facilitating the visual stimulus that will initiate the sublime revelation: “Now shall all things be made clear: / Come and behold our lady where she lies”.<sup>77</sup> A familiar pattern follows, wherein the epiphany promised by Love isn’t disclosed but Dante’s subjectivity seems to melt away, absorbed into the double work. First person

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<sup>73</sup> James L. Miller, “Retheologizing Dante” in *Dante & the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*. Ed. James L. Miller. (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), pp.1-62, p.7.

<sup>74</sup> Human.

<sup>75</sup> Austin, p.171.

<sup>76</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Dante’s Dream’.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

pronouns, initially referring to Dante (“I there was led”)<sup>78</sup> are transferred to the deceased (“she appeared to say, I am at peace”),<sup>79</sup> a process replicated in Rossetti’s ekphrastic accompaniment to his translation as description of the poet gives way to a description of Love, Beatrice, her attendants, and finally birds, rooftops, and bells.

At once illusory and substantial, the double work is a vision of “love... consummated in death”,<sup>80</sup> implied fulfilment manifesting – like *The Blessed Damozel* – in the vapour of cloud:

Beyond in the distance is the outer world of reality... Over all, the angels float upwards, as in his dream, ‘having a little cloud in front of them’ – a cloud to which is given some semblance of the beatified Beatrice<sup>81</sup>

Divine ascendancy emerges in the vision of rising angels, while a proximation of Beatrice is generated in effervescent moisture. Dante’s connection to the desired is bridged by Love, who connects the eternally separated lovers through touch. Vicariously undertaking the kiss, he turns his arrow back toward Dante, the penetrative apparatus of love inverted. Perhaps it signals the eternal return of his affections, in the wake of her death, or the (re)assimilation of the other with the self, attained in the process of transhumanisation.

Crucially, Beatrice’s death doesn’t diminish Dante’s desire, nor does it prevent sublime revelation – it may even intensify it, given the related, emotive themes of mortality, temporality, and loss. Erotic exigency is a recurrent theme of the double works, wherein an inescapable, irresistible drive propels the desirer towards the cessation of

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

subjectivity and its revelations. The phenomenon is perhaps best articulated in *Sibylla Palmifera* and its poem, 'Soul's Beauty':

- the beat  
Following her daily of thy heart and feet,  
How passionately and irretrievably,  
In what fond flight, how many ways and days!<sup>82</sup>

Pivoting from first person address in the octave to second person in the sestet, evolving the description of personal experience to the universal, Rossetti stresses the power of the desire and its nullifying effect. The source of this potent urge is located between "sea or sky or woman",<sup>83</sup> all monumental natural phenomena that initiate and maintain a never-ending cycle, wherein the subject persistently seeks the fleeting knowledge of the infinite and its accompanying oblivion.

The compulsion to pursue the elusive erotic subject – an embodiment of Lacan's paradoxical *objet petit a*, the epitome of desire that exists as "both the void, the gap, and whatever object momentarily comes to fill that gap in our symbolic reality... not the object itself but the function of masking the lack"<sup>84</sup> – is fundamentally the pursuit of the self as it manifests as other. Lacan's assertion that "there is no such thing as a sexual relationship"<sup>85</sup> is useful, here: as Alain Badiou summarises, "sex separates, it doesn't unite... what is real is narcissistic, what binds us is imaginary.... In sex, you are really in a relationship with yourself via the mediation of the Other. The Other helps you to discover

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<sup>82</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Soul's Beauty', ll.11-14.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, l.7.

<sup>84</sup> Homer, p.88.

<sup>85</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. Book XX. Encore 1972-1973. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Bruce Fink. (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 1999), p.55.

the reality of pleasure”.<sup>86</sup> So Rossetti forges the erotic subject to mask the lack, and to create an avenue to the phenomenon Dante terms ‘transhumanisation’.

Rather than figuring, as Helene Roberts observes, “the final engulfment in the infinite”,<sup>87</sup> the momentary conflation of desirer and desired symbolically signalled through the orgasm is a persistent, irresistible, and endlessly rejuvenating process. Part of an “uninterrupted ritual exchange where seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends”<sup>88</sup> the push-and-pull negotiation between desirer and desired is narcissistic, self-destructive, and continuous. Fulfilment only resets the state of lacking, causing the psyche to ceaselessly seek an avenue to eternity and cessation of the self. As a consequence, Rossetti’s erotic subjects never lose their potency.

The orgasm and its concurrent experience of divinity doesn’t diminish the desirer, either. Resisting the nineteenth century notion of sexual gratification as erosion of life essence, wherein “men’s sexual release was regarded as a kind of ‘expenditure’ that depleted his physical strength as well as his moral resolve, bringing him closer to death with every orgasm”,<sup>89</sup> the potency of desire revives and fortifies sexual resolve. Just as the speaker of ‘The Song of the Bower’ remembers “the last time, and the hundred before”,<sup>90</sup> and as Lilith sits in Eden “young while the earth is old”,<sup>91</sup> so ardour revitalises and endures, as the desiring psyche craves the joint revelation of orgasm and eternity.

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<sup>86</sup> Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love: Alain Badiou with Nicholas Truong*. Trans. Peter Bush. (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2012), p.19.

<sup>87</sup> Roberts, p.393.

<sup>88</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p.22.

<sup>89</sup> Regina Barreca, “Introduction: Coming and Going in Victorian Literature” in *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*. Ed. Regina Barreca. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp.1-8, p.4.

<sup>90</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Song of the Bower’, l.6.

<sup>91</sup> D.G. Rossetti, ‘Body’s Beauty’, l.5.

## Imagination, Sex, Ecstasy, Death



Fig. 94 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini*. Watercolour, 24.8 x 44.5cm. Tate Britain, London (1855).

The sign and divinity have the same time and place of birth.

- Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.<sup>92</sup>

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin... The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other words, through the history of all of his history – has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.

- Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”.<sup>93</sup>

Ironically, the lexeme *trasumanar* fails to elucidate the experience which it references, its malfunction as sign (being a signifier that gestures to, but cannot

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<sup>92</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p.14.

<sup>93</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp.351-370, pp.369-370.

adequately establish, its signified) mimicking the very experience it seeks to represent: a microcosm of the transcendent sublime. Despite Dante's warning that its transformation cannot be described in words, scholars over centuries have offered written explanations, usually concluding that "the 'transhumanized' individual has become more than human, has, in fact, left his humanness altogether behind and... become divine"<sup>94</sup> as part of a process which "go[es] beyond the experiential limits normally assigned to humanity."<sup>95</sup>

Yet Rossetti's idiosyncratic exploration of transhumanisation appears to be foundationally human, wherein the revelation of divinity is essentially connected to the function and fulfilment of desire. If God is found in the orgasm, eternity is a perpetual erotic encounter, one in which there can be no moralising about good and evil, but rather a complete absorption into the self.

Locked in a passionate but forbidden kiss, Paolo and Francesca da Rimini succumb to their mutual desire, the adulterous act between brother- and sister-in-law condemning them to the hellish realm where they are discovered by Dante and Virgil in *Inferno* Canto V. Forsaking Dante's biblical inferno, Rossetti's humanist depiction of the couple takes the form of a triptych. The left panel presents the moment they seal their fate (as described by Francesca in Rossetti's 'Francesca da Rimini'), while the right shows the eternal union of their shades entwined in a fiery landscape. In the centre, Dante and Virgil hold hands, poet and guide bearing witness to the love that blinds Paolo and Francesca, elevating them to a suprasensory state. Locked in their embrace with

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<sup>94</sup> Steven Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.222.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.226.

eyes closed, “mirrored reflections of narcissistic unity”,<sup>96</sup> the intensity of the couple’s mutual feeling is experienced within the mind.

In many respects, this double work dramatises Rossetti’s joint semiotic and sexual process interrogated in this thesis, as erotic love incites an irrevocable, mystical change that reverberates throughout eternity. What provokes the pair’s illicit kiss is the illuminated manuscript, which depicts Lancelot and Guinevere in a clandestine embrace, inspiring and legitimising Francesca and Paolo’s transgressive encounter; the mirror of an image-within-an-image ripples out of the double work to reference its own relationship with the viewer/reader. The fulfilment of desire is figured as a kiss, signalling attainment of the female subject’s lips and so the orifice beyond. Through their passion they pass into another realm, where fiery secretions rain down in hot, fluid droplets, obliquely referencing both the orgasm and an experience of eternity, wherein subjectivity assimilates into nothingness.

Encompassing the initiation of desire and its fulfilment, and conceiving of that process as fundamentally related to the generation of meaning, Rossetti’s double works persistently seek Derrida’s “origin and the end of the game”.<sup>97</sup> The subject is locked in an inescapable, rejuvenating compulsion to access some sublime knowledge, although the revelation requires the cessation of meaning, of self, and of signification; “death alone – or at least, the ruin of the isolated individual in search of happiness in time – introduces that break without which nothing reaches the state of ecstasy”.<sup>98</sup> For Rossetti’s erotic double works, that cosmotheological break is figured in bodily terms as the orgasm, a

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<sup>96</sup> Suzanne Waldman, *The Demon and the Damozel: Dynamics of Desire in the works of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p.75.

<sup>97</sup> Derrida, “Structure”, p.370.

<sup>98</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature and evil*. Trans. Alastair Hamilton. (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p.18.

process which is decisively moral – perhaps even divine – as it denotes both critical deficiency and the pursuit of higher knowledge. The privileged ontological, transcendent revelation comprehended through the orgasm is an irreducibly complex phenomenon that both resists and exceeds representation. Within Rossetti's double works, where potential meanings flare and die away between text and image, it is denoted in space and punctuation, achieved at the point of semiotic saturation and nullity.

Throughout Rossetti's *oeuvre* ecstasy and terror, sex and death, orgasm and eternity, word and image, sign and transcendental signified rebound and rejuvenate to (re)establish meanings that pick up humanity from the empirical, material world and thrust it, panting, into the stars. There, the mind discerns cosmic immensities it can never articulate, but knows to exist through aftershock – a route to sublimity that is exclusively and overtly sexual, profoundly individual, and in which eternity is fleetingly discovered in the orifice.

## Siddal and the sublime power of nullity

The dissertation now turns to a crisis of representation in the works of Elizabeth Siddal. It discovers a move away from the Romantic sublime and towards a framework for suprasensory experience which is defined by its own indeterminacy, comprehended as the subject enters into relation with their own otherness.



Fig. 95 Elizabeth Siddal, *The Woeful Victory*. Ink on paper. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Newark (1860).

Her last designs would I am sure surprise & delight you, and I hope she is going to do better than ever now. I feel surer every time she works that she has real genius – none of your make-believes – in conception & colour, & if she can only add a little more of the precision in carrying out which it so much needs health & strength to attain, she will I am sure paint such pictures as no woman has painted yet.

- Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to William Allingham, 29 November 1860.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, letter to William Allingham 29 November 1860, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: II The Formative Years II 1855-1862*, 60.54. Ed. William E Fredeman. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), p.333.

To hear the roar that lies within silence... the feminine sublime is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness – social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic – that is excessive and unrepresentable... a crisis in relation to language and representation.

- Barbara Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime*.<sup>100</sup>

With head turned away, her eyes and mouth firmly shut, the female subject of Elizabeth Siddal's *The Woeful Victory* deprives her would-be suitor of her consciousness. She is the prize of a bloody battle between two knights, but her favoured admirer is vanquished; he lies dying on the ground, his chainmail falling back to reveal a pale, handsome youth in contrast to the dark countenance of his rival. Kneeling between them, the victor's hands simultaneously sever and bridge the immortal gulf between the lovers.<sup>101</sup> He may have terminated their union, but he also forms a physical conduit that discursively suggests a new, eternal bond has been forged by his actions. Their love will endure, rather than perish, because of the tragedy of their premature parting.

The image has no certain literary source. William Michael Rossetti comments that "this fine subject was I believe wholly [Siddal's] own invention",<sup>102</sup> although he later adds that it could illustrate "an incident which was to be introduced into Rossetti's poem 'The Bride's Prelude'; that work, however, was not brought to completion".<sup>103</sup> Such inspiration would make the female subject Alöyse, who relates an unhappy love affair to her sister

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<sup>100</sup> Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.2.

<sup>101</sup> Just as the figure of Love joins Dante and Beatrice in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Dante's Dream*.

<sup>102</sup> W.M. Rossetti, "Dante Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal", p.295.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

Amolette,<sup>104</sup> but while thematic correlations surrounding lost love may be traced in *The Woeful Victory* there's insufficient evidence to assert a definite connection.

Rather than assuming a Rossetian antecedent to the image, it could evidence Siddal's imaginative powers, which Rossetti celebrates in an 1860 letter to William Allingham. In addition to evident fairytale influences, there's a psychological quality to *The Woeful Victory* that is "none of your make-believe".<sup>105</sup> rather, it depicts a knowing female subject bereft of choice and severed from desire. She understands the role designated to her within the *tableau* of chivalric wooing, and she refuses to engage with it. Imprisoned in a story she doesn't want to tell and compelled to marry a man she doesn't want, the princess rejects her present.

Siddal further upsets the conventions of romance by inverting the paradigm of the female cadaver, the source of poetic inspiration so potently described by Edgar Allan Poe:

The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally it is beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.<sup>106</sup>

In this case, the lips of the survivor do not – and cannot – articulate her grief. Impotent to alter her fate, her state of crisis is communicated as she withdraws from the material world, affecting a state of senselessness. This transcendence is not a euphoric brush

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<sup>104</sup> Steven Kolsteren. "Rossetti's Writings as a Source of Inspiration for Victorian Artists" in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 20, no. 3/4, 1982, pp.113–44, p.130. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002991>> [Accessed 5 August 2024].

<sup>105</sup> D.G. Rossetti, letter to William Allingham 29 November 1860, *Correspondence II The Formative Years II 1855-1862*, 60.54, p.333.

<sup>106</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" in *Graham's Magazine*. Vol. 28, no.4, April 1846, pp.163-167, p.163.

with the divine, but rather a paralysis of all sense through which she can, discursively and paradoxically, recover some semblance of autonomy.

Throughout the dissertation it has been established that bodies within Siddal's works resist normative standards of gender, and that the physical world exists as the limit-edge of an expansive mind; that the taboo is the consequence of hegemonic ideals repressing human nature; and that far from existing between stable binaries, cognitive function generates and parses meaning in divergent and unpredictable ways, culminating in a proliferation of impressions wherein illusion becomes indistinguishable from reality. Poetic speakers are "irrevocably changed into something alien by the experience of love",<sup>107</sup> and true love itself is a memory, re-sought but never attained. Locked in a near-uncontrollable hallucination, suffering subjectivities become so alien to themselves that repressed feelings are discerned in echo through the landscape.

The unrepresentable within Siddal's works, then, is everything that this amassed confusion of perception references, but is ineffective to describe, generate, or change: a kind of sublime intensity that is demarcated by torment. Transcendence exists only in the subject's ability to halt consciousness in a bid to renounce the world, regaining some faltering sense of control, and God and heaven are anxiety-ridden possibilities that offer contingent, not guaranteed, salvation. The princess of *The Woeful Victory* sacrifices her ability to signify to signal the horror-filled enormity of her loss and her inability to effect change.

Extremity of feeling and its concurrent representational impotence, wherein the self radically eclipses itself to the point of nullity, is a complex form of sublimity – one in

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<sup>107</sup> Woolley, p.66.

which the subject *iterates* the unrepresentable, because the experience dematerialises them in a process that gesturally indicates acute psychic phenomenality. It is bitterly ironic, difficult, alien and erotic, in which the revelation of love is the beginning and the end of an experience that – while beyond elucidation – does not reference an otherworldly saturation of feeling and signification, but rather the revelatory horror of its vacuous emptiness.

Barbara Freeman, quoting George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, terms this crisis of meaning at the heart of female sublimity as the “roar that lies within silence”<sup>108</sup> – a description that could be levelled at Siddal's overwhelmed, inert subjects. Certainly the bitter muteness of the princess of *The Woeful Victory*, with eyes and mouth clamped shut, speaks volumes.

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<sup>108</sup> Freeman, p.2.

## Beyond Salvation

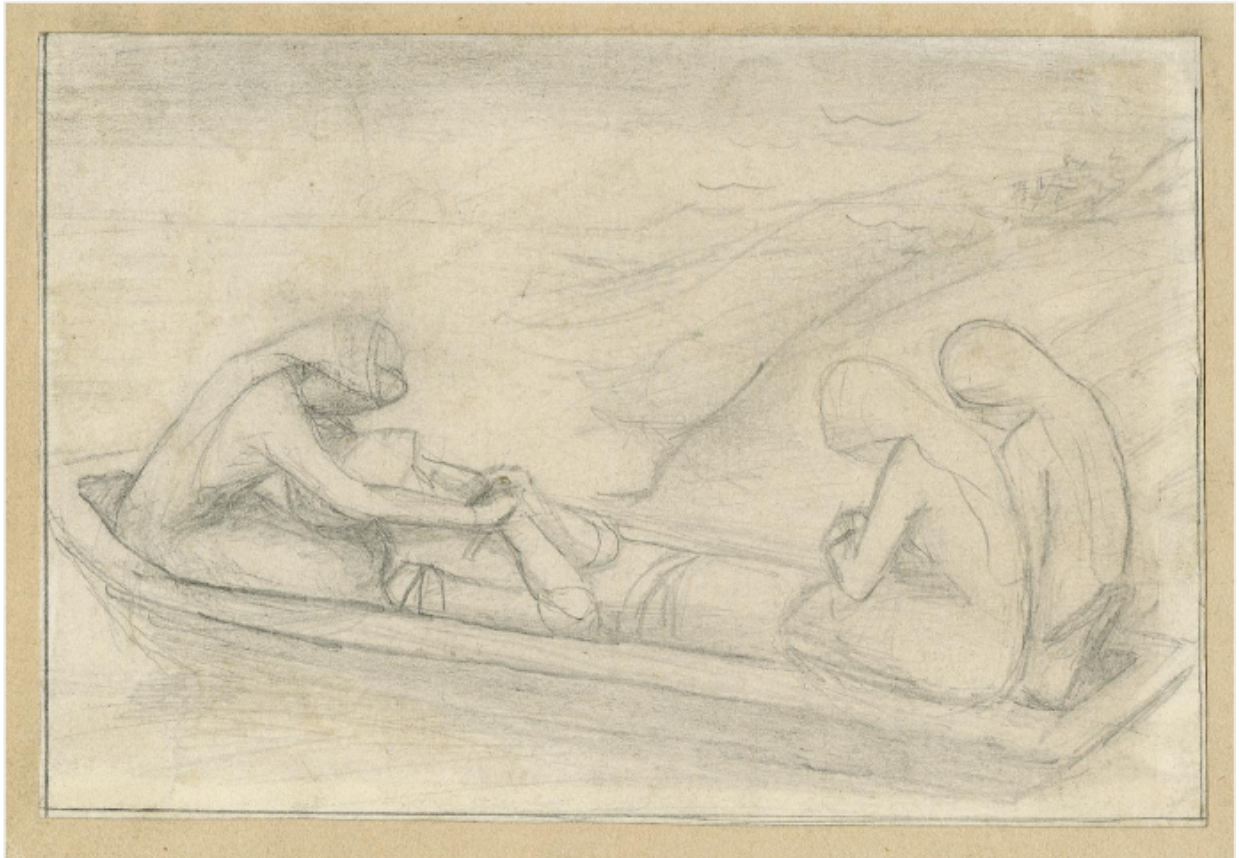


Fig. 96 Elizabeth Siddal, *The Passing of Arthur*. Pencil on paper, 8.3 x 12.4cm. The British Museum, London (c.1855).

Bent over with grief, the three queenly figures of Siddal's pencil sketch *The Passing of Arthur* mourn the dying knight. Two sit at his feet, while the third rests Arthur's head on her lap, the act of comfort bringing their faces into intimate proximity. The erotic potential of the inverted embrace is intensified by its impossibility, sensual tenderness disrupted by the hero's imminent demise and the awkwardness of the reversed position. Intense feeling is deftly conveyed in the simple design, evoking the bitterness of mortality, the depths of human passion, and the temporal nature of love.

A design originally intended for Moxon's edition of 'The Palace of Art', the drawing faithfully recreates a scene from Tennyson's 'Morte d'Arthur' in which three queens comfort the ailing Arthur: "the tallest...and fairest... laid his head upon her lap... And

call'd him by his name, complaining loud / And dropping bitter tears against his brow.”<sup>109</sup>

Rossetti, who would ultimately illustrate Moxon's book, created *The Weeping Queens* to accompany the text. Characteristically, this visualisation is a sensual confusion of hair and body parts, with one dominant face emerging clearly from the claustrophobic cluster of numerous crowned heads, modelled by Siddal.



Fig. 97 Dalziel Brothers after a design by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Weeping Queens*. Wood engraving. 8.2 x 9.2cm. The Royal Academy of Arts, London (1857).

Juxtaposing Siddal and Rossetti's respective designs evidences Siddal's prioritisation of grief, emphasising the queens' anguish as movingly described in Tennyson's poem:

Three Queens with crowns of gold – and from them rose  
A cry that shiver'd to the tingling stars,

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<sup>109</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Morte d'Arthur' in *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: Selected Poems*. Ed. Michael Baron. (London: Orion Publishing, 2002), pp.18-26, p.24.

And, as it were one voice, an agony  
Of lamentation, like a wind, that shrills  
All night in a waste land, where no one comes,  
Or hath come, since the making of the world.<sup>110</sup>

Like the crashing cymbals of Siddal's angels, this inarticulate cry of torment moves out of the human realm to gesture towards something elemental. Rather than a transcendent appeal to divinity, however, it is a hollow and desolate landscape that reflects the women's voices, its emptiness compounding a sense of horror.

A preoccupation with a desolate afterlife is a recurrent theme of Siddal's poetry. Where Rossetti undertakes a transcendent and euphoric appeal to divinity, Siddal's tentative visions of heaven may or may not offer solace. The dying speaker of 'O grieve not' urges their lover to be glad that "the gates of heaven will open wide / and take me in at last",<sup>111</sup> ostensibly imbuing the poem "with a sense of acceptance that heavenly love is to be eagerly anticipated, not feared"<sup>112</sup> – but it is equally evident that joy in death is contingent on the couple's reunion. The surviving lover is instructed to seek out the dying partner "in the throng / of spirits floating past"<sup>113</sup> so that they can "take thee by the hands / and know thee mine at last".<sup>114</sup> Requiring eternal reassurance of devotion, the speaker signals a neurosis surrounding the lover's constancy both in this life and the next, rendering the "solemn peace of holy death"<sup>115</sup> contingent, not guaranteed.

Similarly, the speaker of 'True Love' returns to Earl Richard's graveside to enter a state of near-permanent watching, wherein it becomes unclear if they are conscious or

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.23-24.

<sup>111</sup> Siddal, 'O grieve not', ll.3-4.

<sup>112</sup> Woolley, p.64.

<sup>113</sup> Siddal, 'O grieve not', ll.9-10.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.11-12.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, l.7.

unconscious, “sleeping or dead”.<sup>116</sup> If the latter, the subject appears trapped in the material world and reunification in heaven seems impossible; the enduring image of their love becomes their frozen effigies on earth, one forged of stone and the other flesh.

Serena Trowbridge suggests that like Christina Rossetti, Siddal “constructs heaven as an improvement upon earth, and consequently spiritual love as superior to earthly love, in its permanency”,<sup>117</sup> but even where death is craved there is no promise of paradise. The exhausted speaker of ‘Life and night’ desires respite from the trials of life, calling upon God to “lift me from life’s stony way”,<sup>118</sup> yet the speaker simultaneously expresses anxious concern about what waits beyond, questioning – rather than asserting – bliss in Elysium:

How is it in the unknown  
land do the dead wander  
hand in hand  
give me trust in thee<sup>119</sup>

Fragmented into staccato lines of faltering meter, the despondent request for faith (‘give me trust in thee’) signals both the depth of the speaker’s despair and fear of continued isolation. Felicity in heaven is subject to celestial replication of the love experienced on earth, and there is doubt that such reconciliation is possible.

Anne Woolley, assuming a female speaker of ‘Life and night’ (no gendered pronouns are used in the poem), notes the urgency inherent in Siddal’s use of the present tense, giving “the impression she is relaying her thoughts as they occur... she appears to

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<sup>116</sup> Siddal, ‘True Love’, l.20.

<sup>117</sup> Trowbridge, *My Ladys soul*, p.67.

<sup>118</sup> Siddal, ‘Life and night’, p.49, l.15.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50, ll.27-30.

be taking stock, evaluating her responses to bewildering change enveloping her”.<sup>120</sup> This attempt to navigate an abundance of simultaneous thought processes is compounded by the use of fragmentary interrogative in the manuscript copy of the poem, subjectivity rupturing as the speaker attempts to imagine heaven:

Is the air filled with  
wail [illegible] of spirits circling  
round and round

Is the air filled with harp  
[illegible] to fasten our angels wings  
upon

are there lakes of endless  
song to rest our tired eyes  
upon<sup>121</sup>

William Michael Rossetti omits these difficult tercets from his published version ‘Lord May I Come?’, leading academics who analyse the revised iteration to conclude that “God’s love in all its glory will surpass any that has been experienced even during a lengthy span on earth”<sup>122</sup> – that salvation and redemption can be consistently discovered in divine love. Closer interrogation of Siddal’s original, however, demonstrates that this might not be quite true.

The speaker imagines heaven as a clashing series of impressions that mix faculties of sense in a cyclical process with no end: spirits perform dizzying loops; wings are attached, rather than sprouted, suggesting performativity; the dead watch lakes of song. Whether or not this is the consequence of the writer’s laudanum use, as suggested

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<sup>120</sup> Woolley, p.68.

<sup>121</sup> Siddal, ‘Life and night’, p.50, ll.35-43.

<sup>122</sup> Woolley, p.67.

by William,<sup>123</sup> is neither here nor there – what his editing overlooks is the idea that, while death may be desired, the mysteries of its apocalyptic landscape do not promise comfort.

Heaven is referenced in ironic terms in Siddal's poems, too. The callous admirer of 'I care not' calls upon "Our Father which art in Heaven"<sup>124</sup> to assist the objectified female subject, but the appeal to divinity seems hollow and obliquely mocking. The jaded speaker of 'Oh never weep' encourages the lovesick to give up hope of true love on earth, "where true love is not given",<sup>125</sup> but equally the prospect of finding it in heaven is qualified by the modal auxiliary 'should': "If the merest dream of love were true / Then, sweet, we should be in Heaven".<sup>126</sup> God's omniscience is questioned in 'Life and night', too, as the speaker calls on divinity to remember them in death: "we put our faith in thee / Oh God remember me".<sup>127</sup> Obliquely derisive, these moments evidence that Siddal "place[s] more value on the self than on God or man",<sup>128</sup> and while her speakers "cannot abandon their belief in a loving God... there is insufficient proof of His existence"<sup>129</sup> to offer succour.

Siddal's speakers may be apprehensive about the prospect of heaven because of Christian doctrine surrounding the sinfulness of premarital sex; if lovers are not reunited in the afterlife, their affairs are rendered eternally illegitimate. The speaker of 'It is not now' – "a disobedient Sleeping Beauty, not the damsel waiting for romantic salvation, but a self-contained creature practicing indifference"<sup>130</sup> – makes clear that they've had

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<sup>123</sup> William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences*. Vol.1. (London: Brown, Langham & Co., 1906), p.196.

<sup>124</sup> Siddal, 'I care not', l.10.

<sup>125</sup> Siddal, 'Oh never weep', l.17.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.15-16.

<sup>127</sup> Siddal, 'Life and night', p.51, ll.50-51.

<sup>128</sup> Woolley, p.81.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

<sup>130</sup> Arcara, p.118.

numerous romantic partners, causing them to apathetically disassociate. Their repeated calls to god – “Dear Christ this month of May”<sup>131</sup> and “Dear Christ if I could weep”<sup>132</sup> – are empty curses, rather than genuine prayers, and the speaker knows that God will not answer. So presented, death doesn’t offer salvation and “divine love appears not to engender the exultation so apparent in Rossetti’s sonnets”.<sup>133</sup> The longing for death is the longing for oblivion amidst their swirling dreams, not a potentially damning afterlife.

On the few occasions tranquillity is discerned in Siddal’s poetry, it is when the subject is rendered discarnate and sublimated back into the world, as if achieving a state of karmic non-embodiment – even in heaven, human experience is comprehended in bodily terms. The equanimity discovered in ‘Autumnal leaves are falling’ is arguably greater than the promise of paradisial harmony in any of Siddal’s other poems, because humanity lost its materiality to dissipate into nothingness, its capacity to “listen”<sup>134</sup> and “murmur”<sup>135</sup> lent to the natural features that surround it.

The relative serenity of the scene may be short-lived, however. The suggestion of “autumnal leaves”<sup>136</sup> that “fall”<sup>137</sup> prophesies a cyclical return, wherein either the deceased person or another, new figure will emerge to be subjected to the same struggles as her predecessor. The indistinguishable words spoken between the sea and the grass portend the inevitability of the succession, as if nature is set against humanity itself even as their (re)union is (re)staged in the grave.

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, l.4

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, l.10.

<sup>133</sup> Woolley, p.81.

<sup>134</sup> Siddal, ‘Autumnal leaves’, l.3.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, l.4.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, l.1.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Ordeal of Sublimity



Fig. 98 Unknown photographer after Elizabeth Siddal, photograph of a sketch for *The Gay Goshawk*. Photograph. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (1866).<sup>138</sup>

Siddal's sketch for *The Gay Goshawk*, designed in Hastings in 1854 and intended for the proposed *Border Ballads* book edited by William Allingham,<sup>139</sup> depicts the moment from the source ballad (taken from Walter Scott's *Border Minstrelsy*) that the heroine undergoes a torturous test. Constance Hassett has pointed out Siddal's unusual

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<sup>138</sup> Taken from a sheet containing six other sketches, including studies for *Lady Clare* and *Wreck of a Sailing Boat*. Part of the Bryson Collection at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

<sup>139</sup> Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Artist*, p.61.

choice of subject: where most might illustrate the *denouement* of the story, when the lovers are happily reunited, the artist elects to represent the young woman's brutal trial.<sup>140</sup>

Slumped back in her chair, the female subject has consumed a sleeping draught to feign death, a ploy she has undertaken to escape her familial subjugators. Suspicious, her step-mother drips molten lead onto her chest, an excruciating ordeal designed to establish whether or not she is dead. Her father cradles her head as his wife undertakes the grisly experiment, his passive role rendering him complicit in his daughter's torment.

Despite experiencing searing pain the maiden remains inert, maintaining her deception; she will ultimately flee her home and marry her beloved Lord William, but Siddal sketches the nightmarish anguish she endures, wherein "death is a ruse, silence a triumph, and both are poetic stratagems for narrating a complex tale of a daughter's defiance".<sup>141</sup> Death, sleep, and fainting become indistinguishable, and so create the conditions for momentary recovery of power; a self-imposed, affected senselessness offering a brief reclamation of control, allowing her to fulfil her desires. The maiden's unresponsiveness is self-alienation for independence, just as the speaker of 'It is not now' gains some semblance of liberty through practising indifference and the princess of *The Woeful Victory* reclaims some authority by refusing to give her attention to the victorious knight.

The gruesome undertaking requires total mastery over both body and mind, and the cries of horror that follow the deed are not those of the daughter, but those of the father:

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<sup>140</sup> Hassett, p.449.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

They took a drap o'boiling lead,  
They drap'd it on her breast;  
"Alas! Alas!" her father cried,  
"She's dead without the priest"<sup>142</sup>

This vision of transcendence is not the sublime ecstasy of experiencing the infinite, but rather the subject conquering sensation to maintain paralysed silence under torture. Nature has not so much ignited a sense of awe-stricken astonishment as it has radically eclipsed itself in a fight for survival. The maiden, her head back in her lifeless swoon, has exceeded the limits of human function to realise a state of nothingness, unrepresentable because there necessarily *has* to be nothing to represent – it is her only avenue to freedom.

Terror has long been associated with the sublime experience, and is recognised as a component of the Romantic sublime. Kant acknowledges its straddling of pleasure and pain, torment and ecstasy, accepting "that the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is ever being alternately repelled"<sup>143</sup> as an encounter with the natural world triggers a bliss-and-terror response. Edmund Burke extrapolates on the relationality between terror and sublimity, drawing close correlations between pleasure and pain in suggestive terms:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger... or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Walter Scott, 'The Gay Goss Hawk' in *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Vol III. Ed. T. F. Henderson. (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902), pp.187-198, p.195, stanza 28.

<sup>143</sup> Kant, p.76.

<sup>144</sup> Burke, Part 1, Section VII, p.45.

Siddal's subjects not only experience the enormity of horror as part of an experience of sublime intensity, but they are compelled to surrender themselves to it. Pushed to extremity, they enter into relation with their own otherness in a process that denies classification. It is a realm of experience demarcated by suffering, disruption, and a profound volatility, understood on both an earthly and a cosmic scale.

The precise nature of the entity that causes this self-alienating phenomenon is unclear, but it is often presented as a callous third party capable of either committing or permitting violence to the subject. The lady of 'I care not' must face death with hands and eyes open, transposing her vulnerable subjection from the earth to heaven; the speaker of 'Thy strong arms', while ostensibly protected by their lover's embrace, is afraid, disabled by the "broken wings"<sup>145</sup> that still "must fly away from thee";<sup>146</sup> "ruthless hands"<sup>147</sup> tear a helpless woman from her lover in the poem of the same name. In each case, love demands capitulation.

There is also a sense that the power possessed by the subject's tormentor is near godlike, distorting and rupturing the boundary between earthly and divine love. In 'O god forgive' the "dream of love"<sup>148</sup> is punctured by a violation of the false sanctity of the sexual relationship; the speaker's "idol" is dragged "from its place / and shattered all its shrine".<sup>149</sup> The ferocity of the act of desecration evidences the horror of grim discovery. Introducing the language of pagan worship, Siddal suggests the love offered to the speaker was not sacred, but veneration of a kind of false god. When in love, "No evil thing

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<sup>145</sup> Siddal, 'Thy strong arms', p.86, l.7.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, l.8.

<sup>147</sup> Siddal, 'Ruthless hands', l.1.

<sup>148</sup> Siddal, 'O god', l.2.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, ll..15-16.

could come to me / my spirit was so light”,<sup>150</sup> but now the relationship has failed, they are cognisant of the irreparable damage the relationship has done in both a psychological and spiritual sense. The brutality of the destructive act quickly gives way to the final stanza, in which the illusory dream returns, and the speaker retreats into the numbing depths of memory.

While this perpetrating force could be interpreted as the (putative male) dominant figure, be they a lover or (as in *The Gay Goshawk*) a parent, there is also a suggestion that love itself is the subject’s nullifying oppressor. Love repeatedly manifests as a sudden, striking force within Siddal’s poetry, which fells and dehumanises its victim. In ‘Many a mile’ (“I felt the wind strike chill and cold... I felt the spell that held my breath”)<sup>151</sup> and ‘Thy strong arms’ (“the love that turned and struck me down / Among the blinding snow”),<sup>152</sup> love pierces the speaker, its revelation likened to ice. ‘Oh never weep’ suggests that love’s freezing properties endure long after the lover themselves has departed. The jaded speaker, who has known many lovers, reveals that the bitter isolation of love-knowledge endures: “you will stand alone my dear, / When wintry winds draw nigh”.<sup>153</sup> In each case, loss of innocence is equated to coldness and seclusion, the subject fading into a barren winter landscape; another vision of the icy world of earthly love as viewed through the window of *St Agnes’ Eve*.

Blurring the lines between human lover, a godlike power, and the sensations and demands of love itself, the thing that the subject must surrender to becomes an indistinct amalgam of all three, wherein the only certainty is the subject’s status as

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.19-20.

<sup>151</sup> Siddal, ‘Many a mile’, pp.57-58, ll.17-19.

<sup>152</sup> Siddal, ‘Thy strong arms’, ll.11-12.

<sup>153</sup> Siddal, ‘Oh never weep’, ll.11-12.

different and defenceless in relation to it. Intractable ideologies meld together, instigating a domain of experience wherein the legitimacy of romance is dictated by an inflexible governing hegemony beyond the reach of influence. A state of crisis and overwhelm inevitably follow. Known but unknowable, its confusion references everything and nothing, surpassing subjectivity.

Because this articulation of intense sublime experience is fundamentally without substance, and is activated by a nullifying vision of love that is equally without form, it moves towards a standard of sublimity described by Slavoj Žižek:

The Sublime is no longer an (empirical) object indicating through its very inadequacy the dimension of a transcendent Thing-in-itself (Idea) but an object which occupies the place, replaces, fills out the empty place of the Thing as the void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity – the Sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing.<sup>154</sup>

This evolution of aesthetic philosophy comes to view transcendence of cognitive and representational function not as a discursive but discernible window into an iteration of the divine, but rather evidence of its absence. Siddal, in the agony of her subjects, suggests that nothing exists behind the curtain – that love, once lost, may never be rediscovered – that subordinated positions within the social order cannot imagine enfranchisement, because representation itself signifies nothing. There is only the moment, the craved sensation, of love – Hegel’s concept that there is “*nothing* beyond phenomenality”<sup>155</sup> – especially for a subordinated subjectivity unable to create meaning or enact change.

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<sup>154</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. (London: Verso, 1989), p.234.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p.232.

A verse fragment of Sidal's perhaps best illustrates this complex, intersecting series of connected thoughts:

Land where they lived  
Life is done shall  
I see the starry  
sun floods through  
me the space of  
heaven will all  
these answers truly  
no longer lie [illegible word]<sup>156</sup>

Facing death, the speaker's disoriented voice remembers only the 'land where they lived' with any surety. Both the present and the imminent future are empty, substance seeming to dissolve as light – perhaps celestial light – travels 'through' them. All that fills the void is the moment of remembrance and the perception of light; if any answers do lie in heaven, it is in its 'space', a landscape that appears to be vacant.

Scant, difficult, and disordered, this isn't a transcendent apotheosis, or a culmination of meaning reaching a dizzying peak – but rather a fading evaporation of subjectivity into a state of nothingness. Whether heaven will answer the speaker's questions in this unfinished fragment is unclear, leaving the reader with a sense of unanswered hope, but a hope that struggles with its own expression.

Anne Carson points out that it was Sappho who first described Eros as "bittersweet",<sup>157</sup> the ancient poet recognising a particular aspect of love demarcated by surrender, lack of agency, and pain. Carson notes in tandem that "in any act of thinking the mind must reach across th[e] space between known and unknown, linking one to the

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<sup>156</sup> Sidal, 'Fragments', p.102.

<sup>157</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), p.3. In the original Greek a direct translation would be "sweetbitter".

other but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space. To reach across it is tricky; a kind of stereoscopy seems to be required.”<sup>158</sup> Siddal’s subjects are equally bound up in this complex relationship between pain and pleasure, self and other, heaven and earth, wherein their present is always an experience of the space between, reaching for answers but never gaining them. Unification, clarity, and reassurance are impossibilities, hopelessness a consequence of the revelation that there is nothing beyond space.

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

Signifying Nothing



Fig. 99 Elizabeth Siddal, *The Macbeths*. Pen and brush, Indian ink with scratching out. 21.4 x 13.5cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (c.1850s).

Oh Love thou  
carry my shame  
how wondrous [two illegible words]  
That thought[?] look  
forth and [illegible word] see rain  
where thy dark  
cares has been

Life thou art fading  
from the will the  
way before me I  
shall I wake again  
But once as when  
my dreary eyes see  
the light

- Elizabeth Siddal, verse fragment.<sup>159</sup>

Gripped by psychic turmoil in the wake of Duncan's murder, the blurred features of her face raised up to the heavens, Siddal's Lady Macbeth stands beside her husband, who gropes toward something unseen. Jan Marsh notes that the image is "the only Shakespearean subject EES<sup>160</sup> is known to have attempted, and is remarkable for the violent connotations of the scene depicted"<sup>161</sup> – it is also extraordinary, like *The Gay Goshawk*, for illustrating an unusually specific episode in the source narrative.

Clutching the arm which holds the bloodied dagger, it is the moment Lady Macbeth asserts agency over the faltering Macbeth:

Infirm of purpose!  
Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead  
Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood  
That fears a painted devil.<sup>162</sup>

Electing to detach from reality, Lady Macbeth gains mastery over the ghastly situation by consciously re-framing perception to receive the gruesome scene as if 'pictures'. The couple's differing approaches are communicated through Siddal's manipulation of ink:

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<sup>159</sup> Siddal, 'Fragments', p.99.

<sup>160</sup> Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal.

<sup>161</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Artist*, p.73.

<sup>162</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*. Act 2, Scene 2, ll.49-52. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.24.

Macbeth's eyes are blackened out as he bears witness to the brutality he has wrought, nothing sheltering him from abject revelation of the real, which erupts into his consciousness.<sup>163</sup> Lady Macbeth, her head thrown back, reinscribes and deepens the divide between self and other, subject and object.

Perhaps this vision of self-protection, enacted through a deliberate disaffiliation from the world, has consequences for Siddal's other female subjects – those also caught in tense poses, looking toward the sky without seeing. Overwhelmed by sensation and attempting to recover authority, the subject cuts off consciousness within the empirical space, reconstructing their experiences within the mind in an attempt to make the unbearable bearable.

For *The Macbeths*, the process is profoundly isolating, even as the couple are imagined together. It is the moment their relationship ruptures, where innocence is lost, and recovery or redemption becomes an impossibility. With outreached and overlapping hands there's an erotic tension to the scene, misdirected as they fail to form a connection. Chasms and gaps erupt between mind and body, the happiness of the past and the agony of the present, pools of nothingness left in the wake of alienation as the self radically eclipses itself in a moment of terrible knowledge.

Like the subjects of *The Woeful Victory* and *The Gay Goshawk*, and the speaker of 'Ope not', Lady Macbeth's severing of sensory engagement – referencing a profound psychic experience enacted as the subject retreats into the self – is a considered act of defiance. Obscure, intense, physical and conceptual, it is an experience that defies

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<sup>163</sup> "Corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live... there, I am at the border of my condition as a living being." See Kristeva, p.3.

categorisation and description, instead becoming referenced through strained, detached bodies and stupefied, wavering poetics.

In another unfinished verse fragment, Siddal expresses the process of life fading away in the aftermath of a romantic relationship, which now must carry “shame”.<sup>164</sup> Seeing rain where “dark cares”<sup>165</sup> have been, the speaker tries and fails to discover a method of self-expression, leaving a stammering series of hopeless impressions. The light of love has been enjoyed and lost, leaving confusion and humiliation; death is sought in the present, but seems just out of reach; sensory function is obfuscated and confused; heaven is a possibility that offers no relief.

As consciousness and representation fail, life fades into shadow, and it is in these obscured chasms and crevices that Siddal’s sublime can be discovered. It is an experience of intensity demarcated by obscurity, an overwhelming sensation articulated through a void – but within that void, Siddal astutely exemplifies an irreducible fact of the lived experience of otherness, gesturally iterating a marginal perspective that lies just outside of a system of signs.

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<sup>164</sup> Siddal, ‘Fragments’, p.99.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”:<sup>166</sup>  
Spartali, Lee, and the failure of female aestheticism

The final section of chapter four explores Marie Spartali’s evolution of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s approach to the Romantic sublime. Comparing her single portraits of female subjects to Vernon Lee’s novel *Miss Brown*, it considers the consequences of prescribed aesthetic and rhetorical modes on the understanding and expression of self.

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<sup>166</sup> Audre Lorde, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*. (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2018), p.16.



Fig. 100 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Luisa Strozzi*. Watercolour, gouache, and gum Arabic. 78.8 x 61.1cm. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal (1884).

Why had Hamlin singled her out? and what had he guessed in her, what had he hoped from her? That line of Rossetti's, which Hamlin admired more than any other, which he so often quoted –

“Beauty like hers is genius,” – returned to her with a chill; and she felt that Hamlin wanted, expected, from her that sort of passion which he had spoken of to revive him and his art.

- Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown* (1884).<sup>167</sup>

To Art

I loved thee ere I loved a woman, Love

– Dante Gabriel Rossetti, verse fragment.<sup>168</sup>

Conjured in the contrasting hues of imperial purple, fiery amber, and vibrant green, *Luisa Strozzi* is unmistakably a Marie Spartali portrait. The Renaissance Florentine noblewoman – wearing the same dress as *Madonna Pietra* – cups a decorative basket of honeysuckle and rose in one hand and holds back a curtain with the other, revealing a labyrinth of overlapping apertures in the background. Her coy glance away, coupled with the performance of exposure and floral message-making, makes clear that the subject knows herself observed. Oscillating between willingness and reticence, liberation and reserve, her partial unease is precipitated by the viewer, who occupies the space of her admirer.

Luisa was a real person who, according to sixteenth-century biographers Benedetto Varchi<sup>169</sup> and Bernardo Segni,<sup>170</sup> was persecuted for her striking beauty. According to her legend Giuliano Salviati, a notorious philanderer who may have been acting on behalf of Duke Alessandro de' Medici, made the married woman an insulting

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<sup>167</sup> Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown*. (Doylestown: Wildside Press, 2004), pp.277-8.

<sup>168</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, verse fragment, reproduced in Catherine Maxwell, “‘It once should save as well as kill’: DG Rossetti and the Feminine” in *Outsiders Looking In: The Rossettis then and now*, Ed. David Clifford and Laurence Roussillon. (London: Anthem Press, 2004), pp. 223-237, p.227.

<sup>169</sup> Benedetto Varchi, *Storia Fiorentina* (16 Vols.), first published in 1721.

<sup>170</sup> Bernardo Segni, *Istorie fiorentine dall'anno MDXXVII-MDLV*, first published in 1723.

proposal; he was shortly afterwards attacked and wounded. While the identity of Salviati's assailants is uncertain, the assault was assumed to be ordered by the powerful Strozzi family as retribution for his insolence to one of their own. Within nine months, however, Luisa would die under mysterious circumstances, an alleged victim of poisoning.<sup>171</sup>

The story had enjoyed something of a resurgence in nineteenth century Italy, particularly in her native Florence,<sup>172</sup> and it proved popular in Anglo-American markets, too. English language reviews of Giovanni Rosini's *Luisa Strozzi* (1832) and G.B. Niccolini's *Filippo Strozzi* (1847) note that the "subject is among the noblest that history ever suggested... a tragedy of the deepest dye"<sup>173</sup> with "ample scope for poetic treatment".<sup>174</sup> These remarks, reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's praise for the poetical dead female subject, establish the enduring appeal of Luisa's story: a woman sacrificed for her irresistible allure.

It was while living in Florence between 1883 and 1898<sup>175</sup> that Spartali met Violet Paget, better known in literary circles by the *nom de plume* Vernon Lee. Lee's first novel *Miss Brown* was published in 1884, the same year *Luisa Strozzi* was completed, and endures as an imperfect critique of the ideals of British Aestheticism.

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<sup>171</sup> T. Adolphus Trollope, *Filippo Strozzi: A History of the Last Days of the Old Italian Liberty*. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1860), pp. 236-244.

<sup>172</sup> See Giovanni Rosini, *Luisa Strozzi*. (Pisa: Capurro, 1832); G.B. Niccolini, *Filippo Strozzi, Tragedia* (Firenze: Felice le Monnier, 1847); Pietro Martini and Gualtiero Sanelli, *Luisa Strozzi: Dramma Tragico in tre atti*. (Milano: Giovanni Ricordi, 1847); and Alessandro Focosi's 1862 painting in which a furious Luisa sternly rejects a frenzied Duke, currently held at the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

<sup>173</sup> "Romance in Italy" in *The Foreign and Colonial Quarterly Review*. Vol.3, Jan – Apr 1844. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1844), pp.41-79, p.56.

<sup>174</sup> "Foreign Literature" in *The Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*. Vol. 48, Oct 1847 – Jan 1848. (London: George Luxford, 1848), pp.161-226, p.162.

<sup>175</sup> Elliott, p.98.

The story follows the fortunes of Scottish-Italian servant Anne Brown, plucked from obscurity in rural Italy and thrust into the elite world of *avant-garde* Victorian art by the aristocratic painter-poet Walter Hamlin, who is captivated by Anne's unusual looks. Practical, unromantic, and of considerable moral fibre, Anne resists and sometimes resents the life Hamlin shapes for her, although she ultimately agrees to marry him.

Lee was not subtle in her appropriation of real-life artists for *Miss Brown's* cast – a source of mortification for Spartali, who had introduced Lee to many of the figures she satirised. Character names are adapted and re-ordered in a deliberately misleading manner, but the inspirations behind the principal cast are evident. “Anne Brown” is nominally taken from Ford Madox Brown and “Walter Hamlin” from Walter Pater,<sup>176</sup> for example, but the characters' respective appearances, behaviours, and ideals mimic Jane Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Despite Spartali's dismay at *Miss Brown's* didactic tactics – and Lee's polemic candour more broadly, which was at odds with Spartali's nuanced revisionism – Anne and Luisa share notable characteristics. Both of their lives are profoundly shaped by unsolicited male influence, and Anne is as awkwardly bewildered by Hamlin's infatuation as Luisa is cautious of the viewer's gaze. Recalling Rossetti's sonnet ‘Genius in Beauty’, Anne's inadvertent ‘chill’ of horror is spurred by the revelation of Hamlin's indifference; the ‘genius’ he discovers within her is a reverberation of his own creative and intellectual capacities. The salvation she offers Hamlin, Anne begins to understand,

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<sup>176</sup> Leonee Ormond, “Vernon Lee as a Critic of Aestheticism in *Miss Brown*” in *Colby Quarterly*. Vol.9, Issue 3, September 1970, pp.131-154, p.146. <<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol9/iss3/3/>> [Accessed 30 July 2024].

is based not on who she is, but rather – in Christina Rossetti's words – “as she fills his dream”.<sup>177</sup>

Contradictions abound, however, as Anne and Luisa attempt to reconcile themselves with an ideological and representational mode that doesn't align with their sense of self. Luisa invites the gaze, for all her unease, and Anne, while mortified by Hamlin's callousness, continues to perform (and will eventually accept) the role he creates for her. Simultaneously embracing and rejecting a predominant mode, they present resistance to their symbolic function even as they conform, displaying a kind of knowing acceptance.

Mirroring the challenges faced by their subjects, Lee and Spartali re-generate visions of the Pre-Raphaelite female subject while negotiating the representational limits levied upon them as writer and painter. Both disrupt from within, just as Lee's *Miss Brown* “enacts Lee's practice of writing simultaneously *within* and *against* aestheticism”,<sup>178</sup> and while generated by a proliferation of influences amassed throughout time, it is evident that Rossetti's works are an essential inspiration for both.

Spartali's conflicted, homage-and-pastiche relationship with Rossetti's artistic *oeuvre* and deep affection for their maker has been established throughout the dissertation. Lee never had the opportunity to meet him (he had died two years prior to *Miss Brown*'s publication), but formed Hamlin from “her own impressions of Rossetti's style and those aspects of his life and character which were common knowledge”.<sup>179</sup> Of particular interest to both Spartali and Lee is the attitude expressed in Rossetti's verse

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<sup>177</sup> C.G. Rossetti, 'In An Artist's Studio', l.14.

<sup>178</sup> Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.69.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149.

fragment 'To Art': the decadent faculty of art-creation, the idealisation and celebration of fecundity, love, sex, and the female form that is the crux of his aesthetic and poetic interest – a concept that both struggle to ameliorate with the realities of 'woman'.

So Spartali and Lee utilise the semiotic tools of an established representational mode to query its ideological and aesthetic validity. Spartali's graceful beauties, asserting a vision of femininity that celebrates an ideal perpetuated by Rossetti, are inscribed with nuanced hints that they know that they are locked in a system of representation that doesn't permit their subjectivities. Frozen in a state between copy and original, they obliquely signal a disconnect with their own symbolic formation, becoming partially alienated from the vision of themselves.

Where Spartali's subjects silently tug at their construction from synthetic parts, Lee's Anne Brown revolts against Hamlin's attempt to mould her to his pattern, her identity fragmenting as he tries to sculpt her. Discovered in the schisms that open up between the real and symbolic is Barbara Freeman's "domain of experience that resists categorization... in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness",<sup>180</sup> a disruptive, dislocating kind of queer sublime wherein contradiction iterates its knowledge. That which is unrepresentable is female experience itself, which cannot accede to phallogocentric practices, the othered subject disenfranchised from transcendence as they seek meaning and expression in the everyday.

In their attempt to recover the marginalised subjectivity of the 'stunner' model, however, Spartali and Lee simultaneously undermine and propagate a predominant artistic mode even as they test its fitness to express female experience. Luisa is

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<sup>180</sup> Freeman, p.2.

consumed by the gaze of Alessandro de' Medici and Salviati; by Dante Rossetti and his eroticising treatment of the female portrait; and by the contemporary viewer. Echoing across centuries, her objectification is perpetuated even as it is exposed. Anne Brown, voiceless and unable to control her own symbolic value, exists as a Pre-Raphaelite beauty in Lee's polemic text as a critique of the treatment of women within the art world and Victorian society more broadly.

But the attempt is fraught with contradiction, and bound to fail. Spartali and Lee may wield the master's tools, but they can only be manipulated to expose the limiting schematics of the master's house – a blueprint that omits and obscures the experiences of the mistress.

Both Copy and Original



Fig. 101 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Beatrice*. Pencil, watercolour and bodycolour. 53.3 x 36.8cm. Private Collection (1898).

Spartali's 1898 portrait of *Beatrice*, created three years after the artist's depiction of the same subject on a balcony (fig.19), sees Dante's muse backed by a blue *loggia* and bestowed with an array of floral devices. There are a number of compositional similarities to *Luisa Strozzi*: the architecture of archways leading to a shadowy domiciliary interior; the elongated bowl of roses; and an apparent consciousness of being watched. Her crown of cornflowers is indicative of Cyanus, a mythological figure closely associated with Florence, equating Beatrice with springtime, fertility, and establishing fidelity to her Italianate environment.

As with so many of Spartali's portraits, conventions established by Rossetti are naturalised to generate a representation that encompasses a veiled, but highly individual, subjectivity. Erotic potential is diluted in favour of depicting a beautiful youth; Rossetti's 1865 *The Blue Bower*, by contrast, has a similar palette but orientalist details glamorise the painting, mythologising (rather than legitimising) her relationship to space and her iconographic apparatus.

The effect of Spartali's reformative approach is complex. As Nunn points out, within Aestheticist works "narrative is... merely pretext, and the viewer's satisfaction is attained not through plot or parable but through effects of colour and implied texture and perfume, with fabric, jewels, flowers and so on prompting the imagination",<sup>181</sup> and the sensory delights of Spartali's portraits are designed to render the same indulgent effects in the viewer. But Beatrice and Luisa's portraits are profoundly influenced by a male, gynophilic lens, both in a biographical and a representational sense: both are known

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<sup>181</sup> Nunn, "Alienation", pp.9-10.

historical figures who have become defined by the unsought attentions of men, regenerated as facsimiles of an objectifying aesthetic mode.

Similarly, Anne Brown is a replica of real person and an artistic ideal, both of which become effaced in the intersecting space of ‘desired muse’. Lee had seen Leyland’s collection of Rossetti’s works at Prince’s Gate in 1883, where she had mistaken Spartali as the model for *Veronica Veronese* – an inadvertent admission of the depersonalising effect of Rossetti’s method. Aggrieved by what she perceived to be a reductive approach, Lee reported that the images were “not merely ill painted & worse modelled, but coarse & repulsive, & to make mere painted diseased harlots of women like Mrs. Stillman & Mrs. Morris”.<sup>182</sup>

Her outrage fuelled the creation of *Miss Brown*, a work that Spartali criticised for having “several characters too easily recognisable, they will naturally object to be held up to ridicule and their friends are indignant”.<sup>183</sup> Spartali particularly despaired that Jane Morris “will feel much pain in being in evidence for every one must recognise her and she has suffered so much from being stared at”.<sup>184</sup> It is reported that Morris, who recognised herself in Lee’s novel, was so incensed she never spoke to Lee again.<sup>185</sup> Despite their nascent friendship, Lee did not spare the Spartalis from inclusion, either – the wealthy Greek matriarch Mrs. Argiropoulo holds decadent creative salons, attended by her two daughters.

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<sup>182</sup> Vernon Lee, letter to Matilda Paget 11 July 1883 in *Vernon Lee: Letters Home*. No. 147. Colby College. <[https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/letters\\_home/147](https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/letters_home/147)> [Accessed 3 August 2024].

<sup>183</sup> Marie Spartali Stillman, letter to Violet Paget 27 December 1884. The Vernon Lee Papers, MS-2. Colby College *Special Collections*. Waterville, Maine.

<sup>184</sup> Marie Spartali Stillman, letter to Violet Paget 12 December 1884. The Vernon Lee Papers, MS-2. Colby College *Special Collections*. Waterville, Maine.

<sup>185</sup> Richard Ormond, “John Singer Sargent and Vernon Lee” in *Colby Quarterly*. Vol.9, Issue 3, September 1970, pp.154-178, p.177. <<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol9/iss3/4>> [Accessed 31 July 2024].

The cause of Spartali and Morris' consternation is evident. Hamlin paints Anne as 'Venus Victrix', a work recognisably one of Rossetti's repetitious late portraits of Morris:

a lady in a dress of sad-coloured green and gold brocade, seated in a melancholy landscape... The expression of the goddess of Love, since such she was, was one of intense melancholy. It was one of those pictures which go to the head with a perfectly unintelligible mystery.<sup>186</sup>

Lee rejects the notion that the model has an active influence in portrait-making, heightening focus on Hamlin's campaign to mould Anne to his blueprint. He has her educated in romantic literature and philosophy; designs clothing for her; and places her within a crumbling house surrounded by orientalist and medievalist bric-a-brac. Lee, positing that Hamlin "was interested in Anne Brown, but not in the whole of Anne Brown",<sup>187</sup> presents this attempt to forge an aesthetic ideal from flesh-and-blood as harmful, perhaps even inhumane.

So Lee's Anne and Spartali's Beatrice are, as Kathy Alexis Psomiades points out, "both copy and original",<sup>188</sup> created out of a rigid approach to art-making while pushing against, and questioning, its symbolic agenda. The extent of their defiance varies considerably – Lee's didactic approach is ruthless in its disapproval, while Spartali revels in decadence even as she queries it. Both, however, indicate the impossibility of authentically accessing subjectivity through Aestheticism: "behind the exotic beauty of Anne Brown we find a morally outspoken woman who has no patience with the erotic visions of her artistic friends. Anne's aesthetic views may appear shrill and outlandish, but her crass reactions also elucidate the impossibility to a female position within the

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<sup>186</sup> Lee, *Miss Brown*, p.67.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>188</sup> Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.166.

aesthetic male agenda.”<sup>189</sup> Equally, Luisa, Beatrice, and their painted sisters are beautifully wrought but imprisoned by others’ perception, cloaked by the prioritisation of feminine charm even as they attempt to assert their independent capacities.

At once copy and original, organic and inorganic, Spartali and Lee’s female subjects become a kind of Aestheticist cyborg, generated by a combination of real and synthetic parts. Informed by flesh-and-blood individuals, but forged in a system of representation restricted by patriarchal, heteronormative ideals, they are both related to reality and detached from it, born of nature and somehow unnatural, ethereal. This is not Frankenstein’s monster, created as a mis-match of living tissues, but a co-opted and intersecting set of symbolic values that coagulate into something beautiful and unreal, decadent and illusory.

The cyborg has been used as a symbol of feminist thinking before. Donna J Haraway utilises the concept in her 1985 feminist treatise *A Cyborg Manifesto*, employing the hybridised entity to probe at constructions that denature femininity. Perhaps it’s a useful figure to adopt here, if technological advancements are replaced with nineteenth-century innovations in aesthetics.

Anne, Luise and Beatrice are all a kind of “cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”,<sup>190</sup> forging a kind of superhuman entity that both is and isn’t real. Alienated from nature, aware of their outward construction from synthetic parts, and ineffectively grappling with the apparatus of their own subjugation, these womanish creations are (to a greater or lesser extent) “committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. [They are] oppositional,

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<sup>189</sup> Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), p.113.

<sup>190</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p.5.

utopian, and completely without innocence”.<sup>191</sup> Their lack of innocence might manifest in complicity, too, as the artists perpetuate the very models they seek to critique.

Anne embodies this resistive conflict between cipher and reality. Her radicalism, as Stefano Evangelista points out, is a “deviant model of femininity”<sup>192</sup> instituted on morality, sexlessness, and individuality; all characteristics at odds with the prevailing ideologies of her artistic friends. Aestheticism, which had ostensibly promised her freedom from servitude, narrows her potential to a single, counterfeit ideal. While she battles to evade this prescriptive role in favour of “independence, intellectual fulfilment, and the ethical rewards of social involvement”<sup>193</sup> the inescapable artistic gaze continues to obfuscate her subjectivity, and she vacillates between presence and absence.

Aestheticist principles are so incompatible with Anne’s character that her looks evade Hamlin’s attempts to capture them. On his first attempt to draw Anne, Hamlin discovers that, despite assuming “Anne Brown’s head would be an easy one to sketch... it proved just the reverse. Those salient and outlandish features, which he had thought he could catch in half an hour, were turned into caricature by the slightest exaggeration, and exaggeration was almost inevitable”.<sup>194</sup> This struggle with portrait-making echoes both Spartali’s confession that she “find[s] portraits very nervous work”<sup>195</sup> and William Michael Rossetti’s explanation that Jane Morris’ face seemed created to “fire [his brother’s] imagination, and to quicken his powers... To realize its features was difficult; to transcend its suggestion, impossible.”<sup>196</sup> An admission of a schism between the

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<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>192</sup> Evangelista, *British Aestheticism*, p.69.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> Lee, *Miss Brown*, p.35.

<sup>195</sup> Marie Spartali Stillman, letter to Violet Paget 16 September 1882. The Vernon Lee Papers, MS-2. *Colby College Special Collections*. Waterville, Maine.

<sup>196</sup> W.M. Rossetti, *A Memoir*, p.244.

artist's conception of the model and her reality exists in these statements; two halves that can be affiliated but never authentically unified.

Lee also makes clear that Hamlin's intentions extend beyond the visual, particularly when he is confronted by Anne's cousin Richard, a sensible and practical rival. Hamlin is infuriated that he "could never make this man understand his dreams, his plans of turning Anne Brown into a realised ideal, of wooing and winning the creature of his own making".<sup>197</sup> That courtship must adhere to Hamlin's specific notion of love-making is indicative of his desire to control Anne's behaviour as well as her image; in forging and perfecting Anne as a literary-aesthetic ideal, he wholly eclipses her nature.

For Haraway, the generation of the cyborg is a political act, a response to subjugation including from the implements of self-expression; it "is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other".<sup>198</sup> So Lee and Spartali seize Rossetti's tools to generate and perpetuate an image of femininity that (to greater and lesser extents) offer resistance. Anne, like Beatrice and Luisa, works from within a predominant representational mode to work against it, and both Lee and Anne resist the effects of its ideals while aping its form. It is an imperfect campaign, however, in which the female subject is compelled to accept her symbolic value within a phallogocentric, heteronormative discourse to have sufficient presence to rebel. There is no other method for their perverse, resistive, querying subjectivities to exist within representational space.

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<sup>197</sup> Lee, *Miss Brown*, p.87.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

Venus Defecta

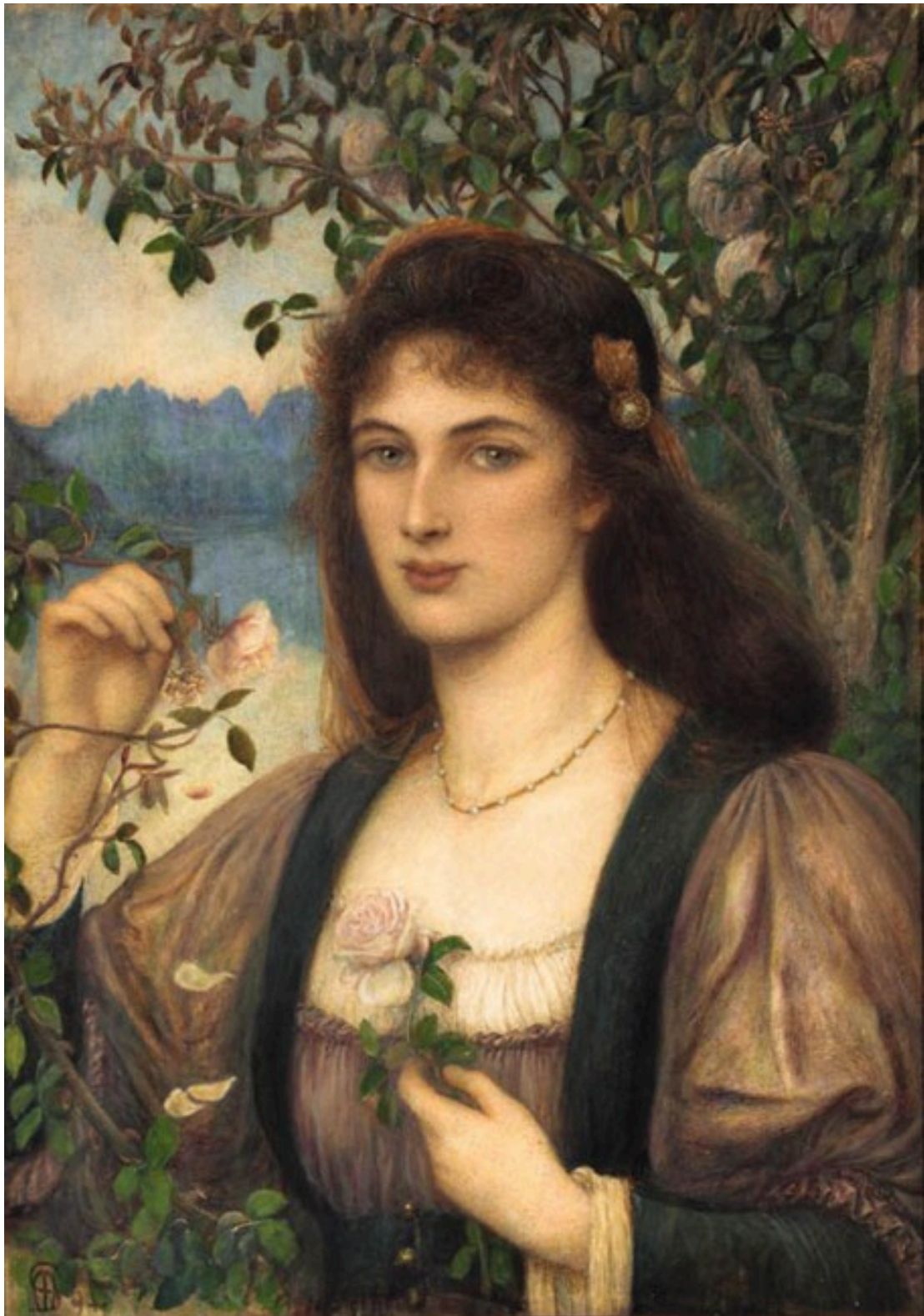


Fig. 102 Marie Spartali Stillman, *A Rose from Armida's Garden*. Pencil, watercolour and bodycolour with gum Arabic. 64.8 x 43.2cm. Private Collection (1894).<sup>199</sup>

<sup>199</sup> Sold at *Christie's* in 2000. See "Catalogue Note for *A rose from Armida's Garden*." *Christie's* <<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-1939054>> [Accessed 1 August 2024].

While Haraway's post-gender cyborg "cannot conform to the masculine/feminine divide... cannot confirm masculine domination of woman/nature"<sup>200</sup> – a consequence of their lack of origin story – Spartali and Lee's subjects are profoundly influenced by their origins in Aestheticism, and the practice's relationship to social realities. They are inescapably defined by it, unable to break free from its confines.

They can, however, indicate a third, indeterminate state of femininity, and so "exit the status of "woman" without becoming "man"". <sup>201</sup> Spartali's *A Rose from Armida's Garden* adopts the narrative of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, a Renaissance Italian epic poem in which the enchantress Armida seduces and imprisons men in her magic garden. Embodying unruly, sensual femininity, Tasso's Armida offers emasculating threat to the men that encounter her; she pacifies the heroic Rinaldo, rendering his virile potency dormant by inducing him into a magic sleep. When she beholds his sleeping face, however, she is seized with love, which prevents her from killing him.

Armida's garden is a space equated to otherworldly indulgence and hedonism, a realm of gorgeous fecundity wherein temptation reigns and all succumb to its paradisaical delights – an ideal choice of subject for a practitioner of Aestheticism. Yet Spartali's audacious, disciplined female subject is not the sensual, louche figure one might expect. This Armida asserts cool control and restraint. Beautiful, feminine, and authoritative, Spartali's focus is on the individual whose power within her natural domain is indifferent to her sexual liberation and supernatural capacities.

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<sup>200</sup> Haraway, p.8.

<sup>201</sup> Zorn, p.120.

When Lee references Armida in *Miss Brown*, it is to recognise her as an irresistible contaminant, the embodiment of a corrosive artistic movement that Hamlin is unable to resist: “Anne used often to think that Hamlin was in the position of a sort of Rinaldo, the noblest of all heroes, degraded into mean sloth by the Armida of aestheticism... she would often sit dreaming of the way in which he might be gradually got from under their influence, and brought in contact with those stronger, more healthy, or more terrible realities, which Anne’s nature, by a kind of occult sympathy, felt in the world all round”.<sup>202</sup> Evidencing Anne’s selective education – Tasso is a suitable source of metaphor and indicative of the narrowness of Hamlin’s curriculum – Lee presents Armida as corrupting temptation, asserting Anne’s arcane powers (including her sense of ‘terrible realities’) as superior in every way.

Lee makes clear that Anne’s flummoxed distaste for Aestheticism does not stem from recalcitrance, but rather a fundamental incompatibility with her being. Throughout the novel Anne becomes increasingly aware that she is to be “a Galatea whose soul [Hamlin] had moulded, even as Pygmalion had moulded the limbs of the image which he had made to live and to love”,<sup>203</sup> a situation she responds to with increasing horror. When she sees her reflection in the dress Hamlin has commissioned for her, she responds with rupturing fear: “that colossal woman, with wrinkled drapery clinging to her in half-antique, half-medieval guise – that great solemn, theatrical creature, could that be herself?”.<sup>204</sup> In a scene that seems to stage the creation of Rossetti’s *Astarte Syriaca* or *Mnemosyne*, Anne becomes alienated and afraid, the falsity of Hamlin’s erroneous perception of her fragmenting her sense of self.

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<sup>202</sup> Lee, *Miss Brown*, p.211.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149.

In the opening paragraphs of chapter I, book VII, Lee elucidates on why:

Some few women seem to be born to have been men, or at least not to have been women... They are indeed sent into the world (if any of us is ever sent for any purpose) to be its Joans of Arc – to kindle from their pure passion a fire of enthusiasm as passionate, but purer than is given to men to kindle: they are not intended to be, except as a utilisation of what is fatally wasted, either wives or mothers. Masculine women, mere men in disguise, they are not... they are, and can only be, true women; but women without woman's instincts and wants, sexless – woman made not for man but for humankind. Anne Brown was one of these.<sup>205</sup>

A third, indeterminate state of 'true womanhood' that defies conventional understandings of femininity (such as that embodied by Sacha, who "manipulates with aplomb"<sup>206</sup> the "erotic possibilities of aestheticism"),<sup>207</sup> this type of identity is a confluence of contradictions. Profoundly feminine yet essentially masculine, passionate but without 'instincts and wants', Anne's sexless femininity is foundationally at odds with Aestheticism's agenda – her identity is so inexorably partitioned from the dynamics, ideals and demands of gynophilic eroticisation that it cannot participate in its processes.

Lee not only adopts this alternative conception of femininity as a method of criticism, but rather elucidates its incongruities to reference an ontological truth about the nature of being. Anne's sexlessness "put[s] into question the entire apparatus of heterosexual desire... What begins as a novel about how masculine desire constructs... a femininity burdensome to "real" women, turns into a decadent text in which desires and identifications proliferate unpredictably".<sup>208</sup> Forged within a paradigm that denies

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.293-4.

<sup>206</sup> *Psomiades*, p.168.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

authentic expression of (at least Anne's) sense of self, female subjectivity begins to distort. Anne begins to fragment, undergoing profound self-alienation, while Spartali's painted subjects innovate and renew, entering into a different relation with their representation. All, however, are compelled to comply, propagating contradictions that coalesce to offer viewers and readers an elusive, indeterminate sense of subjectivity.

Like Anne, Spartali's Armida is beautiful, imposing, assertive, and pure (although not innocent). She has dispensed with Tasso's notion that lasciviousness is an essential component of her being; Jan Marsh notes that she is "innocent-looking"<sup>209</sup> and "discreet",<sup>210</sup> guarding a "dreamworld all would wish to enter"<sup>211</sup> while simultaneously referencing the realities of deterioration – "petals that fall... [combined] with the hint in the title that the woman herself is a flower, add an allusion to the decay that is inevitable in nature but not in art".<sup>212</sup> Fertility and disintegration, delicacy and authority, innocence and knowledge are all discrepancies that abound within the portrait, fusing to produce a female subject who knowingly signals her Aestheticist status.

Yet Anne and Armida cannot throw off the burden of the social and cultural paradigms that construct them, for all that they refuse to neatly integrate into the realm of their aesthetic masters. Designed to signal beautiful dissonance, this is a volatile conception of 'female masculinity' that perceives itself "as a rhetorical construction that self-consciously borrowed figural tropes from an earlier generation of male aesthetes, often employing them to point to difference between proximate gender and sexual

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<sup>209</sup> Jan Marsh, "A Rose in Armida's Garden" in *Poetry in Beauty: The Pre-Raphaelite Art of Marie Spartali Stillman*. Ed. Margareta Frederick and Jan Marsh. (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2015), p.136.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

identities”.<sup>213</sup> In the process, they indicate the unreality of the eroticised female subject – authentic subjectivities, they propose, abound with contradiction.

Venus Victrix, Hamlin’s painterly vision of Anne, is a work specifically designed to “absolutely preclude all possibility of inquiring into [its] exact meaning.”<sup>214</sup> It is also “a picture which might have been one of Hamlin’s best, only that it was never finished”.<sup>215</sup> Its incomplete state is symptomatic of its flawed conception, including its deliberately elusive meaning – this erotic vision of Anne cannot be completed because she doesn’t exist, just as Perry looks at Anne’s face and finds “a mere blank”.<sup>216</sup> The goddess of love can never be victorious, because she is a fiction confined and subjugated by the powers that invented her, divorced from the authentic experience of self – a fixed construction that operates in a specific way within a representative space.

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<sup>213</sup> Frankie Dytor, “‘The Eyes of an Intellectual Vampire’: Michael Field, Vernon Lee and Female Masculinities in Late Victorian Aestheticism” in *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 26, Issue 4, October 2021, pp.582–595, p.584. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcab035>> [Accessed 30 December 2023].

<sup>214</sup> Lee, *Miss Brown*, p.67.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

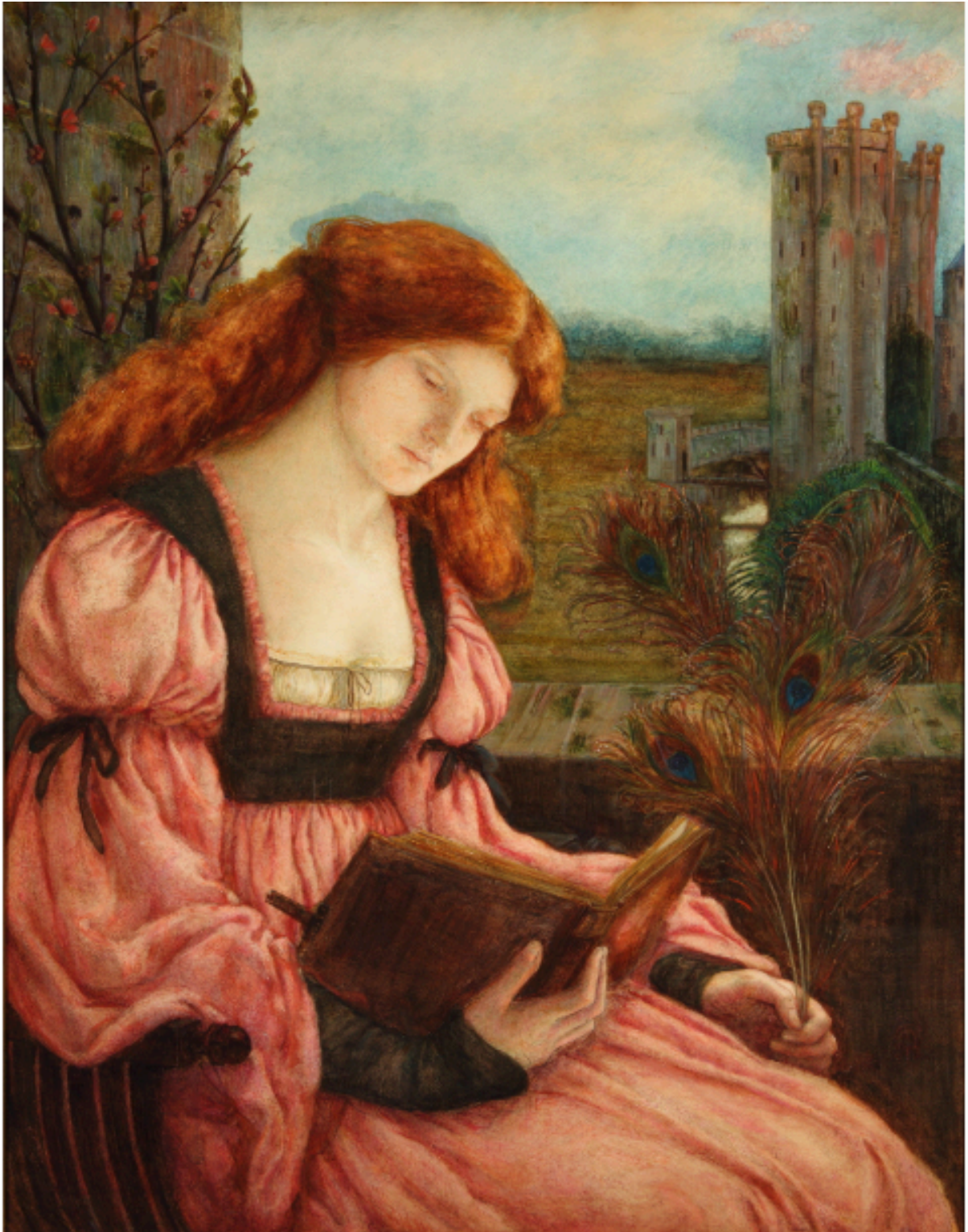


Fig. 103 Marie Spartali Stillman, *Saint Barbara or The Girl with the Peacock Feather*. Bodycolour, watercolour, and pencil on paper. 67.9 x 52.7cm. High Museum of Art, Atlanta (c.1875-80).

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<sup>217</sup> "Love killed by lust". Lee, *Miss Brown*, p.435.

The simulacrum implies great dimensions, depths, and distances which the observer cannot dominate.... [it] includes within itself the differential point of view, and the spectator is made part of the simulacrum, which is transformed and deformed according to [their] point of view. In short, folded within the simulacrum there is a process of going mad, a process of limitlessness... a gradual process of subversion... always simultaneously more and less, but never equal.

- Gilles Deleuze, *Plato and Simulacrum*.<sup>218</sup>

Reading upon a stone balcony, her gentle features subdued, Spartali's *Saint Barbara* is a symbolic riddle. According to the hagiographies, the subject was a third century Phoenician tortured and killed for her conversion to Christianity, but the artist envisages a pale, auburn-haired Pre-Raphaelite beauty clad in the same Renaissance dress as *Self-Portrait* or *On A Balcony* (1874). According to The Golden Legend, Barbara is imprisoned by her father Dioscorus, and Spartali imagines her at once situated within, and set in profile, against her tower penitentiary.<sup>219</sup> She clutches a series of peacock feathers upright, as if obliquely gesturing towards the viewer; a traditional attribute of the saint, peacock feathers (particularly in multiples) similarly reference Aestheticist decadence.

Raiding an amassed collection of symbolic apparatus as if a "three-dimensional accumulation of items... piled up just as robes, crowns, ritual vessels and masonry might be",<sup>220</sup> Spartali's jumbled series of referents vacillate across time and aesthetic practices, heightening the "gap between the pastness of the past and the known

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<sup>218</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum." Trans. Rosalind Krauss. *October*, vol. 27, 1983, pp. 45–56, p.50. *JSTOR*, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/778495>> [Accessed 3 August 2024.]

<sup>219</sup> The grey-brown acropolis here is remarkably British, its architecture reminiscent of Carisbrooke Castle near the Spartali family's holiday home on the Isle of Wight.

<sup>220</sup> Caroline Arscott, "Edward Burne-Jones" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*. Ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.223-235, p.225.

present”.<sup>221</sup> At the same time, she re-naturalises the subject, making her an active reader<sup>222</sup> and dislodging her from the florid palette and fecund symbolism of Pre-Raphaelite works: buds and small blossoms, not plump blooms, creep up the wall behind the sitter. Hues of brown, grey and green surround the subject’s pink-and-white luminescence, emphasising the sense that light and warmth emits from her, rather than from her surroundings.

Barbara’s depiction exists as both a copy, predicated on an accumulated mass of referents throughout time, and as an original vision of femininity that attempts to locate and assert a poised and intelligent – if censored – recuperated subjectivity. Nunn points out that Spartali is “naturally not inclined to stage the figure of Woman as embodying the exotic”,<sup>223</sup> instead generating portraits of “beautiful, enigmatic and often melancholic figures [who] evidence a certain decorum... protagonists’ narratives are not libidinous, their expressions are distant and their presence creates no frisson”.<sup>224</sup> This ostensible vacuity is the consequence of an attempt to exceed semiotic limitations – not to transcend into a state of heightened sensation, but to subvert from within a method of signification explicitly designed to mould the instrument of the female subject to facilitate a prevailing agenda.

Spartali’s female subjects, like Anne Brown, are critically disenfranchised from the intensity of feeling that they are designed to precipitate in their admirers. They are tools designed to inspire sublimity, not independent thinkers granted access to it within

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<sup>221</sup> Elizabeth Helsinger, “Pre-Raphaelite Poetry: Medieval Modernism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism*. Ed. Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp.554-567, p.566.

<sup>222</sup> Rarely do female subjects with books actually read in Pre-Raphaelite works.

<sup>223</sup> Nunn, “Alienation”, p.13.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

the masculine, heteronormative, gynophilic frameworks that generated them. Stuck within this paradigm, Spartali's veiled subjectivities discursively signal their status as sign, while Lee's Anne is consumed by "disgust and desire"<sup>225</sup> as she is compelled adhere to the role created for her. Realising that she must marry Hamlin and find a way to coexist with his counterfeit ideal, Anne is rendered near-lifeless; in the wake of the decision her maid discovers her "lying straight and motionless; her face... looking... like a dead woman".<sup>226</sup> Like Siddal's petrified subjects, she becomes wholly alienated from the self.

Anne's decision to embrace the cipher of the aesthete is a deliberately dissatisfying conclusion to her story, rendering the narrative "circular, rather than progressive".<sup>227</sup> Yet, as Psomiades points out, buried within Anne's fated finale there are traces of another kind of radicalism, obfuscated because of its subversion. When accepting Hamlin, Anne's thoughts turn to Sacha, the despair of accepting the man giving way to the hot, fluid discomfort of the sexually liberated woman:

Miss Brown had a very strong sense that marriage without love was a mere legalised form of prostitution. To become, therefore, the wife of Hamlin, was an intolerable degradation – nay, a pollution... To become the wife of Sacha's lover! Her limbs seemed to give way, to dissolve; a horrible warm clamminess overtook her; she could not breathe, or breathed only horror.<sup>228</sup>

The 'horrible warm clamminess' returns when she finally accepts Hamlin and he kisses her, an experience that Anne associates with Sacha's "throttling arms... her convulsive kiss on her face, the cloud of her drowsily scented hair stifling her".<sup>229</sup> For Anne, an

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<sup>225</sup> Psomiades, p.175.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p.432.

<sup>227</sup> Zorn, p.122.

<sup>228</sup> Lee, *Miss Brown*, p. 429.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p.437.

uncomfortable experience of sexual desire is figured as Sacha, exposing closeted homosexual instincts.

Spartali's female subjects, imperfect chimeras formed of mechanical parts of a hegemonic aesthetic ideology, discursively signal that they know the attempt to exceed the confines of their representations will fail – that their subjectivities are doomed to be mute and marginalised. But within that failure there exists some kernel of authenticity; its emptiness signals the semiotic realm each subject is confined to, revealing its parameters and so pointing to possibilities that exist outside of it. In Deleuze's words, "the simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbors a positive power which denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*."<sup>230</sup> Similarly Anne Brown, who embodies the tension between the lived experience of femininity and its manifestation as symbolic fiction, radically gestures to her individuality even as she is eclipsed by Hamlin's needs and demands.

Within Spartali and Lee's works what is unrepresentable is female experience itself, their sublime *ekstasis* the gestural push beyond the limits of their designated role and assigned symbolic values. This is a difficult and self-destructive expression of the sublime because it references that which sits outside of normative modes of meaning-formation, creating a scenario where representation offers resistance to itself. In the process, however, both point to a possibility that lies outside of 'the original and the copy'.

For Spartali, this third state is referenced through a gentle, oblique needling of Aestheticist methodologies, wherein an aesthetic mode is enjoyed even as it is

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<sup>230</sup> Deleuze, p.53.

contradicted. For Lee, it is a blunt and didactic attack, wherein Aestheticism's approach to femininity is condemned. In both cases, a schism opens up between the real and symbolic, the organic and the ideal, an effacing vacuum replacing the sublime transcendence of Rossetti's double works as subjects become alienated from third-party perception of themselves.

Within this paradigm, "love destroyed by lust"<sup>231</sup> doesn't signal emotional or spiritual damage rendered by a sexual relationship, but rather true, authentic subjectivity distorted by a fantastical, sexualising standard. Symbolically powerful but functionally impotent, the female subject is caught within a framework wherein they can only reference the hollowness of their simulation, and the project to rebel against predominant methodologies is inevitably a failure. Aestheticism makes spectres of all its female subjects, and neither Spartali nor Lee can wholly reconstitute them; all they can do is laterally assert an alternative kind of femininity, one that is too potent for aesthetic modes to convincingly represent.

Spartali and Lee's works have been perceived as threadbare – shadows of a much richer and more nuanced approach to art-making proliferated by their male colleagues. Yet to dismiss them as insubstantial facsimiles overlooks the point. In claiming the uneven space between copy and original, they make a clear case for a new kind of femininity, one that resists hegemonic ideologies even as they are compelled to adapt to them. Disruptive, uneasy, and contradictory, Spartali and Lee's subjects might perhaps agree with Donna J. Haraway's assertion that "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess".<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p.435.

<sup>232</sup> Haraway, p.68.

“That roar which lies on the other side of silence”:<sup>233</sup> the consequences of sublimity

The conclusion to chapter four summarises the analysis of the sublime undertaken on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal, and Marie Spartali and considers the centrality of the female face to the unrepresentable aesthetics of all three.

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<sup>233</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*. Third Edition. Ed. David Carroll and David Russell. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.182.



Fig. 104 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Raven, Angel Footfalls*. Pen and brown ink on paper. 22.2x17.5cm. Birmingham Museums, Birmingham (1847).

This hour thou bad'st all men in Helen's face  
The ravished ravishing prize of Death to know.

- Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Cassandra".<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Cassandra' in *Poems: First Edition*. (London: F.S. Ellis, 1870), pp.272-273, p.272, ll.7-8.

Beneath the watchful gaze of the portentous bird, the subject of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's drawing of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven' half-stands out of his chair, gripped by the otherworldly vision of Lenore. Caught in a suspenseful moment of reconnection, the lovers gaze intently at each other's faces, absorbed in memory and separated by death. Furniture and lamplight form a barrier that mirrors their celestial divide, and although their faces crane toward each other the longed-for kiss is an impossibility. Lenore is a wraith, her appearance within the angelic procession an echo, just as the Seraphim's "foot-falls tinkl[e] on the tufted floor",<sup>235</sup> their footsteps a reverberation that suggests presence while denoting absence.

Rossetti was an early adopter of 'The Raven', experimenting with visual responses within eighteen months of its first appearance in the *New York Evening Mirror* in January 1845. His fascination proved life-long; Holman Hunt<sup>236</sup> and Thomas Caine<sup>237</sup> report Rossetti reciting it to his friends in 1848 and in 1881 respectively, while scholarly interrogations of the poem's influence on 'The Blessed Damozel'<sup>238</sup> and 'The Portrait'<sup>239</sup> are numerous.

The fervent confrontation between Lenore and her lover in Rossetti's 1847 illustration isn't described in Poe's original poem, wherein a visitation is sensed ("the air grew denser, perfumed by an unseen censer / Swung by Seraphim")<sup>240</sup> but does not materialise. Lenore's manifestation is Rossetti's invention, the poet-painter giving form

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<sup>235</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Raven' in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Complete Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. (London: Book Club Associates, 1982), pp.737-739, p.739.

<sup>236</sup> William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. Vol.1. (London: Macmillan & co., 1905), p.146.

<sup>237</sup> Caine, p.284.

<sup>238</sup> D. M. R. Bentley, "'The Blessed Damozel': A Young Man's Fantasy." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 20, no. 3/4, 1982, pp. 31–43. *JSTOR*. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002983>> [Accessed 27 October 2024].

<sup>239</sup> "Rossetti and a Poe image" in *Notes and Queries*, vol. CCIII, Issue Jun, 1 June 1958, pp.257–258, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/nq/CCIII.jun.257a>> [Accessed 27 October 2024].

<sup>240</sup> Poe, 'The Raven', p.739.

to the madness of Poe's grief-stricken man, who craves "respite and nepenthe"<sup>241</sup> from memory and the "fantastic terrors"<sup>242</sup> precipitated by the "ominous bird of yore".<sup>243</sup> Tantalisingly present but just out of reach, her otherworldly potency seems correlated to her lover's psychic capacities, an idea reinforced by the reciprocity expressed in their mutual confrontation; without his gaze, she would not be seen. Rossetti's later sketches on the same subject provide further allusions to male imaginative capacity, as a portrait of Lenore hangs on the wall, and in the 1848 illustration, the man clutches a pen and book.

Within Poe's poem and Rossetti's illustration "the mind itself is both catalyst and reagent in the chemistry of aesthetic combination"<sup>244</sup> in a self-destructive process that embraces "obscurity, power, darkness, solitude and vastness".<sup>245</sup> The sublime, desire-and-death process is cyclical, Poe's repeated use of "nevermore"<sup>246</sup> signifying – like Rossetti's implied orgasm – a simultaneous state of lacking and of abundance, being both 'never' and 'more'. The apocalyptic profundity of this inescapable, tormenting drive is neatly summarised in Rossetti's poem 'Cassandra': prophetic, destructive, violating, and at once everything and nothing, "all men"<sup>247</sup> shall "know"<sup>248</sup> its mysteries.

The totemic signifier that instigates the apocalyptic revelation, the thing in which transcendent multitudes can be discerned, is "Helen's face";<sup>249</sup> just as the vision that

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<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p.737.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p.738.

<sup>244</sup> Frederick L. Burwick, "Edgar Allan Poe: The Sublime, the Picturesque, the Grotesque, and the Arabesque" in *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 1998, pp. 423–36, p.429. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41157397>> [Accessed 26 October 2024].

<sup>245</sup> Burwick., p.425.

<sup>246</sup> Poe, 'The Raven', p.737.

<sup>247</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Cassandra', l.7.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, l.8.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, l.7.

haunts the man of 'The Raven' is Lenore's countenance. It is through engagement with her face that man's "unlimited"<sup>250</sup> imagination – whose "materials extend throughout the Universe"<sup>251</sup> – can encounter the sublime. The process is profoundly gendered, lending credence to Bonnie Mann's suggestion that "nowhere has the misogyny of the Western tradition in aesthetics been more explicit than in philosophical discussions of sublime experience".<sup>252</sup>

For Elizabeth Siddal and Marie Spartali, 'Helen's face' is not an inspirational source of divine possibility that quickens erotic and creative powers, but a mask which re-inscribes a standard that they adopt and – in a limited way – adapt. It screens a realm of experience beneath its façade, wherein knowing subjects struggle to ameliorate their subjectivity with its inflexible, fantastical features. Spartali's feminine beauties self-consciously nod to a realm of intelligent, creative, authoritative consciousness obscured behind an idyllic exterior, while Siddal's stunned faces tensely hint at a disorienting realm of confusion behind, which cannot elucidate its incongruities.

Siddal's sublimity shares much with Poe's. Neither put forth, as Kant would suggest, "an individual subject who, with his sense temporarily overwhelmed, ultimately arrives at a sense of wholeness through the triumph of the supersensible",<sup>253</sup> but rather represent "the sublime in terms of a subject in a permanent state of crisis".<sup>254</sup> Overwhelmed by the dreamlike memory of blissful love and the profound isolation and heartbreak that follows, the world and the self become alien and strange within Siddal's

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<sup>250</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "Marginalia" in *Southern Literary Messenger*, vol. XV, no.5, May 1849, pp.292-296, p.292.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> Bonnie Mann, *Women's Liberation and the sublime: feminism, postmodernism, environment*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.29.

<sup>253</sup> Dennis Pahl, "Poe's Sublimity: The Role of Burkean Aesthetics" in *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2006, pp. 30–49, p.31. *JSTOR*, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41506003>> [Accessed 26 October 2024].

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

poetry and drawing. Voices may be reduced to an animal howl, or turn to stony silence; bodies exhibit strained endurance, while consciousness is seized or sublimated into the landscape; death may be sought, but remains elusive; redemption is uncertain, and remains reliant on a lost lover. Only by refuting the present can Siddal's subjects manage to recover some sense of autonomy, refusal to participate proving a process that can require brutal sacrifice.

Yet even as the subject is engulfed in horror at the revelation of the hollowness of a challenging world, there is a suggestion that redemption may be feasible through the very act of distortion; that the roar within silence is itself an avenue to salvation. This suggests an idea akin to that expressed by Theodor Adorno:

The only philosophy that can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things... from the standpoint of redemption... Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.<sup>255</sup>

Siddal's crisis of representation, her indeterminate sublime intensity, reveals a chasm between the world as it is and the world as it might be. In the process she calls into question the former's limiting and disenfranchising structures, obliquely referencing the liberating (if remote) potential of the latter.

While Spartali's evocative, beautiful portraits are profoundly different to Siddal's sparse and intense subjectivities, there is a sense of the same discursive reference to the limitations of predominant modes – probed but intractable, lacerated or circumnavigated but never materially changed. Adopting celebrated methodologies

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<sup>255</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*. Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. (London: Verso, 1974), p.247.

within defined rhetorical and aesthetic parameters, both Spartali's portraits and Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown* reference the emptiness of the symbolic fiction of the Aestheticist ideal while perpetuating the simulation. For Spartali particularly, there is joy and beauty to be discovered in its fantasies, and an elusive, profoundly feminine substance which is detectable but muted, as if not fully brought to bear within the world.

A third, indeterminate state of femininity is laterally referenced as a possibility, generated as the fictions inherent in art and life meet, characterising "the sublime experience of the dissolution of the boundary between art and life. This boundary isn't dissolved by a mutual reunification... but by the... annexation of one by the other. *It is life that is subsumed by art.* While art remains art... life loses its character as a dense reality entangled with necessity."<sup>256</sup> Lee's Anne and Spartali's female subjects accept – and in a way enjoy – their existence as artistic constructs designed for pleasure and charm. But they also resist the lack of relation to reality, and seem to wink at a realm beyond their aesthetic constraints.

The politics of Spartali's works are knotty, because of the joint act of admiring, querying and perpetuating an oppressive mode. Generally speaking, "what fin-de-siècle aestheticism substituted for revolutionary dreams was intensity of experience... conceived as a kind of visceral, sensuous rush",<sup>257</sup> a consequence of the decadent lifestyle and ideas of the (male) Aestheticist artists themselves. Yet in the shy, authoritative, active, intelligent female subjects of Spartali's portraits can be discovered a kind of resistance, expressed even in the act of veneration. Copy-and-original distortion highlights, but can't overturn, a patriarchal standard; rather, it moves towards

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<sup>256</sup> Mann, p.30.

<sup>257</sup> Amy Newman, "Aestheticism, Feminism, and the Dynamics of Reversal" in *Hypatia*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1990. *JSTOR*. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810153>> [Accessed 28 November 2024], pp.20-32, p.22.

a practice of self-reflexivity that relies “extensively on appropriation and expropriation, pastiche and montage, and irony and parody”.<sup>258</sup> Evocative but non-specific, there’s a profound, clever, good-natured affection for Aestheticist convention in Spartali’s portraits that can still query the standards it evokes: Helen’s face adopted and tested to tease out what is real, what is symbolic, and what it might be like to live up to her impossible standard.

Ultimately, what unites Siddal and Spartali’s undefined sublime is “the roar that lies within silence”<sup>259</sup> itself; the inarticulate cry that references a realm beyond, where consciousness might break free of confining strictures. It is a gestural appeal which is contradictory, vacuous, relational, and which iterates its own intensities through profound indeterminacy.

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<sup>258</sup> Bob Nowlan, “Queer Theory, Queer Cinema” in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Ed. JoAnne C. Juett and David Jones. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2010), pp.2-19, p.18.

<sup>259</sup> Freeman, p.2.

## Conclusions: Ut Pictura Poesis<sup>1</sup>

In drawing conclusions the dissertation returns to the Venn diagram conceptualisation of the affiliations between the three artists. Examining intersections in pairs and together, these closing remarks explore conceptual, historical, and aesthetic interrelations unique to this trio of creators.

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<sup>1</sup>“As is painting so is poetry”. Horace, *Ars Poetica*. Ed. H. Rushton Fairclough. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), p.480.

## Knowing the silence of her soul for God:<sup>2</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti & Elizabeth Siddal

Ostensibly, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sensuous double works and Elizabeth Siddal's slight illustrations and fragmentary poems have little in common – it is the pair's medievalist subjects, created in close collaboration during the 1850s, that contain the most obvious evidence of shared aesthetic concerns. Undertaken at a formative time in both Rossetti and Siddal's lives, these early interests would ultimately be surpassed by *Bocca Baciata* and Siddal's premature death. But underlying correlations emerge throughout their respective *oeuvres*, detectable even as aesthetic methods and priorities change.

For Rossetti, the male-and-female cipher of the erotic subject, an 'emanation' of the gynophilic mind that tantalisingly turns to confront her maker, is an errant shard of the narcissistic self that the psyche misrecognises as an other. Her gorgeous, sensual depiction may be inspired by the qualities of the 'stunner' model, but her likeness is transformed in the process of sexualisation, turning all into a vision of Helen: beautiful, threatening, irresistible, and destructive. Occupying a liminal threshold, she draws her lover, the viewer/reader, and Rossetti into her narcotic realm.

Kaleidoscopic symbolism erupts through the intersection of word and image, culminating in a loss of the desirer's subjectivity at the moment of sexual fulfilment, gesturally referencing a revelatory experience that is known but unknowable, reverberating through the body and the cosmos. Figured as the orgasm, this glimpse of

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<sup>2</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'The Portrait', p.131, ll.98-99. This paraphrased from Rossetti's original verse: "It enters in her soul at once / And knows the silence there for God!"

the infinite is fleeting, the state of lacking that precipitates yearning met with superabundance that resets the criteria for desire – a perpetually rejuvenating cycle.

Siddal's body of work, wisps relative to Rossetti's considerable *corpus*, exhibit a similar campaign to express potent interior experience; but this isn't transcendence through subversion, culminating in absorption into the self. Siddal's subjects crave love, stability, and autonomy, but cannot discover it in their lovers, their faculties of sense, or in representational modes. Neither heaven nor the convent offer a sure reprieve, and only in disassociating from the present, or dematerialising to achieve a discarnate state, can some semblance of peace be known, the self proving more reliable than God or man.

Disruptive, disordered, and deeply emotive, Siddal's approach subverts literary and artistic convention in curious and evocative ways. Linear, inflexible forms become inscribed with significant tension; absence denotes profound and damaging presence; knowing speakers describe states between asymmetrical cognate positions; human nature, straining against social doctrine, aberrates to become monstrous; and pain replaces love, creating sensual visions of masochistic desire. In the process, potential meanings proliferate and rebound in complex ways, emotional and representational crisis becoming the only certainty in the subject's world.

Whether conscious or not, both Rossetti and Siddal share ideologies redolent of William Blake's mystic philosophy. Both assert the primacy of imagination, making a case for a renewed relationship between the physical and metaphysical worlds; both explore a humanist form of divinity, wherein God is discovered within the self, and where visions of heaven are notable for their earthly materiality; and both seem to derive potent meaning from the reality-adjacent poetics and aesthetics of the dream. Siddal's worlds prove more dark and uncontrollable than Rossetti's indulgent realms, however, as

disenfranchised subjects struggle to derive meaning and certainty within a limited and limiting reality.

It is Siddal's profound emotivity – generated with remarkably slight compositional details – that seems to inspire some of the commonalities between Rossetti and Siddal's pictorial works. The dissertation has sought to deepen enquiry into potential aesthetic correlations, arising from their intermittent collaboration in the 1850s, eventual marriage in 1860, and from Rossetti's ongoing 'borrowings' after Siddal's death in 1862. While a few have been noted, there are many more to be discovered, and there remains much to be learned about this labyrinthine series of intersections. In drawing these comparisons the thesis does not claim attribution of any individual compositional device to any specific party; to assert any definitive conclusions as to an idea's origins would be to misunderstand the reciprocity of artistic collusion more broadly.

Ultimately, Rossetti and Siddal share a preoccupation with transgressive desire, and desire's intense emotional and psychological consequences. Within Rossetti's gorgeous double works meaning ricochets between the earthly and the divine, the natural and supernatural, text and image, art and life, forging a crescendo of meaning in which hermeneutic potentiality peaks into orgasmic overwhelm. Within Siddal's ruptured verse and strained drawings, a gasping consciousness becomes so severed from meaning-formation that they become seized by an inarticulate void, caught between competing forces that deprive or deny their desires and wants. Nullifying, horror-filled inertia follows, and any victory that might be found – either in heaven or earth – demands sacrifice.

## Hopeful and Brave:<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Siddal & Marie Spartali

Elizabeth Siddal and Marie Spartali are an unusual pairing, brought together in this thesis for the first time. Separated by time, class, opportunity, and – as even a cursory appraisal of their output confirms – radically different aesthetic approaches, there seems little to connect them. Yet comparison between their works has exposed startling and insightful parallels, particularly discovered in relation to their presentation of othered subjectivities. While these commonalities are doubtless influenced by shared interests – particularly the works and ideas of Dante Gabriel Rossetti – they also seem to be uniquely informed by their status as female artists and models within a wider artistic *milieu*.

Both artists subverted literary-aesthetic conventions to devise restructured methods of expression. For Siddal, medieval manuscript form and ballad tradition are adopted and disrupted to generate melancholic, ironic, emotionally-charged visions of otherness. Spartali enters into direct dialogue with Italian Renaissance literature and art – and Rossetti's idiosyncratic reworkings of the same – to generate delicately revolutionised portraits of femininity.

Reconstituting their subjects while embracing and distorting the traditions they queried, both artists come to embody another kind of dissident: that of the respectable female Victorian artist and model. Demonstrating remarkable creative curiosity and courage, both negotiated the staunch patriarchy of the Victorian era to create, exhibit

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<sup>1</sup> Siddal, 'True Love', l.13.

and sell artworks that were uniquely informed by their femininity, ideas bound up in Spartali's characteristically subtle motto "de ipsa fecit".

Both problematise traditional sites of romance and female activity, exerting subtle pressure on physical and conceptual boundaries. Domestic interiors are resisted, while sites aligned with ideas of liberation are tested, their delimiting perimeters lacerated or circumnavigated. Rather than offering a safe refuge in which to stage romantic dramas, the walled garden becomes an Edenic frontier that presents considerable risk, a knowing Eve threatened by Adam, God, and knowledge of love itself. Motivated by romantic and (particularly in Siddal's works) sexual desire, subjects cross thresholds in the hope of attaining fulfilment, but the process often demands irrevocable sacrifice. For Siddal, the forest becomes a space to experience emotional and psychological turmoil in the wake of a ruptured relationship, oppressive darkness becoming a refuge as pain substitutes former love.

Alienated from phallogocentric methods of representation and compelled to adapt new strategies to express othered subjectivities, both artists use the natural world to create a new idiolect with no fixed lexicon, wherein broad interpretative potential creates a semiotically powerful method to reflexively communicate the self. Spartali uses specific flower *genera* and curated, sometimes arcane symbolic apparatus; Siddal expresses intense emotion through reverberative echoes reflected in the landscape, (re)discovering pathos as it is paraphrased in moaning branches or running leaves. In both cases, the outcome is highly suggestive but critically ambiguous, leaving viewers (and, in Siddal's case, readers) to intuit a veiled psyche.

In the struggle with representation – as Spartali's painted subjects appear self-consciously aware of their status as sign, and as Siddal's poetic speakers fail to find truth

or stability in any signifier – the presented subjectivity enters into relation with their own otherness. Their experiences (and the challenges of parsing or negotiating those experiences) become defined by their inability to be coherently categorised or represented. It is this disruptive, difficult intensity which iterates a kind of feminine sublime, notable for its contradiction and opacity. Helen’s face is a man-made mask that screens a realm of experience that defies elucidation because of its fixity – whether the wearer embraces its supreme beauty or not.

The considerable differences in approach between Spartali and Siddal are evident. Siddal comprehends sublime intensity as a profound void, a crisis of representation precipitated by total dislocation from the self and a system of signs. Severed from desire and deprived of self-expression, the only method available to enact some form of autonomy is the removal of consciousness from the material world. For Spartali, sublime intensity relies on appropriation and expropriation, homage and pastiche, copy and original, gently exposing the simulative qualities of femininity itself, caught somewhere between resigned acceptance (and, in many ways, celebration) of the role women must play and awareness of the inauthenticity of the performance.

To extend Audre Lorde’s metaphor,<sup>2</sup> Spartali adopts the apparatus of Aestheticism to laterally reference a mistress who defies both the original conception of femininity and her representative copy. Regenerating and adjusting a celebrated aesthetic mode, she makes a case for a renewed female identity, one whose beauty, independence and intelligence is apathetic towards her sexual powers. Siddal’s subjectivities, meanwhile, struggle with the tools themselves, entering into a state of

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<sup>2</sup> “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”. Lorde, p.16.

representational crisis in the process. Alienated, disobedient subjects may refuse to engage with them altogether, rejecting the symbolic world to retreat into the caverns of the mind. Each of these approaches rely on irony, instinct, and the use of the very traditions the artists seek to tug at, generating a kind of dreamlike queer sublime: a roar within silence that disdains dominant ideologies by adopting and then disrupting them, self-reflexively entering into a state defined by its indeterminacy.

## Worshipping before her smile:<sup>3</sup> Marie Spartali & Dante Gabriel Rossetti

There's little doubt that Marie Spartali admired and imitated the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. They shared an appreciation for Dante and the Italian Renaissance, and Spartali enters into a dialogue with Rossetti's distinctive style in her own half-length portraits of female subjects. This dissertation has sought to reconceive of their relationship, leaving behind the model of master and student to move towards a discourse between artists – one notable for reciprocity, evolution of ideas, and shared aesthetic interests.

As Spartali takes compositional inspiration from Rossetti for her intertextual portraits she subtly but tellingly reworks his approach. Partially necessitated by propriety – Spartali was a respectable woman, working almost exclusively in watercolour and generating portraits that prioritised youth and grace – there also seems to be a discreet, shrewd resistance in her works, asserted as the female subject gains poised mastery over herself and her environs. In the process her subjects obliquely evidence a veiled subjectivity, detectable if not wholly comprehensible, creating a new kind of youthful, beautiful feminine power.

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<sup>3</sup> Siddal, 'I care not', l.2.



Fig. 105 Attributed to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Girl with White Roses* or *A Young Girl Holding a Spray of White Roses*. Pastel on paper. 61.3 x 51.8cm. Beaverbrook Art Gallery, New Brunswick (1862).

There is no clearer example of the complex relationship between Spartali and Rossetti's works than *Girl with White Roses*,<sup>4</sup> a work purchased from Sotheby's in 1958 'as by Dante Gabriel Rossetti' and now housed at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in

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<sup>4</sup> Also known as *A Young Girl Holding a Spray of White Roses*.

Fredericton, New Brunswick. Although Beaverbrook continue to attribute the work to Rossetti on their online catalogue as of 2025, Virginia Surtees questioned its assignation in 1977:

I suspect that it will not surprise you to learn that your drawing is not by Rossetti... at a guess I would say that the sitter is Marie Stillman and that it is a self-portrait.<sup>5</sup>

The 1862 date and “DGR” monogram, Surtees ventures, was probably added later.<sup>6</sup>

Lawrence Peters suggests the piece is an 1860 collaboration between Rossetti and an eighteen-year-old Spartali, generated as part of a clandestine teaching arrangement, wherein the student is taught in a manner akin to that depicted in *A Parable of Love*.<sup>7</sup> Such explanation accounts for the work’s technical ability: comparison to confirmed works by Spartali like *The Lady Prays-Desire* shows that *Girl with White Roses* is too competent to be an independent Spartali portrait, while lacking a finesse of Rossetti’s portraits of the same period. Less credible is the claim that these artists knew each other as early as 1860; as explored in the introduction, Rossetti probably didn’t fall in with ‘the Greeks’ until 1864.

If the work is a Spartali-Rossetti collaboration created around 1864 (and misdated, perhaps due to the later monogram as Surtees suggests), that might account for the slight similarities to Rossetti’s *The Beloved* (1865-6), discovered in the subject’s veil and single stem of flowers. Comparable to the commonalities discovered between *Found* and *Pippa Passes*, *Hamlet and Ophelia* and *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, these

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Virginia Surtees to Beaverbrook Art Gallery dated 3 May 1977. Reproduced in Peters, p.55.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

could indicate that the works were designed around the same time, although these correlations are not sufficiently strong to draw any definitive conclusions.

Certainly the image is strikingly Spartali-esque, both in likeness and in composition. None of Rossetti's other regular models of 1860 to 1862 with dark hair and pale eyes – Ada Vernon, Ellen Smith, or Agnes Manetti – quite fit. The sitter's act of effortfully holding up a single stem of blooms – rather than being surrounded by fecund vegetation or letting a flower or two droop louchely to one side – is a feature more evident within Spartali's *oeuvre* than Rossetti's.

Perhaps it is an art historical riddle never to be solved, but that it remains a mystery illustrates the point that there are greater intricacies in the relationship between Spartali's and Rossetti's works than are generally accepted. Spartali's deviations from Rossetti's antecedents evidence a contradictory attempt to embrace and break free from an established paradigm, and her copy-and-original portraits of women reference the unreality of the simulacrum while laterally hinting at the muffled signified buried beneath a strata of signs. Like Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown*, her female subjectivities problematise Aestheticist methodologies even as they embrace them, generating a rupturing, difficult experience in which the self recognises – and is compelled to accept, despite potentially rupturing consequences – its own otherness.

Spartali's approach is significantly less polemical than Lee's, however: she is discreet, clever, and masterfully diplomatic, enacting change cautiously from within by unearthing the power and poetry in feminine beauty. In doing so, she reclaims representational control, and it is the suggestive subtleties of Spartali's portraits that grant them a potent air of independent authority which continues to captivate viewers today.

## Death-In-Love:<sup>8</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Marie Spartali, and Elizabeth Siddal

The Italian art critic and academic Mario Praz visited Marie Spartali in her London home towards the end of her life, chronicling the visit in *La casa della vita* (1958). Stefano Evangelista, who has translated Praz's writings, reveals that the critic encountered Spartali in a "gloomy and empty London home"<sup>9</sup> which he compares to a "hypogeum... where the former pre-Raphaelite model appears to him like a faded queen Nefertiti – not so much a fragment of a disappeared world but a fallen vision of that world".<sup>10</sup> Evangelista's choice of words is telling, as "separation, exile and darkness, aspects of disunity of the divine Emanation, are images of Blake's fallen vision";<sup>11</sup> here, too, there is a yearning for something lost, and an irresolvable desire for the unattainable.

Praz's description offers a sense of degraded isolation, but that references a continuous connection to something arcane, profound, and near-cosmic in scale; Nefertiti – poised, elegant, familiar but distant – becomes a dislocated relic that embodies and bridges the gap to another time, her mysteries both alien and highly resonant. Praz almost becomes Shelley's "traveller from an ancient land",<sup>12</sup> happening upon a sculpted fragment of Ozymandias' likeness, and so experiencing the sublime heartache of tragedy, decay, and the certain knowledge of the loss of something once beautiful and great.

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<sup>8</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Death-in-Love' in *Poems*. (London: F.S. Ellis, 1870), p.211.

<sup>9</sup> Stefano Evangelista, "Aestheticism's Italian *mise-en-scène*: Vernon Lee and Mario Praz" in *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism*. Vol.3., 2019, p.13. <<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:6d2b1918-7c00-4e2e-a668-723843ebfe46/files/m4b8b0da7a6456cd0687a569e6e65cc3e>> [Accessed 3 August 2024].

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Billigheimer, p.97.

<sup>12</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ozymandias' in *Rosalind and Helen, A Modern Eclogue with Other Poems*. (London: C. and J. Oliver, 1819), p.92, l.1.

This sense of sublime longing mirrors a concept found at the heart of the works of these three artists: a profound expression of desire, which seeks to exceed physical and conceptual boundaries. It is a longing to reach beyond – beyond materiality, beyond the mind, and beyond representation itself. But it is a longing that can never be fulfilled, a relentlessly compelling quest with no end. Erotic gratification will only ever reset the criteria for sexual desire; sexual liberation and/or detachment from sexual potency will not free the female subject from objectification; and unhindered access to semiotic apparatus will still never create the conditions for the artist to wholly encapsulate subjectivity. The signifier can never authentically express signified, even where a diverse range of representational modes are deployed in tandem – it can only ever gesture to something else, signalling to the mind and pointing it towards that which exceeds its limits.

So desire for sexual and romantic fulfilment becomes entwined with the desire for representation, in which the artist enters into an uneasy discourse with the limitations of their tools. An intensity of feeling, understood to be contradictory, dynamic, inescapably compelling yet self-destructive, emerges as each generates their interdisciplinary and/or intertextual works, drawing on a plethora of influences galvanised throughout time to evidence an element of human experience that evades representation.

The plurality of unrepresentable subjective consciousness is influenced by different things for each artist – for Rossetti, it is a symptom of the interrelation between the dualisms of the earthly and the divine, the material and the imaginative. For the female artists, their subjugated, othered subjectivities are silenced by sexualising predominant ideologies that prevent access to self-expression. Disenfranchised within a symbolic and real sense, their muted, uneasy representations express a new kind of

queer sublimity, in which a defiant but indefinable, self-reflexive interrelation with otherness iterates sublime intensity. Forming a counterpoint to Kant's awe-and-terror enormity, this is an intimate realm of experience demarcated by contradiction, muted indeterminacy, and – particularly in Siddal's case – inert nullity.

The world may have moved on from Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism; today's gallery-goers and poetry-enthusiasts may feel, like Praz, that Rossetti and Spartali's gorgeous celebrations of blossoming life and Siddal's wispish, melancholic fragments of suffering psyches are relics of a bygone age, familiar but strange, couched in memory and faded through time. But a closer look at these works – and the relationship between them – exposes an aesthetic potency that is rebellious, steeped in passion and yearning, and that seeks to (re)connect body and mind with the cosmos, and consciousness with art itself. Each enters a dialogue with the process of representation and exposes a deep-seated urge to forge meaning, suggesting that it is the torment of desire which forms the crucible of creation.

There, the artists probe the void between male and female, self and other, signifier and signified, the artist-creator and God, generating works that discursively express a self-reflexive sublimity that is as profoundly, achingly human, and as obscure and remote as a handprint on the wall of Lascaux. It says: I am here. Despite my limitations, I am compelled to express myself, to make somehow tangible the impenetrable complexity of my own knotty existence. In my role as creator, I both describe and become God. But I cannot succeed. Signifier will never cohere with signified. Desire is ceaseless, its search endless, its fulfilment its reset: in becoming the creator-God, I become the silence that fills the void, and enact a kind of self-erasure. Union of desire, of love, of the

self with the real, only renders extinction. In Rossetti's words, "I and this Love are one, and I am Death".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> D.G. Rossetti, 'Death-in-Love', l.14.

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