REBUILDING *THE HOUSE OF LIFE*: DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI, EKPHRASIS, AND VICTORIAN SEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Recent critical scholarship and public exhibitions of the painting and poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti appear reluctant to credit this unique Victorian creator with a significant place in the key Victorian discourses on sex, religion, and death. It is the intention of this work to reconsider Rossetti's poetry and painting in an attempt to address this imbalance. By promoting the speculative possibilities presented by Rossetti's somewhat problematic imagery of women, I hope to provide an alternative scholarly approach to his creative canon. I am particularly interested in the imagery of rape in the Victorian period and how this imagery was subordinated to a variety of textual and visual constructs, and the work of word-image theorists such as Mieke Bal, Norman Bryson, T.J. Clark, and others, together with post-modern debates surrounding ekphrasis, provide the theoretical impetus for my exposition.

Chapter one examines both the visual and verbal evolution of Rossetti's art through a diverse and challenging dialectic between representations of the divine Virgin Mary and the pagan goddess Proserpine, one that challenges and disrupts traditional conventions of Victorian culture. By exposing the creative impulses behind what is Rossetti's overriding theme throughout his work, I hope to demonstrate the value of his work as cultural historical documents that expand our insight into the clandestine, coded forms of sexual hierarchies that dominated Victorian society.

Chapter two provides an in depth analysis of one of the recurring and most recognisable images of Rossetti's work – the series of 'floral' portraits he made during the 1860s. It is these portraits that are consistently reproduced as evidence of Rossetti's aversion to narrative in his paintings. It is my contention that rather than avoiding narrative, these portraits and the ekphrastic poetry that accompanies several of them, act to inform the viewer of an implied narrative through the composition of the painting itself and the juxtaposition of word and image through the accompanying sonnets.

In chapter three I consider the issues of ownership within the greater body of his mature poetry represented by *The House of Life*. Here Rossetti's imagery of ownership takes on a unique conflict oscillating between passion and worship as the poet exults in the *death of the female* essentially in order to reconstruct and control her through her resurrection. I propose that it is through an examination of the dual nature of the major poetic influences on Rossetti, revealed through Dante and the Early Italian poets he translated, that the divide between divine and secular that dominates his work can be thoroughly interrogated.

Chapter four considers Rossetti's images of the city within the discourse of the Victorian novel and the effect of geographical and architectural moral maps on the fate of the fallen woman and the development and maintenance of sexual hierarchies. This is an important step towards establishing a truly interdisciplinary approach to Victorian scholarship, as it is with the interpenetration of literary and visual cultures that I am particularly interested. Through an examination of a variety of literary sources, I hope to demonstrate how Rossetti's work negotiates, debates with, reinvents and resuscitates dominant strands of Victorian cultural influence through pictorial innovation and the re-presentation of literary motifs.

I declare that everything contained in this thesis is the product solely of my own research and writing.

INTRODUCTION

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,
A saint, and angel; every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eye looks back on him
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim,
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Christina Rossetti's poem 'In an Artist's Studio'[1](1856) has stamped an indelible mark on the reception of her brother's art. J. B. Bullen remarked, 'so germane is it to Rossetti's creative processes, it is difficult to resist the temptation of using it as a commentary on his work'.[2] Bullen's subsequent inability to affect the necessary resistance anchors his argument regarding Rossetti's female portraits in a discourse of 'undifferentiated femininity'. The ease with which a reader could accept this assumption and permit it to influence their approach to Rossetti's artistic canon makes Bullen's rather obvious statement misleading and somewhat dangerous. In this thesis I consider Rossetti's verbal and visual images of women within a critical framework that encourages the reader to look beyond the mirror of Christina's poem. I argue that Rossetti's women do not present the 'same one meaning' but rather a diverse and challenging dialectic between representations of the divine Virgin

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1. *Christina Rossetti: Poems and Prose*, ed. Jan Marsh (London: Dent, 1994), p. 52.

2. J. B. Bullen, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Mirror of Masculine Desire' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* Vol. 21 (1999), pp. 329-52 (p. 332).

Mary and the pagan goddess Proserpine, that occurs within a cultural context that places Rossetti firmly at the heart of the Victorian discourse on sexuality. In chapter one, 'The Divine Goddess', I trace this dialectic through a visual evolution in an attempt to disclose the pattern of Rossetti's creativity. My examination of this issue will continue in chapter three 'The Poetics of Ownership', by contextualising Rossetti's verbal appropriations of the female image within a literary tradition of male violation of the female body. Subsequently I consider the issues of ownership within the greater body of his mature poetry represented by *The House of Life*. Here Rossetti's imagery of ownership takes on a unique dialectic oscillating between passion and worship as the poet exults in the *death of the female* in order to reconstruct and control her through her resurrection. This resurrection can be seen on the one hand as part of a recurring attempt to engage the female as an object of desire through a variety of media, and on the other as symptomatic of Rossetti's own personal relationships and experience. This incessant, recurrent unification of opposites is challenging due to Rossetti's ability to force unsettling and problematic images on to the spectator: unsettling because they disrupt traditional and conventional subject matter and problematic because they implicate the viewer in a dialogue between the male artist and the female subject he(Rossetti) has created yet cannot control.

Bullen's benign statement is indicative of a recent trend chiefly among male scholars content to consign Rossetti's images of women to a narcissistic world of romantic costume and medieval courtly love that exists only within the reflected mirror of the artist's psyche. Criticism of this type perpetuates an intentional fallacy that fails to engage the image as a phenomenon capable of

acquiring levels of meaning independent of its creator. Bullen describes the female Rossettian image as 'compliantly reciprocal', and the canvas as a mirror reflecting back the 'feminized self of the creator'. The representation of a female image created by masculine desire situates this debate in a wider cultural discourse that refers to opposing approaches to aestheticism. Kathy Psomiades identifies the aesthetic dialectic involved:

> On the one hand, critics like Richard Dellamora and Jonathan Dollimore describe a[n] . . . aestheticism that ultimately benefits both men and women, through its realization that 'motives of desire imply the emancipation of women as well' and through its tendency to destabilize the dominant paradigms of bourgeois subjectivity. On the other hand, feminist scholars like Griselda Pollock and Elaine Showalter see an aestheticism that, rather than liberating women, insists on their status as objects of a heterosexual masculine desire and misogynistically devalues them . . . one might argue that there really are two aestheticisms, a liberatory one produced by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde that disrupts gender norms, and a conservative one produced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the decadent poets that reinforces the status quo.[3]

Whether an enabling, liberatory aestheticism or misogynistic subjection are the result, the collective failure of these proposals is that they ignore the possibility that female representations originating in masculine desire might nevertheless acquire a power independent of their origin. What is at stake in this discussion is the nature of representation itself, and in particular the nature of male representations of the female. Rossetti's unique position as poet and painter provides an opportunity to interrogate the oscillations of power inherent in this male-female opposition, in addition to examining the word-image

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3. Kathy Alexis Psomiades, "'Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace': Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics", *Victorian Sexual Dissidence* ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 21-38.

opposition itself, the transaction that occurs within the ekphrasis, the verbal representation of the visual.

The reaction to representation embodied in the ekphrastic encounter implicates the visual image, in Peter Wagner's words, 'as sign, as discursive work that comes from and returns into society'.[4] The female expression that I contend is inherent in male representations of the female image originates in interpersonal relationships and social exchange; it exists prior to the moment that any particular woman becomes an object of desire to the male voyeur. Foucault indicates that the repressive Victorian discourse on sexuality led to the creation of 'places of tolerance', wherein could be housed those 'other Victorians': the 'prostitute, the client, and the pimp . . . the psychiatrist and his hysteric'.[5] Thus 'clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse' were acknowledged within the brothel or mental hospital in order to restrict their exposure to society. So one observes the determined manufacture of an institution specified for the confinement of the discourse of sexuality. The importance of this observation is that it represents the use of such institutional apparatus as structure and as regulation designed to separate, confine, exclude and ultimately define something deemed undesirable while it is seemingly indispensable.

My point here is that control, specifically male control and manipulation of the female, begins not with the simple approximation of the female visage or image, but with tools that serve to exclude, confine and regulate female

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4. Peter Wagner, ed., *Icons-Texts-Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), p. 236.

5. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Press, 1980), p. 5.

behaviour, to create an environment within which the female image can be situated in order to assimilate her to the dominion of the male transgressor. In chapter two, 'The Orchard-Pit', I will examine through Rossetti's 'Blue Bower' portraits how the artist implies the illicit purchase of the female body through the structural confines of the canvas, both in the physical form of the painting itself, including the frame and the gallery space in which it is observed, and in the suggested narrative of the painting. Rossetti's poem 'The Orchard-Pit' encapsulates the hypnotic power of male desire when driven by an image of a dangerous woman the male seeks to control. Whether the form of control takes on aspects of domestic violence and imprisonment, rape, and ultimately murder/suicide, within the illusory fantasy of desire the male assumes complete control over the female image and her environment.

This chapter examines the semiotics of rape and the identification of rape as an example of self-mutilation leading to suicide in relation to Rossetti's female portraits of the 1860's. Mieke Bal's explication of Rembrandt's *Rape of Lucretia* identifies rape as an unrepresentable act, and is worth repeating here: 'rape itself cannot be visualized. It cannot be visualized . . . because rape makes the victim invisible'.[6] Murray Krieger describes ekphrasis as 'the illusionary representation of the unrepresentable'.[7] The ekphrasis makes an offering to the reader within this context to represent that which lies beyond representation. The technique through which this is made possible is by reading signs metonymically. Bal argues that the sign operates 'not by similitude but by

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6. Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p. 64.

7. Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (London and Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1992), p. xv.

temporal contiguity, just as a consequence can represent its cause, or a later event its predecessor'.

This process is implicit throughout the history of Western art and the representation of rape therein. The archetypal scenes of female violation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, primarily in the story of Arachne, indicate the many occurrences of molestation and rape carried out by the immortals Jupiter, Neptune and Phoebus, among others. In the woven indictment presented by Arachne during her contest with the goddess Athene the archetypal male predator is depicted as an immortal. The immortal male is an entity that violates with assumed impunity; he is willing to manipulate his own image in order to do so and he is fully aware that he is acting without the consent of the female victim. Accordingly, the female victim is defined by the abuse she is subjected to. She is forever connected to her violator by the nature of his deception and the consequence of the act. Whether it is Leda buffeted by the wings of the swan leading to Paris' abduction of Helen, or Danae's shower of gold leading to Perseus' purchase of Andromeda; the defining consequences of the act of violation lie in its subsequent imitations by the mortal male.

In the space between existing reality and individual male fantasy the woman is metamorphosed from an object of desire into the desired object in the mind of the male voyeur and the two are not the same. The unbridgeable gulf between reality and the manufactured image exemplifies the complexity of negotiation between female reality and male fantasy. If it must be read at all as a productive commentary on her brother's portraiture and the implications of the artist as voyeur, it is the closing line of Christina's poem that offers the deeper insight into male subjugation of the female and its manifestation in art:

'Not as she is, but as she fills his dream'. Subsequently, while rejecting John McGowan's[8] contention that Rossetti 'failed to find a voice beyond himself', I will adopt Griselda Pollock's argument that 'representation... stresses that images and texts are not mirrors of the world, merely reflecting their source. Representation stresses something refashioned, coded in rhetorical, textual or pictorial terms, quite distinct from its social existence.'[9]

Rossetti's reading confirms his interest in the mythologies and histories of women. In addition to his well-documented interest in Dante, Arthurian legend, and 'chivalric Froissartian themes'[10], Culler reports that his reading included Edward Lane's *Arabian Nights*, selections from Homer, Plutarch, Petrarch, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[11] He also owned a copy of Thomas Heywoode's unique seventeenth-century publication *Gunaikeion*, or, *Nine Books of Various History Concerning Women*.[12] This comprehensive volume offers an insight into Rossetti's construction of a chaotic, vacillating dialectic of femininity, presenting a kaleidoscope of women of fluctuating reputation under a variety of subheadings. Book VI, *Erato*: *Chaste Women, and Wantons*, places Mary Virgin at the head of a list ranging from Penelope through to Mary Magdalen, under the headings 'Wantons, Strumpets, Concubines, Honest Whores, and Wantons Converted'. Other Books deal variously with 'Women

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8. John McGowan, "'The Bitterness of Things Occult': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Search for the Real", *Critical Essays on Rossetti*, ed. David. G. Riede (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), p. 115.

9. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 6.

10. *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 9 vols. ed. William E. Fredeman (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2002), II, 224.

11. Helen Culler, *Studies in Rossetti's Reading*, Michigan: University Microfilms Ann Arbor (Yale University PhD, 1943).

12. Thomas Heywoode, *Gunaikeion* (London: Adam Islip, 1624).

that have dissembled their shape'(Book VII *Memorie*), 'Muses, Sybils, Vestals, Prophetesses'(Book II *Euterpe*), and the volume concludes with Book IX *Calliope*, 'Discourse of death and punishment', 'with Punishments of the Vitious, and rewards due to the Vertuous'.

Gustave Moreau reflected on the fate of these women in his writings, while situating their importance to the nineteenth-century search for answers in an examination of a notion of femininity within the fallen woman:

> Huge, pale figures, tremendous, lonely, dark and desolate, fatal, mysterious lovers condemned to titanic infamies. What will become of you? What will your destiny be? Where can you hide your fearful passions? What terrors, what compassion you inspire, what immense and awesome sadness you arouse in those mortals called to contemplate so much shame and horror, so many crimes, such great misfortune.[13]

Moreau's lament for Pasiphae reveals a litany of abused women, disclosing a narrative of immortal concupiscence, of lust and desire satisfied only by destructive rape and assault. The abduction of these women invariably involves a transmutation, the image altering of one being or another as an immortal attempts to satisfy himself on the body of the female he pursues. Moreau's call to contemplation can be read in nineteenth-century terms as a commentary on the fate of the fallen woman, the mistress or the prostitute who exists on the underside of the transaction fostered throughout the Victorian sexual hierarchy. The elevation of the state of fallen womanhood to the grand status appended by Moreau may seem at first glance tenuous, but given the amount of textual and pictorial space taken up by this narrative, the connection is not at all surprising.

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13. Gustave Moreau, *Pasiphaé*, in *L'assembleur de rêves* (Fontfroide: Fata Morgana, 1984), p. 69.

The Victorian public had a voracious appetite for reading and viewing all manner of depictions of these narratives; and whether the subject is the rejected Lady of Shalott, floating to her watery grave, or a nameless female body washed ashore beneath the arch of Waterloo Bridge[14], the questions Moreau asks remain relevant: 'What will become of you? What will your destiny be? … What terrors, what compassion you inspire.'

In chapter four, '*Found* in the City', I examine Rossetti's contemporary work on women in the city within a narrative based around images of women in the Victorian novel. What I seek to achieve is an understanding of the central themes of Rossetti's work as they exist within the larger discourse of the Victorian city and the representations of women therein. Thus presented, Rossetti's images of women can be implicated within Foucault's dialogue on Victorian sexuality and its distinct privileging of male power and the hierarchies of sexuality this engendered. What is particularly interesting about Rossetti's construction of male-female relationships is that they originate in much wider discourses than have previously been recognised. The creative distillation of the biblical and mythological 'histories' represented in works such as *Gunaikeion* or *Metamorphoses* into the Victorian hierarchies which the writings of Foucault and others have highlighted, places his work very much at the heart of the discourse of Victorian sexuality rather than at the periphery. Rossetti makes this integration possible due to his interrogation of the connections between representations of the divine and the secular.

These connections became an overriding theme throughout his work, and are succinctly realised in the verse fragment he translated from Petronius,

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14. See chapter four for my discussion of illustrations of the suicide narrative.

encapsulating the precarious balance Rossetti sought to exploit between life and death, man and woman, heaven and earth:

> 'I saw the Sybil at Cumae'
> (One said) 'with mine own eye.
> She hung in a cage and read her rune
> To all the passers-by.'
> Said the boys, 'What wouldst thou, Sybil?'
> She answered, 'I would die.' (*Works* 241).[15]

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15. The Rossetti Archive. Ed. Jerome McGann. 1999. University of Virginia. 2000-04. http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu:2020/dynaweb/superbook/. Subsequent quotations indicated by the abbreviation *Works*, are all sourced from the 1911 edition of Rossetti's poetry reproduced at this domain.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DIVINE GODDESS

The Virgin Mary was the subject of Rossetti's first two exhibited paintings, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, or *The Annunciation*. Both of these paintings serve to illustrate the accompanying sonnets entitled 'Mary's Girlhood'. While one painting acts as a purely descriptive work, a symbolic interpretation of biblical narrative, the other contrives to appropriate, manipulate and eventually disintegrate traditional biblical typologies. The paintings can be read together as a manifestation of the problematic dichotomy Rossetti encountered when approaching the life of Mary, one that would come to dominate his vision of all women. The 'great sorrow' and 'great reward' that accompanies the majority of Rossetti's images of women are polarized in these paintings for the first time. The disintegration of biblical typology and the undermining of a historical narrative context culminate in confusion over the doctrines of the Annunciation, the Resurrection and the Assumption. These are instances of the divine interacting with humanity, of 'Life touching lips with Immortality'[1] and are concerned with transformation, metamorphosis, and the distinction between divine entities and secular bodies.

The disturbance of traditional images in the Rossetti canon enables the artist to engage the female he has separated from divine exclusiveness, implicating the altered image in a discourse concerning male power and female resistance. This chapter opens with a comparative analysis of Rossetti's first two paintings to establish not only the narrative tradition Rossetti enters into with these works, but a pattern for reading his art that will enable a rethinking of his purpose in attempting to reduce the divine image to a secular one.

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1. 'For a Venetian Pastoral', *Works*, 188.

Subsequently I will explicate Rossetti's verbal response to Leonardo's *The Virgin of the Rocks*, a response that is indicative of the power of biblical typology and how a combination of the autonomous female voice and Rossetti's own desire to engage that voice lead to the amalgamation of the divine and the secular in a reflection of doubt. This consideration includes the collection of sonnets Rossetti wrote in response to various images of the Holy Family; it also examines the creative journey Rossetti makes from the divine to the secular that dominates the various female figures he engages with over the remaining chapters of this thesis.

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin [Plate 1] was the first painting exhibited that bore the initials *PRB*. It was Rossetti's first public exhibition in 1849 at the third annual Free Exhibition at the Hyde Park Corner Gallery. Rossetti's decision for his first painting to be one of a religious narrative was probably more influenced by the school of Overbeck and 'Early Christian Art' than by any overt adherence to Pre-Raphaelite tenets. The painting was exhibited with two sonnets attached to the frame. They are highly descriptive and patently betray a young artist's desire to interpret his painting for the viewer. Rossetti's painting was extremely well received. The *Art Journal* of April 1849 noted: 'The picture is the most successful as a pure imitation of early Florentine art that we have seen in this country'. Rossetti wrote that previous paintings of the scene showing the Virgin learning to read were 'obviously incompatible with those times, and which could only pass muster if treated in a purely symbolical manner'.[2] Although the theme of the education of the Virgin was a common one in European painting, Rossetti's distinct variation on the theme was

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2. Letter to Charles Lyell, 14th November 1848. Fredeman, I, p. 75.

unusual. Rather than showing Mary learning to read at her mother's knee, an image familiar in education scenes, Rossetti shows her working at embroidery in a stylized domestic setting. The second sonnet, 'Mary's Girlhood', interpreted the considerable symbolism:

> These are the symbols. On that cloth of red
> I' the centre is the Tripoint: perfect each,
> Except the second of its points, to teach
> That Christ is not yet born. The books-whose head
> Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said-
> Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
> Therefore on them the lily standeth, which
> Is Innocence, being interpreted.
>
> The seven-thorn'd briar and the palm seven-leaved
> Are her great sorrow and her great reward.
> Until the end be full, the Holy One
> Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
> Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
> Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son. (*Works* 173)

Surtees[3] decodes the symbolism and the particulars need not overly concern this discussion. It is enough to recognize that Rossetti includes so much iconographic detail within the painting itself to signify his subject matter that the sonnet is all but rendered extraneous. The artist goes as far as writing the names of Anne, Mary and Joachim on the canvas itself. From the purity of the lily, to the True Vine growing on a Cross trellis; from a haloed Dove heralding the coming of the Holy Spirit, to the Lake of Galilee; Rossetti has painted a scene that while perhaps not common to the thematic history of Mary's education, certainly includes most of the religious iconographic baggage that has become associated with it. In a letter to Charles Lyell, Rossetti commented

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3. Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882): A Catalogue Raisonné* 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), I, 10.

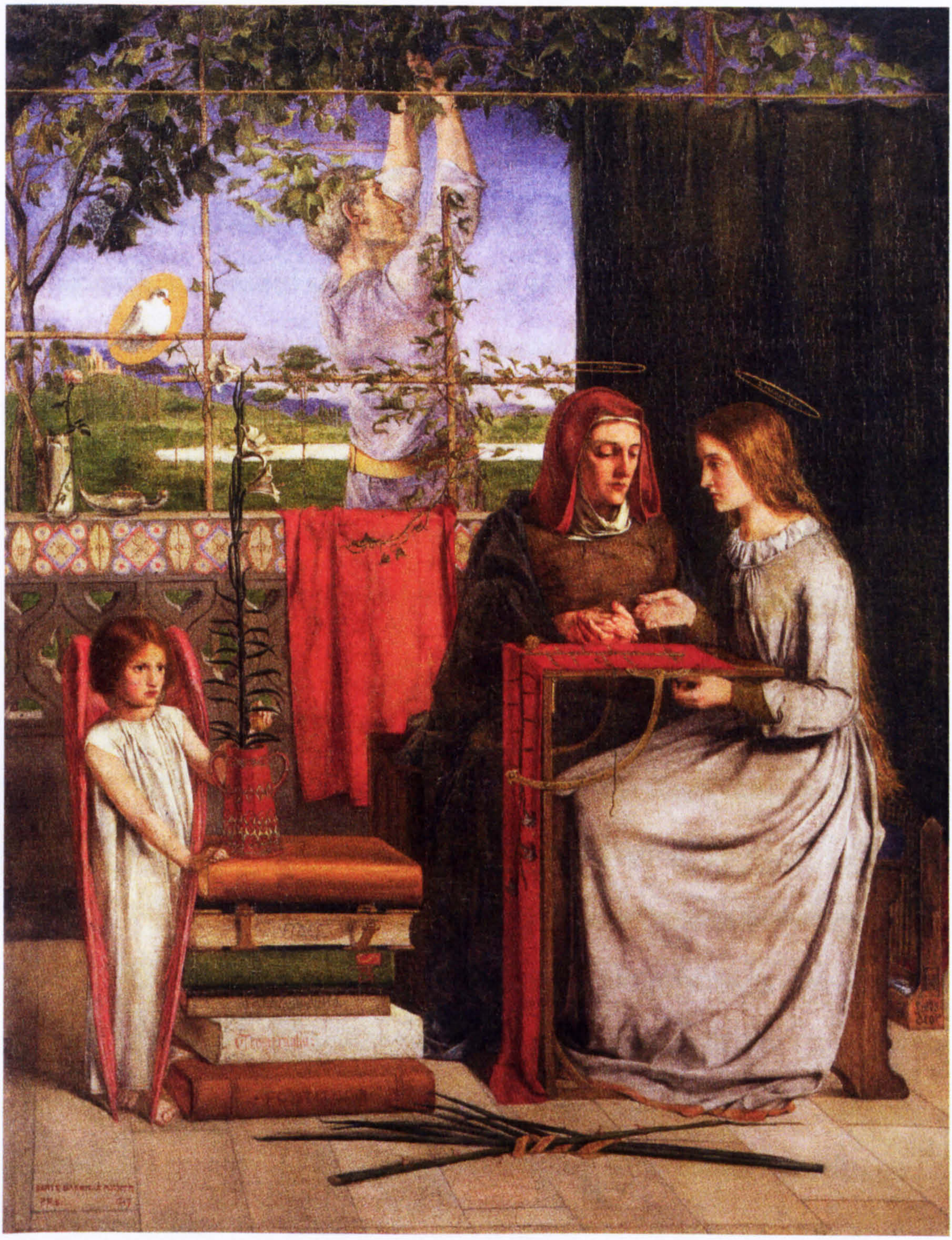

Plate 1. *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*
1848-49 oil on canvas, 83.2 x 65.4cm
Tate Gallery, London.

that; 'The subject . . . has been treated at various times . . . but, as I cannot think, in a very adequate manner'.[4]

Thus the painting exists within a particular cultural history that can be identified by its distinct set of encoded signs. In this particular case those signs are extremely common and enable the reader to extrapolate the iconography the artist has employed. Norman Bryson[5] has proposed that the distinction between denotation and connotation is an indispensable tool when utilizing the advantages that an iconographic approach to 'reading' art can bring. Mieke Bal has demonstrated with her readings of the biblical stories represented by the Benesch collection how this distinction is valuable, and I follow her model here.[6]

If we consider *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* as part of a wider contiguous body of work representing the education of the Virgin Mary, then the ability to recognise and process particular signs that indicate the visual history of this subject is extremely helpful. A reader who comes to the Rossetti painting can be considered pre-informed and able to begin assimilating the painting fairly quickly. In the tradition of visual representations of the education of the Virgin Mary, particularly in Counter-Reformation art, Mary is depicted kneeling at her mother's side learning to read. Even though Rossetti has deviated a little from this tradition, our recognition of the scene comes from the depiction of two women, one obviously older, both usually seated. This then is our first and immediate denotative sign; it becomes a self-evident and

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4. Fredeman, I, 75.

5. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 60-66.

6. Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt"*, Chapter 5.

absolute reference to the subject of this painting. Bryson concedes that the absolute quality of denotation is historically variable, but argues that we as readers will learn to recognize those variations.

The image of the young woman being tutored is decoded by the reader in this case as synecdoche for the whole scene. In addition, this particular painting is loaded with signs that inform the viewer as to its subject. The lily, the angel, the books, all direct the viewer to read the painting, all signify that this is a painting of the Virgin Mary. Even the colours of Mary's robe and that of Anne's are identifiable as part of the tradition to which Rossetti has now added. Bryson argues that connotative signs exist to help confirm 'the effect of the real'. Within this specialized relationship 'the effect of the real' exists where 'connotation so confirms and substantiates denotation that the latter appears to rise to a level of truth'.[7] In this particular image, the lily, the angel, the book titles all contribute to the symbolic signification of Mary herself – and her divine destiny. In the painting that follows this analysis, these symbolic elements take on a connotative resonance that once read in conjunction with the narrative of the image begin to signify the effect of reality that Bryson proposes. This effect is enhanced considerably when they reappear in the subsequent work and their connotative significance to this image is brought to light.

A consequence of a reading based solely on iconographic signs is that it could lead the viewer to ignore the particularity of Rossetti's painting. Essentially what iconographic reading does is substitute the visual painting for the sign it represents. This prompts the viewer to read the narrative implied by the painting as what it is not; thus replacing what they see with what they know,

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7. Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, p. 62.

in this case their knowledge about the life of Mary. Bal considers that iconographic readings will ultimately fail if the reader cannot distinguish between the iconographic pre-text and the narrative present. This distinction is what gives each particular representation of a theme its individuality. In other words, if we fail to consider Rossetti's particular painting *as* particular, we only see a painting of signs that represent the story of the Virgin Mary within a history of paintings of signs that represent that story. Bal proposes that we attempt to place our iconographic knowledge on a plane with our narrative reading and let the tensions between them determine a new meaning. With these factors in mind we can return to the painting and attempt to determine this new meaning. Because this painting is so heavily laden with iconography it presents a difficult task for the viewer attempting to determine Rossetti's particular contribution to the visual history of the scene.

Rossetti's representation of the tradition of Mary's education is simple yet powerful. As St. Anne watches her daughter sewing at the crimson cloth we see that Mary's gaze, and consequently that of the viewer, is drawn to the child-angel holding the lily. The drawing itself is centered on the wooden trellis; in effect Rossetti 'hangs' his painting on the trellis. The internal composition is symmetrically arranged between the horizontal gaze drawn by the line between Mary and the angel and the vertical one of St. Joachim and the red robe on the balustrade. The structure is then reinforced by the central cross of the trellis. Rossetti's implied narrative is one that emphasizes the destiny of the Virgin, her pre-ordained purity anticipated in her own Immaculate Conception. The vision of the angel serves as a reminder of the inseparable nature of Mary's 'great reward' and 'great sorrow'. On the ground lies a seven-leaved palm branch and

a seven-thorned briar, tied with a scroll inscribed *tot dolores tot gaudia*, 'so many sorrows, so many joys'.

Munich notes the verbal inversion of the traditional title leading to an emphasis on 'Virgin', advocating that this emphasis is part of Rossetti's desire to stress his interest in Mary as a 'girl' rather than a child.[8] Unfortunately the point is made without drawing the conclusion that Rossetti's interest in 'girls', an interest which was indicative of a trend among his Pre-Raphaelite peers, did indeed lie in furthering their prospects, in educating them. It is widely accepted fact that the Pre-Raphaelite artists were disposed to 'rescuing' young girls from working class environments to use as models for their paintings and raising them on pedestals of romantic medieval fantasy, a concept I will return to in chapter three. Rossetti's inversion of the traditional title is emphasized when this painting is placed beside its successor and the implied narrative disrupts the viewer's reliance on traditional biblical iconography.

In the painting of Mary's education Rossetti presents a scene that conforms to the iconography of traditional biblical narrative, enabling the viewer to assimilate the painting without creating tension between what they see and what they know. The following image disturbs that comfortable vision of the Virgin Mary and replaces it with an altogether more problematic and disruptive one. The symbolism of the first painting is overcome by the narrative of the second, reinforced perversely by the inclusion of several important connotative elements from the former that by their reappearance take on further significance.

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8. Adrienne Munich, *Andromeda's Chains* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), p. 95.

Ecce Ancilla Domini! [Plate 2] is the narrative successor to *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, and illustrates loosely the lines from the first sonnet; 'Till, one dawn at home,/She woke in her white bed, and had no fear/At all,--yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed:/Because the fulness of the time was come'. The subject of the Annunciation is confirmed at the end of the second sonnet; 'She soon shall have achieved/Her perfect purity: yea God the Lord/Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son'. The colouration of the painting points to a European tradition in religious subject matter, the associated emblematic colours of blue, red and gold offset the stark, bleak colouring of the domestic dwelling and the characters' robes. This conformity to the colouration and iconography which reinforces the traditional devotional scene is undermined immediately, however, by the structure of the painting and further by the action it depicts.

This painting is executed simply although the narrow perspective is somewhat unusual. The extraordinary pale red of Mary's hair and her downcast face attract the viewer's eye as she withdraws from God's messenger. Mary's bedroom is depicted as a simple spartan cell as befits a devout servant of God. Images depicting Annunciation scenes invariably occur within the environment of Mary's bedroom or in a walled garden, as they must occur privately. In this context the enclosure represents privacy, of the need for isolation while the divine message is related to its recipient. The narrow perspective of *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* heightens the sense of concealment as the viewer feels forced forward into the image by the lack of foreground and the subsequent proximity of the figures. The wall of the room contributes to this effect, also acting as the signifier of concealment, of isolation from the outer world. It is in one sense a

Plate 2. *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*
1849-50 oil on canvas, 72.4 x 41.9cm
Tate Gallery, London.

reprieve from that domestic world and in another a removal of the outer world and all the freedoms that society represents. Isolation has connotations that are indicative of the containment or imprisonment of the female body and is extremely relevant to my reading of Rossetti's work throughout this thesis.

This painting is the first instance of Rossetti's implicit use of a physical impediment to suggestively inhibit the movement of the female body, and obstructive barriers become a dominant feature in his poetry. The appearance of a wall or other restrictive device in both Rossetti's poetry and painting is subtly implicated by the artist as an instrument of confinement and subsequent violation. Consider for instance Rossetti's 'A Day of Love' (*Works* 80), sonnet XVI from *The House of Life*. In this sonnet the narrator speaks of his desire to isolate his beloved in order to satisfy his physical yearning. This is a theme that is recurrent throughout the Rossetti canon in both word and image, and it is the result of a delusional male desire for control over the female body, realised in a fantasy world which hints continually at the darker side of Victorian sexual inequality and the potential abuse of power in male-female relationships. The language indicates the darker side of desire and the need to possess in order to control: 'Those envied places which do know her well,/And are so scornful of this lonely place,/Even now for once are emptied of her grace:/nowhere but here she is'. Here the sense of removal or confinement from what is familiar, 'which do know her well', is manipulated into an image of isolation and ownership, 'nowhere but here she is'.

Rossetti frequently returned to this image of ownership and it came to dominate his imagination. Later in this chapter I will discuss the origins of this concept in *St Agnes of Intercession*. Chapter three includes an analysis of

'The Portrait', Rossetti's tale of the artist who sought to restrict outside knowledge of his beloved to such a degree that: 'They that would look on her must come to me'. While the seclusion of the female in 'A Day of Love' is not altogether threatening it nevertheless implicates the male narrator as a potential possessor willing to imprison his beloved for his own purposes. The delusional male fantasy acts imperceptibly to turn prurience into abuse and in this sonnet it exists as a latent threat to the beloved's freedom. Once again the physical displacement of the female is the signifying concept. In Rossetti's image of the Virgin Mary the wall of the cell is the instrument of seclusion, it indicates the restriction of movement and an attempt to control the female body. This restriction serves to emphasize Mary's attempted withdrawal by blocking it, thereby heightening the sense of confinement. Mary is pressed against the wall and it is her *action*, her movement of withdrawal that gives this painting its focalization.

The movement of withdrawal is what draws the spectator into this painting, manipulating the viewer's eye in conjunction with several other factors to alter our perception of this traditional scene. Mary's movement of withdrawal as she recoils from Gabriel implicates the spectator as a witness, acting as a visual apostrophe similar to the gesture of Rembrandt's *Lucretia*, and this is a concept I will revisit throughout this work.[9] The spectator is made aware of their position in relation to the vulnerability of Mary and the intimidating power of Gabriel. The implication of this action is that the distinction between the traditional religious treatment of this scene and an image of attempted male violation becomes confused. When this image is

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9. See chapter two for a detailed explanation of the 'apostrophe' within this context.

described as a narrative without relying on iconographic precedent the disintegration between the boundaries of the spiritual and the sexual become more apparent.

The narrative consists of two figures involved in an interaction, constituting what Bal calls the 'elementary narrative syntagm of the fabula', in other words; subject--action--object, or man--approaches--woman, or equally applicable, female--recoils from--male.[10] This reading enables the spectator, already implicated as a witness by Mary's apostrophe, to process the action taking place in terms which dynamise the figures. An exclusively narrative reading of this image allows descriptions of the figures which are 'attributive and adjectival', to 'join adverbially in the action itself, which is thus described emphatically as an event'.[11] The figures can be described in terms of their posture, their placement in the scene and their attitude to one another. Here the male figure approaches the female, the raised left foot indicates his movement and his bare arms are stretched towards her. He is naked beneath a robe which is split from the shoulder to reveal an almost full-length view of his body. His left hand is held in a placating gesture as if to calm a frightened animal, while his right holds the lily stem. The female figure is seated on a narrow bed, she is wearing what appears to be a nightgown and her arms are also bare. Her head is lowered as she looks down, avoiding the male gaze. It is apparent that she has been surprised in her bedchamber. She is leaning away from the male and her movement is restricted by the wall of the chamber. Linda Nochlin[12] compares

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10. Bal, *Reading Rembrandt*, p. 208.

11. ibid.

12. Linda Nochlin, 'Lost and *Found*: Once More the Fallen Woman', *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).

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the structure of this painting with that of the contemporary scene Rossetti revisited so many times during his career, *Found*.[13]

The painting illustrates Rossetti's poem of the same name. It depicts a woman kneeling in the street and a man attempting to pull her to her feet. She turns her face from him desperately, cowering into a wall at the side of the street. Nochlin sees a correspondence between the 'cowering female' and 'towering male' to Mary and Gabriel respectively. Without recourse to the co-text that is the poem 'Found' and indeed the appended title *Found*, it is evident this image responds extremely differently due to the signifiers of attempted male violation and possession. The process of reading an image does not end there however. Having defined the narrative in terms that describe the action taking place, the viewer must be aware of how the action is depicted, the manner of narration. The painting can betray a certain attitude through such simple structural features as hand movement and posture, executed by the painter in the combination of brush-strokes and lines that delineate the image.

In the painting *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* the way the action is depicted assists the viewer in processing the purely narrative description outlined above. The drawn lines and brush-strokes help to indicate how the viewer is to interpret the actions of these figures. Bal calls these 'telling strokes' because they work with the narrative reading described above to designate this particular fabula, a particular focalization. The manner of narration specifies the intensity of the action the figures undertake. The male figure here is delineated by lines that soften his approach: his feet appear to lightly touch the surface of the floor, the pose of his hand is rendered less threatening by the slim sleek lines which

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13. Chapter four includes a detailed analysis of *Found*.

convey his ethereality. The female figure has been forced back against the wall of the cell, her pose is tense and her face anxious, her expression is one of stress, bewilderment and discomfort. Thus the viewer is drawn into the painting through the anxiety displayed in the woman's body, and the context of the work comes under closer scrutiny. In *this* narrative decoding of the fabula of *this* image the narrative reading identifies the distinct effect of this particular work, which when supplemented by the iconographic reading is placed within its traditional biblical context. As I argued in my previous reading of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, if we fail to consider the narrative implications of Rossetti's painting we will see only a painting of signs that represent the Annunciation within a history of paintings of signs that represent that event. The iconographic features which identify this painting work therefore as a countermeasure against the disintegration of the boundaries between the spiritual and sexual mentioned earlier. The structural composition of the image reveals by antithesis the contiguity between it and the psychological imagery of female imprisonment and subjugation.

If we consider again the interaction between the figures outlined above it is an unequivocal observation that the female figure withdraws from the male, hugging the wall in an enclosed space while the male approaches. Two of Rossetti's studies in pencil completed for this particular image confirm the importance of this apostrophic action when enacted by the female. Both of these studies are nude, and while this was not unusual for Rossetti, it does indicate his eagerness to recreate specifically the stress of the female body in this situation. The Tate [Plate 3] study shows a slightly more forced withdrawal than the finished image. The knees are drawn higher up towards the body and

Bottom Left: Plate 3. Study for *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*
1849 pencil on blue paper, 19.7 x 13.9cm
Tate Gallery, London

Top Right: Plate 4. Study for *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*
1849 pencil on blue paper, 16.5 x 9.9cm
Birmingham City Art Gallery.

the hand appears to clutch the robe beside the feet. The girl's shoulders are tense and hunched as she backs into the wall. The Birmingham [Plate 4] study is more telling. Mary is nude and she therefore acquires a more urgent need to recoil. Her reaction is indicative of a sudden startled movement backwards. She draws her feet towards her, crossing one under the other to obscure her genitalia. Her arms adopt an altogether more protective pose, the right arm is drawn across the breasts while the left is held over the head as if to avoid physical contact. Her face is even more closed and tense when compared to the finished version, her reaction is insistent and her apprehension appears immediate and real.

When these images are mapped over the narrative reading of the finished painting it becomes clear that the placement of these figures within an enclosed space, the action between them and the implication of the viewer as a witness all confuse the clarity offered by the iconographic reading. The consistent iconographic signifier between this painting and *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* is that of the embroidered crimson cloth. The viewer's eye is drawn by the slash of red paint to the completed embroidery from the first painting, a symbol of Mary's purity. In this image the symbol of purity becomes an imitation of the instrument of conception, the life-giving flower in the hand of the angel. The viewer, attracted by the red of the cloth, is drawn across the painting in a diagonal line from the folds of Mary's dress covering the area of her womb to the stem of the fertile lily and up to Gabriel's shoulder, not to his face. Mary also does not look at the angel's face; her gaze is fixed on the lily in his hand, and she does not recognize the male intruder, only the instrument of impregnation pointed at her womb. Mary's hypnotic gaze, fixed

on the lily, indicates its symbolic significance. Rossetti's ability to create this dichotomy and present the viewer with a moral crisis indicates his willingness to compromise the accepted spiritual and sexual boundaries of his society. This dilemma is reinforced by the suggested imprisonment and the subjugation of the female form. When considered outside the narrative restraints of biblical typology this painting becomes something it is not, forcing the viewer to contemplate its mutability, its capacity to deceive. If this ability to deceive were developed further, what would it mean in the context of this particular narrative and image?

Rossetti's poem 'For an Annunciation, Early German' describes the act of the miracle ambiguously. Mary becomes 'a Virgin' rather than 'The Virgin'. She is depicted thus prior to her metamorphosis, which is described only as 'she has turned': 'With meek bowed face a Virgin prayed between./So prays she, and the Dove flies in to her,/And she has turned.' Thus this highly significant moment is described ambiguously, the Immaculate Conception is recounted in terms of physical change that are neither positive nor negative. Mary's loss of virginity is secularised through the physical intimation – 'she has turned'. What is described is the deflowering of a virgin, the repercussions of which echo back to Eve and the fall from Paradise. The divine 'He' of man, and the use of masculine symbols for the divine, legitimate masculine power by connecting the male fantasy of the deflowered virgin to an ultimate reality of divine instruction. The poem closes with a languid, sensual appraisal of the secular environment surrounding the momentous event of the Annunciation.

> At the low porch is one
> Who looks as though deep awe made him to smile.

Heavy with heat, the plants yield shadow there;
The loud flies cross each other in the sun;
And the aisled pillars meet the poplar-aisle.

The introduction of an unidentified male voyeur at this point complicates the narrative further. The male observer is linked to the masculine Gabriel in *Ecce Ancilla Domini*! and in both painting and poem the pure instrument of conception – the lily and the dove respectively, are subordinated to the appearance and involvement of the male in the process of deflowering the virgin. The suggested alternate title 'Filii Filia'[14] means 'Daughter of the Son', and encapsulates the male – female dilemma described above. Mary is the biological mother of Jesus, but as a human being she is also His spiritual daughter. Male dominance is thus reinforced even within the spiritual sphere of the conception of Christ. The hierarchy established here resonates throughout Rossetti's struggle to reconcile his vision of the divine with the secular in *The House of Life*.

Within this construct religion is utilized to exercise male power over women because religious systems enforce rules for social behaviour that supposedly emanate from God(Him), and are therefore difficult to oppose.[15] Thus the act of Mary's deflowering, her confinement within physical and spiritual bonds, even the possibility that she conceived without consent, become

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14. This sonnet has a complicated textual history. It was paired with another entitled 'Returning to Brussels', which describes a Marian shrine on the roadside. Rossetti considered publishing them together in his collected works edition in 1870. However they were never published in this way. The artwork described in the title has never been identified although William Rossetti does verify that it existed, claiming his brother saw it in an auction-room. The Rossetti Archive provides further details.

15. S. Wehr Demaris, *Jung and Feminism: Liberating Archetypes* (London: Routledge, 1988).

a synecdoche for the abuse of male sexual power legitimised in this instance by the divine image reflected in man.

What is evident through analysis of this painting is that the use of biblical typology is disrupted by the forceful narrative implications therein. The visionary quality of the biblical image contains a propensity to defy representation because it is essentially wordless. Thus its subordination to a mythological or contemporary context is as necessary as it is unavoidable. *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* betrays its illustrative function by showing Mary to be the victim of a deception. This painting simply cannot and should not be read as both the iconography and the co-text suggest; to do so is to ignore the narrative implications of this and the images that surround and inform it. The woman seen in the narrative context of Mary's attempted denial of the divine messenger indicates a shift in power from male violator to female victim. This signals a rejection of enforced male dominance by challenging the traditional historical narrative legitimised by archetypal images.

Confirmation of the mutability and transformation of biblical typology can be found in a painting by Rossetti's first mentor, Ford Madox Brown. The painting *Take Your Son, Sir!* [Plate 5] is a powerful example of this type of rejection and metamorphosis of the traditional biblical typology associated with the Virgin Mary. In this dramatic image a young mother thrusts her baby from the folds of a garment as if from the womb, holding forth the naked babe accusingly at the presumably neglectful seducer and father. The image is given an unmistakably Marian flavour by the halo shaped mirror around the woman's head. The narrative implications of the Virgin birth are evoked as the babe is produced seemingly from nowhere – the unfinished nature of the

Plate 5. Ford Madox Brown, *'Take Your Son, Sir!'*
1851, 1856-57. oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 70.4 x 38.1cm
Tate Gallery, London.

painting means that the woman is given little substance below the shoulders. This image is an unsettling integration of a mother's natural love for her son being displaced by the desperate courage of the wronged woman. The baby is held in a strangely sacrificial manner, echoing the divine sacrifice of Mary – and the knowledge of the sure loss of her son to the world. This evocative indictment of male persecution recalls the words of Rossetti's sonnet, 'her great sorrow and her great reward' once again linking the secular with the divine.

I have identified a fundamental component in the narrative tradition of male aggression as the existence of an autonomous female voice that strives to act independently from the male persecutor. The interrelationships between secular and divine depictions of women may help in determining the origins and expressive power of that voice. The Sibyl whose lament for death is transcribed in the introduction to this thesis has undergone her own metamorphosis over the centuries since Petronius encountered her at Cumae. Forming yet another intricate, inextricable affinity in the web of Arachne, apocalyptic works have mingled Scripture with profane history to form a connection between the ancient Sibyl doomed to live out a prolonged life of decrepitude, robbed of her beauty and pride by a vengeful God(Apollo), and the Cumaean Sibyl of the Nativity depicted in the 'sibylline oracles'. The Sibyl prophetesses purportedly foretold events such as the Annunciation and the Nativity; the *Dies Irae*, the first words of the Sequence of the requiem mass, 'the day of wrath', refers to the sibylline prophecy of Judgement Day.

The Sibyl of the *Metamorphoses* is significantly one of the rare mortal female figures in the collection who avoids being sexually assaulted. In a pagan presaging of the metamorphosis of Mary, the Sibyl's virgin transformation

empowers her with the ability to see into the future, significantly to the time of her own death. The Annunciation of Mary encapsulates in one moment her entire life from the conception of Christ until her own death, and makes her bear witness to it all. As a prophetess Mary became aware not only of the conception and birth of Christ, but of His labours, His betrayal, the Passion and the Crucifixion, and most importantly His Resurrection. The Resurrection is the one miracle that Mary shares with her son. Mary's entire life is subsumed into that of her son and will only be relinquished by the final miracle of her Assumption: reminiscent of the Sibyl, Mary will not die an ordinary death. This is the consequence of Mary's transformation, the power of knowing the future, of seeing the sorrow that lies ahead. It also indicates a vicious cycle of violation and subjugation wherein the male forever seeks to deny the autonomy of the female through his possession of her, without realising that the act of possession is in itself a transference of knowledge, and thus, of power.

Rossetti's artistic career is plagued by this paradox. The sensuous portraits of women from the 1860's onwards all struggle with the dilemma of knowledge and power that originates with the Virgin Mary's position as a woman of ultimate power and knowledge. The possession of the female immediately points to the destruction of the male: this is graphically illustrated in his portrait of Helen of Troy that I will discuss in the next chapter – and is captured eloquently by W. B. Yeats in the poem 'Leda and the Swan'(1923):

A shudder in the loins engender there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power

Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?[16]

With the act of violation comes the moment of exchange which lies at the heart of ekphrastic theory. It is as a result of this exchange that the female victim is empowered. Once the aspiring male possessor is revealed, the shift of power to the female has begun. Rossetti's progression from divine worship to secular love forces him to deal with Mary's(woman's) metamorphosis, her empowerment. His ekphrases of the Virgin Mary are indicative of this progression as he is forced to address the massive weight that the iconography of the Virgin brings to representations of her image. Rossetti engages Mary as the mysterious empowered female other in several of his ekphrases, including 'For a Virgin and Child by Hans Memmelinck' (*Works* 190), and 'For the Holy Family by Michelangelo' (*Works* 232). The most powerful meditation and perhaps the most revealing is Rossetti's response to Leonardo's *The Virgin of the Rocks* [Plate 6] in the sonnet 'For Our Lady of the Rocks' (*Works* 171).

Paintings depicting the Holy Family represent some of the most recognisable images in the history of European art. The pre-existent narrative in the form of an iconographic history has rendered images of this subject extremely difficult to reinterpret, as they are almost instantly recognisable. The challenge Rossetti faces with his verbal representations of these particular visual images must carry the weight of that pre-existent narrative. Peter Wagner describes the function of the representation of the visual in such a circumstance as 'an act of accepting or rejecting the discourse that had already

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16. W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, ed. Timothy Webb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) p. 149-50, ll. 9-15.

surrounded the paintings, an act that is distinguished by interference, assertion, and finally, usurpation'.[17]

Rossetti's representation of the visual in this case is an act of rejection, of appropriation and ultimately of deception. His manipulation of images works through displacement to challenge assumptions regarding the role of traditional iconographic symbols, to confuse their message and distort their meaning. Rossetti is not able in this instance to presuppose any artistic intention; he is no closer to the artist than his audience is when viewing their paintings. The image and its resonant meanings are subordinated to Rossetti's narrative, thus reducing the iconographic power of biblical typology. The importance of the subject matter depicted is reduced (although not the identity) and the precise nature of the narrative sonnet becomes the perceptive vehicle. This technique elevates the image beyond its status as an iconographic symbol, distinguishing it from the pictorial tradition within which the pre-existent narrative encloses it. Through the displacement or adroit re-presentation of these traditional symbols Rossetti is able to comment on their relevance within his own art and in the outlook, conscious or otherwise, of his society.

In relation to the biblical images appropriated by Rossetti, the indefinable quality of the image lends itself to transmutation, to metamorphosis, to the appropriation of the image by the collective unconscious in order to compensate for the grievous limitations of its own outlook. When analyzing Rossetti's narrative it is apparent that in several aspects his sonnet has little that actually relates it to the appearance of the visual image. His tendency to distance his ekphrastic poetry from its visual source has been misinterpreted in

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17. Wagner, p. 236.

Plate 6. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*
1491/1494, finished by 1508, oil on panel, 189.5 x 120cm
The National Gallery London (c.1506).

this way as a subjective response locking Rossetti in what is essentially an internal self-reflection.[18] His deliberate juxtaposing of image and word in such instances is less a reflection of Rossetti's own narcissism than a reaction to a collective societal pre-occupation that can be implicated as such within this narrative tradition.

Such criticism fails to acknowledge how Rossetti is able to affect a reading or create a unique vision within what is an overcrowded discursive space. What is engaging about Rossetti's interpretation of these visionary images is his ability to divert his audience from the primary focus of what is actually depicted to a resonant meaning he creates partly through an exploitation of the physical space of the picture. I noted above that the repetition of mythological motif is common among authors and artists attempting to demonstrate a divine moral purpose: Rossetti avoids the temptation to create alternative(mythological) narratives for biblical subjects by using the existing space or landscape of the image to engage his audience. Furthermore it is evident that the interface between Rossetti's images and his poetry is made in the smaller details of internal composition, and what is particularly interesting about his response to Leonardo's painting is that he engages the reader with several of the key features of his own painting and poetry: the exploitation of shades of light and dark, the liminal qualities of absence and presence, and the extraordinarily subtle focus on the hands of the model to implicate the spectator as part of the narrative reading of the painting. Rossetti's focus on the integral position of the spectator in his female portraits of the 1860's, often made implicit by the positioning of the model's hands, is

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18. For example see K. J. Wilson 'The Leonardo Landscape of Rossetti's verse', *Studies in Iconography* Vol. 4 (1978) p. 149-60.

crucial in my analysis in the following chapter – and here in a sonnet he wrote 'many years before 1869',[19] his interest in developing this technique is already discernible.

In the sonnet 'For Our Lady of the Rocks' Rossetti engages his reader in a complex interpretation of the painting. On the one hand Rossetti considers through the painting particular questions regarding the unresponsiveness of faith, the fear of death and the possibility of life after death as represented by Christ's Resurrection and Mary's Assumption. Regardless of his deceptive interpretation of Leonardo's primal image, these questions are relevant, immediate, and representative of the concerns surrounding faith within Victorian society, and they are urgent questions Rossetti was not alone in asking. On the other hand, Rossetti undertakes an exercise in reading a painting through those features that became so important to his own images – those I outlined in the previous paragraph, and particularly his attempt to direct the viewer through a visual narrative. Through Rossetti's perceptive reading and reinterpretation of this image, the reader is confronted with conflicting visions based primarily on either the restriction of light and space to close the visual image, or the exploitation of the same to open the painting to the viewer. The sonnet effectively leads the viewing eye diagonally across the painting, from behind Mary's right shoulder and the watery grotto through the rocks, to her left hand as it hovers above the head of the infant Christ. Subsequently, while the figure of Mary remains the focus of the reading, both at the heart of the visual composition and the verbal response, Rossetti's reader is directed to view the painting through several points of focus that perhaps indicate a reading

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19. William Rossetti's notes to this sonnet discuss the actual version of the painting Rossetti saw and the date of composition. *Works*, 171.

sympathetic to Leonardo's vision of this scene.[20] These focal points are at once intimately connected to the visual narrative and yet appear somewhat removed from the body of the painting proper. The conclusion to this chapter attempts to determine the effective elements in this sonnet and others that look beyond the limit of Rossetti's personal experience to express significant contemporary considerations, while providing evidence of Rossetti's unique reading and creation of images themselves.

For 'Our Lady of the Rocks'
by Leonardo da Vinci.

Mother, is this the darkness of the end,
The Shadow of Death? and is that outer sea
Infinite imminent Eternity?
And does each death-pang by man's seed sustained
In Time's each instant cause thy face to bend
Its silent prayer upon the Son, while He
Blesses the dead with His hand silently
To His long day which hours no more offend?

Mother of grace, the pass is difficult,
Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered souls
Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through.
Thy name, O Lord, each spirit's voice extols,
Whose peace abides in the dark avenue
Amid the bitterness of things occult. (*Works* 171)

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20. Pietro C. Marani's exposition of this painting reveals that a possible source for Leonardo's composition – in particular its emphasis on Mary rather than Christ – could have been the semiheretical text *Apocalpsis Nova*. This text offered an unorthodox interpretation of the Immaculate Conception: 'According to his vision, the Virgin and St. John, rather than Christ, are the protagonists of the New Testament. The figure of Mary is assimilated to that of personified divine Wisdom, endowed with perfection and the gift of universal knowledge'. Pietro C. Marani, *Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Harry N. Abrahms, 2000) p. 123-53.

Standing behind this sonnet is the famous Pauline text (1 Corinthians 13:12); 'For now we see in a glass, darkly, but then face to face'.[21] This is a vision of imperfect form, of a poor reflection resulting in distorted or incomplete understanding.[22] The other key word here is 'darkly' or 'dimly', from the Greek *en ainigmati*, an enigma or riddle; the implication being that when one can see only partially, one should be wary as to how one interprets dogmatically. The sonnet manipulates this inability to see clearly and develops it into an effective shroud that cultivates a profound fear of the unknown. It is dominated by an abiding anxiety reminiscent of the Dantesque traveller in a hostile environment beyond his understanding. In Canto XXIV of *The Divine Comedy* Saint Peter asks a singular question which perhaps Rossetti sees as most significant and it resonates throughout this sonnet; '"Speak, good Christian, and declare yourself; Faith, what is it?"'[23] Rossetti explores the implications of this question, whether or not it can be answered satisfactorily and whether Rossetti and through him his society can be seen as responding positively to questions of faith or negatively.

Matthew Arnold's famous 'Rugby Chapel' written after the death of his father undertakes a similar theme, describing as it does a journey through hardship and physical extremity in search of Paradise.

See! In the rocks of the world
Marches the host of mankind,

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21. The Rossetti Archive. Ed. Jerome McGann. 1999. University of Virginia. 2000-04. <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu:2020/dynaweb/superbook/>.

22. The visual source for this image comes from ancient mirrors made of burnished metal which gave a dull, distorted reflection - and were a specialty of Corinth.

23. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1975), p. 271.

A feeble, wavering line.
Where are they tending?--A God
Marshall'd them, gave them their goal.—
Ah, but the way is so long!
Years they have been in the wild!
Sore thirst plagues them; the rocks,
Rising all round, overawe.
(ll. 171-79)[24]

Arnold's poem ends with the renewal of the straggling human race by heavenly spirits such as his father, who guide the 'wavering line' towards 'the bound of the waste,/On, to the City of God'(ll. 204-5). Arnold directs the reader towards the horizon, over which presumably lies salvation. This very physical manifestation of faith as a landscape of darkness and waste that must be negotiated in order to gain Paradise is not unique, as Rossetti's sonnet indicates.[25]

John Hollander confirms that the painting Rossetti knew was almost certainly the version in The National Gallery in London and not the earlier version now in The Louvre.[26] The Virgin Mary sits at the centre of the triangular composition, her right arm is draped over the shoulder of an infant while her left hand is held above the head of another, smaller child, who is supported by an angel. The children can be identified due to several associated iconographic signifiers. The reed cross and scroll identify the older boy on

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24. *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (London: OUP,1957), p. 286-92.

25. It is also a prevalent concern of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*; as various labours of spiritual faith are integrated with physical hardship to prove the moral worth of Victorian/Arthurian society.

26. John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: CUP, 1995), p. 151. The distinction is important because in the Louvre version the angel Gabriel is pointing at the infant St. John, thus lessening the visual impact of Mary's left hand, which is thrust towards the viewer.

Mary's right as John the Baptist.[27] The complexion of the picture then changes, we see the infant John paying homage to the infant Christ who in return can be seen blessing his relative and prophet.[28] The landscape surrounding the figures is one of towering rocks through which a glimpse of a tranquil sea green body of water can be seen. Studies in various plants and shrubs adorn the surrounding stalagmite and stalactite.

The painting indicates several concepts that occupied Leonardo and saw women situated in a variety of weirdly lit landscapes containing strange bodies of water. Portraits such as *Ginevra de' Benci* and *Mona Lisa* situate their subject in an environment that contributes to the painting's sense of the unnatural, lending the sitter a mysterious aspect. Rossetti's sonnet perpetuates this sense of Leonardo's ability to veil his subject in an ethereal light, instilling in the image an unnatural mysticism. Rossetti then develops this image further, pursuing the half-light into a darkness Leonardo does not imply.

Darkness is the abiding sense that permeates through this sonnet. It is an oppressive encroaching gloom in stark contrast to Rossetti's painted images of death or the imminence of death that I will examine later in the thesis. His paintings of the femme-fatales that represent the possibility of destruction in 'The Orchard-Pit' are a testament to the artist's ability as a colourist, and yet

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27. It is almost certain that these signifiers were not painted by Leonardo but added at an early date to clarify the identity of the child. See *Giotto to Dürer: Early Renaissance Painting in the National Gallery* (New Haven; London: Yale UP, 1991), p. 382.

28. An informed reader of this scene may be aware that groupings of these three principals were common in Italian religious painting. Apocryphal narrative relates that when returning from their journey to Egypt the Holy Family visited the home of Mary's relative Elizabeth and her son John, during which time the infant John displayed a respect for the Christ Child despite his tender years. Although lacking scriptural authority these scenes of Saint John and Christ together prior to Christ's baptism became common particularly in Florence due to Saint John's position as the patron saint of that city. Hollander identifies the angel as Gabriel and his traditional pre-eminence as the herald of birth specifically with relation to Elizabeth and Mary does support this identification.

here he has chosen to cloak the scene in darkness, to smother it in fatality. The sense of limitation and control Rossetti creates in this sonnet comes from using images of shadow and blindness, of darkness and the restriction of space. The control of the verbal and visual image by limiting the reader's ability to see clearly is prevalent throughout *The House of Life*, in sonnets such as 'Sleepless Dreams' (*Works* 87) and 'Secret Parting' (*Works* 89), in addition to dominating 'The Portrait' (*Works* 169), which I will discuss in chapter three.

Beyond the subduing darkness lies a direct allusion to the painting's horizon, 'that outer sea/Infinite imminent Eternity'; reminiscent of Arnold's imposing horizon which marked the end of the journey for lost bewildered souls. Kate Flint argues that in Victorian painting the horizon often represents 'not just the edge of the visible, but suggests futurity, the space into which the imagination and inner vision may travel: it connotes expansiveness'.[29] Contrary to this perception Rossetti identifies the horizon in this case as the limit of life, of existence, as the certainty of death. His use of 'Infinite . . . Eternity' while suggesting the continuation of life in the hereafter is itself subverted by the restrictive 'imminent', implying alternatively the inexorably premature finality of death. In *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* the horizon could barely be glimpsed through the open window and was replaced by the constrictive wall which signified female subjugation. The window indicated a promise of what lay beyond, in a world free of preordained motherhood, free of 'great sorrow and great reward'. In what will prove to be a particularly Dantesque interpretation of this image, Rossetti exploits the mystical landscape of Leonardo's painting to focus the gaze of the spectator. Rather than being constricted by the physical

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29. Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 285-312.

mass of rocks that define the focus of this painting, Rossetti invites the reader to contemplate what lies away in the distance, beyond the edge of vision, reason, and life. The physical constriction of the painting is replaced by the restriction of light, by the inevitability of death, and the mystery of resurrection.

While the octave of 'Our Lady of the Rocks' offered much to discuss in terms of Rossetti's reading of the painting, it offered little in the way of adherence to Leonardo's image. The reader is already aware that Rossetti's loyalty to pictorial narrative implied by the painting is negligible. In the sestet Rossetti begins to shape his verbal image of Leonardo's painting. Here the first physical reference to the appearance of the painting is made, 'keen as these rocks,' at once reminding the reader of the restrictive, oppressive weight of the dark space behind this image. The simile is reinforced by the metaphorical images which follow; 'the bewildered souls/Throng it like echoes. Blindly shuddering through'. The reader now envisages the physical presence of the souls of humanity wandering through a hostile environment reminiscent of Dante's journey through Hell in the quest for Paradise, or Arnold's 'host of mankind/A feeble, wavering line'(ll. 172-3).[30]

Just as Dante finds sanctuary and relief in the presence of his guide and master, Rossetti offers the abiding peace of the Lord 'in the dark avenue' even amidst the hostility created by the bleakness and the darkness, 'the bitterness of things occult'. This sonnet is an interrogation of traditional notions regarding the afterlife and the journey through hardship in order to gain entry to Heaven. The journey is made in life, and the way is fraught with danger signified by the

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30. Dante frequently uses rocks and water to indicate the passing from one section of Hell to another. See Canto XI 'Behold . . . within these rocks . . . are three lesser circles, from grade to grade, like those which thou art leaving'. Canto XXIV 'Up along the crag we took the way, which was rugged, narrow and difficult, and far steeper than the one before'.

darkness among the rocks; yet it may be negotiated by putting one's faith in the Lord and abiding in the peace He offers. Leonardo's landscape becomes a physical manifestation of the obstacles in the quest for spiritual fulfilment. The Virgin Mary is here the mediator of grace, a guide to the confused and directionless. Rossetti's verbal composition reflects that of the visual one in Leonardo's painting. The Virgin Mary is the primary focus of this painting, and the sonnet identifies the figure of Mary as the conduit between the mortal world and the image-less horizon of the divine vision. Rossetti seeks answers from the Virgin Mary regarding the mystery of death residing beyond this divine quartet and within the ethereal landscape of Leonardo's painting. His probing seeks to discover what lies behind the familiar, symbolic faces and poses of the Holy Family, what substance lies in the doctrine of the resurrection.

As I have noted Rossetti also responds to Leonardo's image of the Virgin Mary by directing the spectator's gaze away from its principals. The sonnet's octave contains three questions. The first two, 'is this the . . . Shadow of Death?' and 'is that . . . imminent Eternity?' provoke the images of the horizon and death I have commented on. The last is a more complicated enquiry regarding the nature of Mother to Son and God to Man and refers back to the 'Filii Filia' of 'For an Annunciation'. This marks a return to the concept of 'great sorrow and great reward' alluded to in the sonnet 'Mary's Girlhood'.

Leonardo's portraits of women in mysterious surroundings are remarkable due to the sense of depth afforded by the carefully crafted landscape that fills the background. In *The Virgin of the Rocks* this effect is enhanced by the forward movement of the Virgin's hand, thus creating the illusion of space both in front of the composition and behind. While I have concentrated mainly

on effect of the horizon and grotto behind the figures to the opening of Rossetti's sonnet, it is the seemingly disembodied hand of the Virgin that focuses the sonnet on her, and once again the poet directs his reader to view the image in a certain way. Hollander's assertion that the painting Rossetti saw was almost certainly the National Gallery version is important in that the London painting is altogether lighter than its counterpart. The figures are lit from in front, accentuating the space created by Mary's gesture, yet the grotto is lit from behind, giving further resonance to Rossetti's emphasis on the horizon beyond.

Rossetti's focus on the Virgin Mary defines the sonnet and also Leonardo's painting, the gesture she makes becomes integral to understanding not only this sonnet but also a great portion of Rossetti's work. The hand is suspended in space quite a distance from the head of the baby Christ [Plate 7]. The gesture is the extension of the 'silent prayer' Rossetti envisages from the Virgin, a visual reference to the 'great sorrow and great reward' which dominates his vision of Mary. The image created is one of weary resignation as the Virgin contemplates the sacrifice of her son to the cause of man's deliverance. The 'silent prayer' is offered as a consoling gesture which identifies with pain, 'the death-pang'. This relentless task of blessing the dead causes the Virgin to pity her son, to 'bend' her face towards him. This is a vision which encapsulates instantaneously the life of Christ from birth to death; 'In Time's each instant' man shall demand a blessing for the dead, and time becomes irrelevant as 'hours no more offend'. The hand then becomes symbolic of her gesture of sacrifice in the larger sense: it acts as a synecdoche that directs the reader to recall her significant role in the religious story. This focus on the hands of the female is a feature that dominates Rossetti's

Plate 7. *The Virgin of the Rocks* (detail).

portraiture and it links his vision of the Virgin Mary here to his other 'goddess' Proserpine. The curious relationship between mythological and divine Rossetti envisaged and engaged with throughout his work is evident when one compares this sonnet with the image of Proserpine he created.

Rossetti completed three canvases of the eight he began that portrayed the mythological goddess Proserpine [Plate 8].[31] He also wrote two versions of a sonnet to accompany the work, one in Italian and one in English. The eighth and final composition was completed just a few days before his death and is the only one to display the English version of the sonnet. It is also unique in that Rossetti replaced the dark hair of the model Jane Morris, with the red of Elizabeth Siddal. As a mythological figure Proserpine is highly suited to Rossetti's manifesto of replication and resurrection. Her abduction at the hands of Pluto and subsequent interment in the underworld for six months of each year places her at the centre of a struggle between life and death evinced through a multitude of contrasts of light and dark, hope and despair, renewal and decay, togetherness and separation, which are so integral to Rossetti's oeuvre. Without concentrating on the particulars of Proserpine's mythological narrative, the sonnet 'Proserpina' deals with specific concerns that Rossetti raises in the sonnet written on Leonardo's *The Virgin of the Rocks*.

Proserpina (for a picture)

Afar away the light that brings cold cheer
Unto this wall,—one instant and no more
Admitted at my distant palace-door.
Afar the flowers of Enna from this drear

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31. These were all ostensibly the same composition.

Dire fruit, which, tasted once, must thrall me here.
Afar those skies from this Tartarean grey
That chills me: and afar, how far away,
The nights that shall be from the days that were.

Afar from mine own self I seem, and wing
Strange ways in thought, and listen for a sign:
And still some heart unto some soul doth pine,
(Whose sounds mine inner sense is fain to bring,
Continually together murmuring,)—
"Woe's me for thee, unhappy Proserpine!" (*Works* 253)

This sonnet begins by evoking a distinct lack of light, 'that brings cold cheer' for an 'instant and no more'. This image is far from life, far from the vale of Enna where Proserpine was snatched by the lustful Pluto. The sonnet casts a shadow over that life once known, conveying a feeling of the chill death of the nights to come. The transient, ephemeral nature of existence is constructed through this image of light restricted, much as it is in 'Our Lady of the Rocks', where 'Time's each instant' demanded a blessing for the dead; and the 'Tartarean grey' invokes the 'dark avenue/Amid the bitterness of things occult'. The sestet of the sonnet gives a voice to the trapped female, echoing the transformation of Mary following the Annunciation: 'Afar from mine own self I seem, and wing/Strange ways in thought, and listen for a sign:/And still some heart unto some soul doth pine'. As the immortal female figure cast in the role of sorrow and loss Proserpine prefigures the Virgin Mary, but in Rossetti's art she is created out of Mary; she is a product of his multiple visions of Mary's 'great sorrow and great reward': 'What more of anguish than/Endurance oft hath lived through, the whole space/Through night till day, passed weak upon her face'('For a Virgin and Child by Hans Memmelinck', *Works* 190).

Plate 8. *Proserpine*.
1882 oil on canvas, 77.5 x 37.5cm
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

Rossetti's Proserpine, like his interpretation of Leonardo's Mary, abides in a foreign place that is dark and difficult to reach: it seems that the exclusion of light coincides with the physical distancing of the female body. Proserpine envisages a distant source of light, similar to the light shining through the back of Leonardo's canvas, through the rocks where the souls of the dead come 'blindly shuddering' in Rossetti's sonnet.

Rossetti's painting of Proserpine contains the instantly recognisable features of Jane Morris, her abundant mass of wavy black hair painted a distinctly Pre-Raphaelite red. The background wall behind the model's head is lit by the light from 'afar' of the accompanying sonnet. The viewer is focused on the slender elongated hands, one of which holds the pomegranate of mythology, and on the sorrowful, distracted face of the model. The model's hands act in a similar way to Mary's gesture in the previous painting, and inform Rossetti's interpretation of it [Plate 9]. Here they make a profound gesture towards the entire story of Proserpine – as one hand grasps the other – attempting to hold back the bitter fruit which caused her stay in the underworld to be permanent. In this one action Rossetti creates the visual referent to the entire mythology surrounding the portrait. The gesture of restraint, at once so subtle, is nevertheless of momentous import. It is in this gesture that Rossetti's portrait of Jane Morris becomes a portrait of trapped womanhood, a sorrowful, insightful vision that mingles fantasy and reality, and informs much of our reading and misreading of Rossetti's female portraits.

The contemplative mood of Proserpine echoes that of Mary in Leonardo's work. In both cases the face of the female is turned from the spectator, as if absorbed in some quiet reverie beyond the realm of reality.

Plate 9. *Proserpine* (detail).

Rossetti's sonnets on the Holy family confirm his interest in the inner psyche of the divine, and his depiction of an amalgam of Jane Morris and Elizabeth Siddal in the role of Proserpine indicates his deliberate placement of the divine concept of knowledge coupled with sorrow into the hands of the artist. His own contemplation of the female divinity took on a variety of representations but his abiding interest in the reduction of divine or ultimate sorrow remains throughout his artistic career, beginning with the Virgin Mary and ending with Proserpine.

In both Rossetti's sonnets the threshold between life and death is rendered ambiguously. As in Arnold's 'Rugby Chapel' it is represented in terms of a barrier which lies 'beyond': an indecipherable, featureless boundary between life and whatever waits after. Flint convincingly argues that the horizon became a focal point to Victorian artists due to a number of factors, among which were geographical expansion and colonialism, the safe enclosure of country and family, the figurative expansion of upper and middle-class women's horizons, or, conversely, unrelieved monotony and tedium. These are ingenious interpretations of why Victorian artists concentrated much of their time on sea and landscapes which included an expansive or enclosed horizon, yet none approach why Rossetti would use Leonardo's seemingly inaccessible horizon, so implied by the remote 'outer sea', to concentrate the viewer's mind on the certainty of death. This is the horizon beyond the wall, beyond the rocks, beyond the globe, beyond female emancipation and beyond monotony and tedium. What Rossetti proposes here is an interrogation of the typology traditionally associated with the Resurrection and Assumption.

Although the prevailing theme of the sonnet concerns the journey made in life in order to achieve Paradise after death, it is what exactly happens after death that is of interest to Rossetti. The questions are directed to Mary due to her prescience of the events in her son's life imparted to her at the time of the Annunciation, during the moment of her transformation. In this context the Virgin Mary takes on the role of Rossetti's confessor: she represents to him an outlet for his guilt for doubting the doctrine of the resurrection. The female role as a repository of knowledge is a proposition the sestet of the sonnet confirms. It is also prevalent in Rossetti's ekphrases written after other paintings of the Holy Family. 'For a Virgin and Child by Hans Memmelinck' indicates this pre-occupation with the 'great sorrow' that this foreknowledge brings:

> . . . Since first her task began
> She hath known all. What more of anguish than
> Endurance oft hath lived through, the whole space
> Through night till day, passed weak upon her face
> While the heard lapse of darkness slowly ran? (*Works* 190)

The sonnet 'For the Holy Family' is written after a Michelangelo painting depicting Mary withholding prophetic writings from her son. Rossetti voices the mother's concern over the fate of her son, 'The sorrows that Thy manhood's lot must rue/And dire acquaintance of Thy grief' (*Works* 232).

Rossetti's ekphrases addressing the Holy Family seek to determine the nature of the shadow in death and the possibility of life in the hereafter. This is the primary task of Rossetti's verbal representation of *The Virgin of the Rocks*. Just as Arnold envisaged his father as a Heavenly spirit whose purpose was to guide the lost of mankind towards spiritual redemption, Rossetti seeks to diminish the boundary between man and the figure of Christ. Arnold's

identification of his father, a personal tangible memory as part of the heavenly host, implies the same intimacy between man and God. Rossetti's deliberate omission of the angel Gabriel from his narrative reflects his proclivity to expose the secular aspect of what he sees as important in this image. The idea of Christ as a mortal being who faced similar problematic questions is echoed in the prophetic sonnet 'The Passover in the Holy Family':

> Here meet together the prefiguring day
> And day prefigured . . .
> Lo! The slain lamb confronts the Lamb to slay.
>
> The pyre is piled. What agony's crown attained,
> What shadow of Death the Boy's fair brow subdues
> Who holds that blood wherewith the porch is stained
> By Zachary the priest? John binds the shoes
> He deemed himself not worthy to unloose;
> And Mary culls the bitter herbs ordained. (*Works* 210)

In this sonnet Rossetti again examines the idea of Christ as man rather than God. Christ's feelings of mortality and His mother's knowledge of that mortality prior to His birth are key moments for Rossetti. Mary's 'great sorrow and her great reward' is to witness a crown of 'agony's attained'.

Rossetti's philosophy on the duty of art to celebrate religion is outlined in *Hand and Soul* (*Works* 549-59) and forms a strong undercurrent to *The House of Life* where Passion and Worship become central ideologies. The instructions of Chiaro's Soul encourage the amalgamation of man's passion with the worship of the divine, and sit well within Rossetti's artistic manifesto: 'Give thou to God no more than he asketh of thee; but to man also, that which is man's' (*Works* 554). Rossetti's art echoes this endeavour and his reduction of the divine to the mortal tangible object is a key part of this process. Chiaro's

Soul explains: 'Only by making thyself his equal can he learn to hold communion with thee, and at last own thee above him' (*Works* 554). This artistic licence granted to Chiaro and therefore naturally to Rossetti sees him committed to the approach outlined above. The revelation of the divine as mortal offers an opportunity to reflect on spiritual realities and therefore the purpose of the divine within contemporary society. Rossetti contemplates the ability of art to imitate divine structures without complete comprehension of their full meaning.

The sense of an imperfect vision, of seeing 'through a glass darkly', imbues the poem 'St Luke the Painter', as the 'soulless self-reflections of man's skill' somehow evoke images of divine purpose in 'some deeper way' through symbols it doesn't truly understand:

> Give honour unto Luke Evangelist;
> For he it was(the aged legends say)
> Who first taught Art to fold her hands and pray.
> Scarcely at once she dared to rend the mist
> Of devious symbols; but soon having wist
> How sky breadth and field-silence and this day
> Are symbols also in some deeper way,
> She looked through these to God and was God's priest.
>
> And if, past noon, her toil began to irk,
> And she sought talismans, and turned in vain
> To soulless self-reflections of man's skill,--
> Yet now, in this twilight, she might still
> Kneel in the latter grass to pray again,
> Ere the night cometh and she may not work. (*Works* 99)

Here Saint Luke integrates the secular world of art and the divine world of the miracles of the Holy Family. In order to paint his own soul, as Chiaro is instructed, Rossetti needs to reduce the mystery of the divine and assimilate it within his secular world of art. A significant step he takes towards this

achievement and one that permeates throughout the entire canon of his art is the story *Saint Agnes of Intercession* (*Works* 557), intended for publication in the fifth edition of *The Germ*.[32]

William Rossetti suggested this story was a suitable 'pendant' to *Hand and Soul*, yet while *St. Agnes* may seem less intimate than its more famous predecessor, the connection it makes between life, death and resurrection is more compelling than *Hand and Soul*, and it is a searching appraisal of this vital process in Rossetti's work.[33] In addition the significant shift from addressing the male to the female divinity completes the journey Rossetti began in the sonnets regarding Mary, and also in Chiaro's identification of his 'soul' as a beautiful woman that he is able to reproduce on canvas. The story remained unfinished at Rossetti's death although his brother records that he had returned to it once in 1870 and then again in the last few months of his life.[34] Tradition has it that St. Agnes was a thirteen year-old Roman virgin martyred in the fourth century. Superstition adds that a virgin who prayed on St. Agnes' Eve might be granted a vision of her future spouse. Rossetti's story does not engage directly with St. Agnes herself; it is a contemporary Victorian tale about an aspiring young artist who discovers a chilling connection between a painting of his own, a likeness of his sweetheart, and one that inspired him as a child to pursue his chosen career. The story follows the young man's obsessive search for the painting through the galleries of Italy, finally reaching the portrait of St. Agnes painted by the fictional Bucciuolo d'Orli Angiolieri in Perugia:

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32. The Germ was discontinued after the fourth edition in April 1850.

33. WMR noted in his diary for 21 March 1850 that DGR was even then "writing. . .a tale entitled 'An Autopsychology'" (see WMR, *The P.R.B. Journal* 64).

34. *Works*, notes, p. 680.

> The picture is about half the size of life: it represents a beautiful woman, seated, in the costume of the painter's time, richly adorned with jewels; she holds a palm branch, and a lamb nestles to her feet. The glory round her head is a device pricked without colour on the gold background, which is full of the faces of angels. The countenance was the one known to me, by a feeble reflex, in childhood; it was also the exact portrait of Mary, feature by feature. I had been absent from her for more than five months, and it was like seeing her again.

The catastrophic realisation the young artist experiences indicates three major concerns Rossetti approached in his career. The first is that of resurrection with which this chapter deals. The second is the meeting of the self, of which the doppelganger image *How They Met Themselves* is Rossetti's depiction.[35] The third is the deliberate portrayal of St. Agnes here not as the thirteen year-old girl that legend suggests she was, but as a beautiful woman, and in this the reference to Dante's Beatrice is unmistakeable.[36] The story continues as the artist turns to the self-portrait of Bucciuolo in the same gallery and is confronted with an image of himself: 'I can recall my feeling at that moment, only as one of the most lively and exquisite fear'.

The fictitious details of Bucciuolo's life and loss of love are supplied by the gallery catalogue. The Italian artist had been separated from his beloved by the warring factions of Florence, she having been exiled with her family to the city of Lucca. In the pain of their separation she fell fatally ill and called for him to paint a final portrait in remembrance of her. Thus Bucciuolo hastened at

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35. See chapter three for further analysis of this image.

36. Beatrice Portinari was 8 years old when Dante first saw and fell in love with her. She died age 24. In chapter three I comment on Rossetti's inability to understand the full complexities of the concept of medieval love, to which can be attributed his mistranslation of the *Vita Nuova*. I suggest that his misreading of Dante's extremely spiritual love for Beatrice – comparing it as Rossetti does to the more overtly erotic love poems of Dante's contemporaries is how Rossetti arrives at this vision of womanhood in the child.

once to do so, but: 'On the third day, while Bucciuolo was still at work, she died without moving'. While resembling the denouement to the Edgar Allan Poe[37] short story *The Oval Portrait*, Rossetti's ideas regarding the psychological catastrophe embodied in the meeting of the self have deeper resonance. It is clear that his concern is the connection between mortality and divinity, manifest in both the concept of resurrection in the tale, and the re-imagining of the divine child St. Agnes as a beautiful woman beloved by an artist whose gift to her is the equivalent of being immortalised in paint.

Rossetti illustrated the moment of death in the medieval-style work *Bonifazio's Mistress* [Plate 10]. As attendants and the artist try to revive her, the eerie image of the woman's face stares out from the canvas beside her lifeless body. There is a complex circularity at work here as Rossetti consciously endeavours to connect those aspects of life, death and resurrection that interested him. That the St. Agnes of legend, a thirteen year-old virgin, can be replaced by the beautiful woman who represents the artist's sweetheart, indicates the malleability of the divine body. But the depiction of death inevitably invokes the transcendent spirit in the hope of resurrection in the afterlife.

While Rossetti examined this concept verbally in *The House of Life*, he repeatedly revisited the idea with his seven portraits of Elizabeth Siddal as *Beata Beatrix*, which occupy a unique position in his portraiture. Part of the uniqueness of these portraits comes from the time of their conception and execution, coming after Siddal's death in February 1862. In chapter two I

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37. See chapter three for an examination of the Poe story and its relation to Rossetti's 'The Portrait'.

Plate 10. Study for *Bonifazio's Mistress*.
c. 1856 ink on paper, 19.4 x 17.1cm
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

consider Rossetti's portraiture of the 1860's, which is characterised by brilliant colour and bound by a common narrative of female subjugation. *Beata Beatrix* [Plate 11] is distinguished from this group due in part to the subject matter, and in part to the execution of the painting itself.

In the story of *St. Agnes* Rossetti's artist narrator describes his first meeting with his beloved in terms that seem to embody Rossetti's perfect vision of the female form, one that he revisited in many different ways: 'I made sure she was very beautiful, from her tranquil body and the way that she held her hands'.[38] The portrait of Elizabeth Siddal as Beatrice appears to convey the entirety of the very spiritual side of this story. The images are given a hazy ethereality, the colours are muted and the pose of Beatrice is a trancelike sleep prior to her transcendence. Siddal's face is painted slightly upturned, her eyes are closed and her mouth is fractionally open. Her hands rest in her lap and receive a white poppy of death from a heavenly dove, thus signalling a return to the iconography of his first painting, the 'Girlhood of Mary Virgin', and the dove of the heavenly spirit. In the context of Rossetti's personal relationship with his model, the symbolism takes on altogether different connotations. The white poppy can be seen as a source of laudanum, an overdose of which had caused Siddal's death. Her immortalisation in this way indicates the close correspondence between this painting and the story of St. Agnes. The narrator of the story believes that somehow he will be responsible for the death of his sweetheart, thus returning to the distinctly Rossettian concept that the painted portrait can in some way prolong life while simultaneously representing death. In addition the story contains strong overtones of foreseeing, which links it to

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38. In chapter two I consider Rossetti's use of the hands in his portraits of the 1860's. Rossetti frequently used the position of the hands to move the viewing eye around a painting.

the Cumaen Sybil and to Mary. While the narrative has its origins in Dante's visions of Beatrice Portinari, Rossetti's emphasis on the moment of transformation confirms the connection with Mary's Assumption. The idea of rebirth became to him a constant artistic aspiration, one that came to dominate his work in both word and image; and was the moving concept behind his most coherent collection of poetry, *The House of Life*, which I will examine in chapter three.

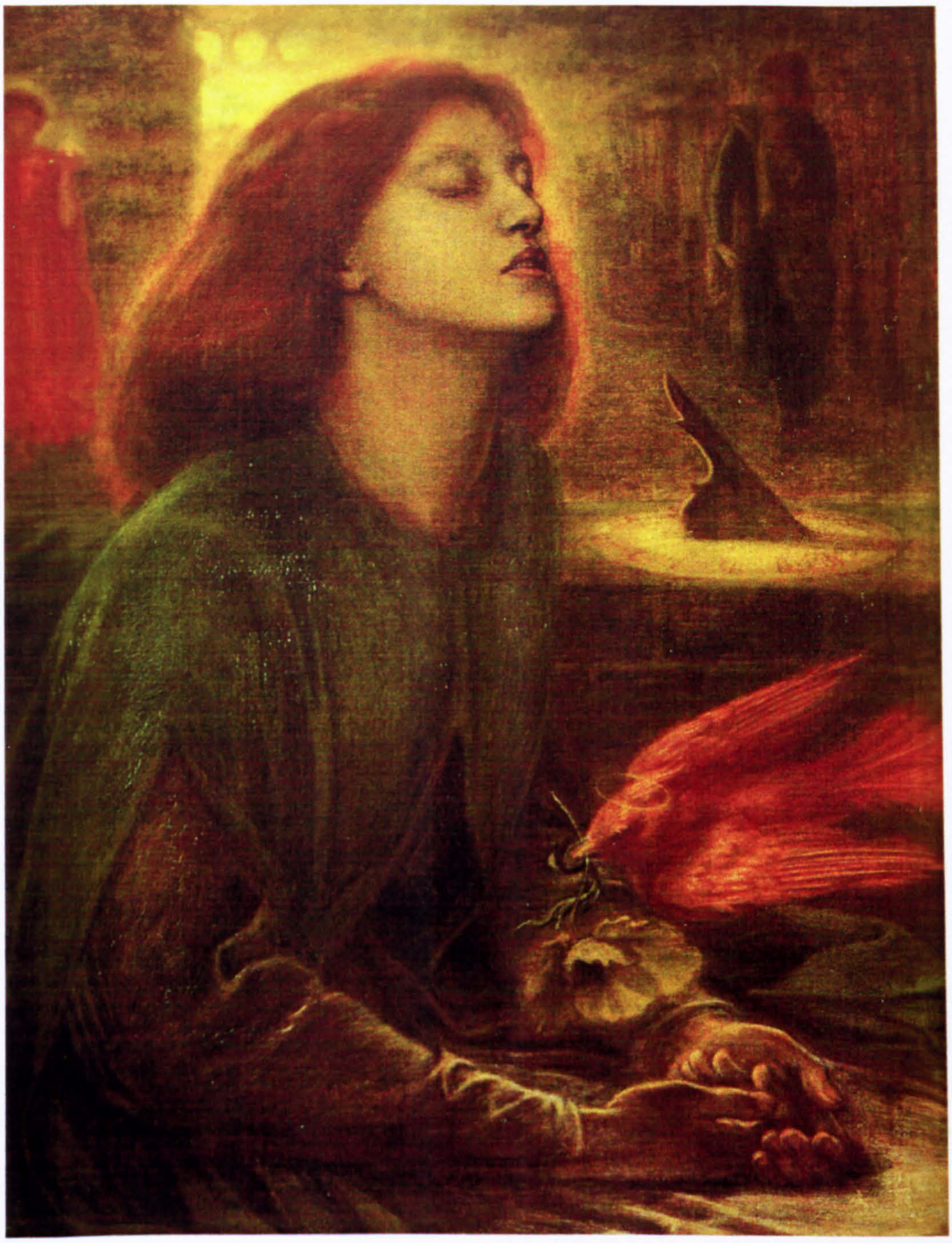

Plate 11. Beata Beatrix
c. 1863-70 oil on canvas, 86.4 x 66cm
Tate Gallery, London.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ORCHARD-PIT

> ...since the author of *Tom Jones* was buried, no writer of fiction among us has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN. We must shape him, and give him a conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art...Even the gentlemen of our age...we cannot show as they are, with the notorious foibles and selfishness of their lives and their education. You will not hear it— it is best to know it— what moves in the real world, what passes in society, in the clubs, colleges, mess-rooms— what is the life and talk of your sons.[1]

In the preface to *Pendennis* Thackeray expounded his frustration at the inability of contemporary 'Art' and polite society to engage with the vices of its privileged male fraternity, hinting at the hidden recesses of the Victorian male psyche. This 'absence' of the male can be examined through Rossetti's work in the series of female portraits and accompanying ekphrastic poetry he produced during the 1860's. By implicating the male gaze as a voyeuristic, unidentifiable solicitor of female prostitution, Rossetti's word image constructs contrive to expose that absence which Thackeray laments as 'the life and talk of your sons'.

In October 2001 The Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham celebrated the University centenary with an exhibition entitled '*The Blue Bower*: Rossetti in the 1860's'.[2] The central image of the exhibition consisting of over 20 of Rossetti's paintings and drawings was the sumptuous portrait of Fanny Cornforth Rossetti painted in 1865, *The Blue Bower*.[3]

> Described in the gallery catalogue as the 'climax of the series', *The Blue Bower* [Plate 12] is without question a dazzling masterpiece of colour and sensuality,

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1. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Pendennis* I (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1910), p. lv.

2. Paul Spencer-Longhurst, *'The Blue Bower': Rossetti in the 1860s* (London: Barber Institute of Fine Arts and Scala Publishers Ltd, 2000).

3. ibid. p. 50.

of opulent detail, and it signals the height of Rossetti's achievement with colour in the oil paintings of this period. Unfortunately, in the very act of focusing the exhibition on Rossetti's prefiguring of abstract painting through the overwhelming dominance afforded to the intense colouring of this particular portrait, the exhibitors divert the attention of the spectator from the effect of colour and space on the narrative subtext of these works. The catalogue claims that Rossetti achieves 'advances in the direction of abstraction', 'by promoting colour as the primary subject of his painting, giving it precedence over narrative and even meaning'.[4] That this painting, and indeed any of those which characterize this period in Rossetti's development, subordinate 'narrative and even meaning' to the harmonious combination of colour and decorative pattern, is not an unjustified claim. However a more productive reading of these paintings reveals a narrative subtext as it is achieved through pattern, colour and structure, rather than eclipsed by them. The recognition and implication of the male spectator in relation to the female image is integral to the development of a consistent appraisal of these paintings which, while not denying Rossetti his place as a precursor to modern abstract art, recognizes his integration of abstract ideas and forms into the highly contentious Victorian narrative concerning masculine representations which aligned the female image with commercial transaction.

The absence of the male alluded to by Thackeray becomes a complicated assault on gender relations when viewed from the context of Rossetti's portraits of the 1860's. The proposal that the Victorian male is not necessarily the dominant party in a relationship he is traditionally seen to

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4. ibid. p. 15-16.

Plate 12. *The Blue Bower.*
1865 oil on canvas, 84 x 70.9cm
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

control exposes commonly asserted theoretical perceptions that designate to the female only the role of mirror image to masculine fantasy and identity. Furthermore, what may already be evident is that the implied 'absence' of the male is in fact not an absence at all. Rather, it acknowledges through the residual signs that imply 'absence', a male presence that becomes the object of the gaze, the manipulated, the designated; as opposed to the manipulator, the designator, the director of the gaze. In Rossetti's portraits the implied presence of the male reverses the traditional 'mirror of desire', projecting as they do an image of feminine beauty that undermines male domination through colour and form combined at times with a considerable narrative pretext which Rossetti supplies through the ekphrastic sonnet. Thus the artist cultivates his fascination with the ineffable quality of the divine or mythological image discussed in the previous chapter. Rossetti engages the opposition between male and female, life and death through a series of portraits that question the male role in the subordination of women. Simultaneously his painting begins to make the subtle transformation from the narrative story-telling characteristic to Victorian portraiture, to the abstraction he undoubtedly prefigured.

Whereas the critical orthodoxy sustained by Spencer-Longhurst in the Barber Institute catalogue maintains this transformation 'further distanced Rossetti from Victorian narrative painting',[5] in this chapter I will demonstrate how these portraits exercise their narrative force in a manner that, while informing and foregrounding abstract painting, contribute to the powerful statement made in Rossetti's paintings of the same period that verbally and visually implicate the gender imbalance perceived by Thackeray.

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5. ibid. p. 60.

Against a backdrop of political debate on contagious disease legislation and the creation of new laws governing divorce and the state of the family, Rossetti's sensual portraits react explosively when mixed with the loss of sexual passion he perceived in the Victorian marriage, described in 1884 by Engels[6] as the first form of marriage and family to be based on economic and not natural conditions. John Stuart Mill wrote in 1869 that 'the wife is the actual bond-servant of her husband, no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called'.[7] This statement introduces the concept of the transaction at the heart of this discussion. The peculiarity common to the privileged male gentleman Thackeray describes is his propensity to execute what is essentially a trade-off between the sexual pleasure he purchases from the prostitute, and the desexualized marriage transaction he enters with his wife.

> The intellectual climate within which these transactions were sanctioned and regulated held largely that men were not to blame for their indulgences; rather that an inherent promiscuity in women was at fault. William Acton asserted that 'prostitution is a transitory state through which multitudes of women pass'.[8] W. R. Greg advocated that women were devoid of desire until 'exposed to exciting causes'. In 1850 he wrote:

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6. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, introd. Michele Barrett. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), Chapter One, 'Family'.

7. John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longman, 1909). Quoted in Harrison *Dark Angel.*

8. William Acton, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities, with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (London: Churchill, 1857). While Acton claimed that male lust was a primary and active part of the act of prostitution, the representation of women as unable or disinclined to be proactive enough to avoid having to prostitute themselves ostensibly leads into my argument.

> Their affections engaged, their confidence secured; thinking no evil themselves they permit caresses which in themselves, and to them, indicate no wrong, and are led on ignorantly and thoughtlessly from one familiarity to another, not conscious where those familiarities must inevitably end, till ultimate resistance becomes almost impossible.[9]

It was this type of indictment that led the Victorian male to create and maintain an ideal female image of dutiful wife, mother and home-maker, thus consequently sustaining the dominant role of men in the lives of women not only within illicit sexual relationships but within domestic, social and marital spheres. Rossetti's representation of the female through his portraiture challenges the power imbalance evident in male-female relationships, sexual or otherwise. If we read these images and their accompanying ekphrases as symbols of the decay of social union, the paintings implicate the male voyeur as an active participant in the illicit transaction described above.

Such analysis does not end with the recognition of male authority in illicit relationships. A comprehensive re-reading of these ekphrastic works demonstrates that Rossetti's representation of female figures in these portraits undermines traditional depictions of women during this period that appeared to paint out the female character in the very act of painting it in. The accompanying ekphrastic poetry activates speculation regarding the visual implications of the image described, thus enabling Rossetti to converse through his images with the spectator of his paintings.

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9. W. R. Greg, 'Prostitution', *Westminster Review*, 53 (July 1850).

Bryson argues that the power of the image to intervene in the social fabric of culture has been underestimated due to the logistical administration of the image itself, leading subsequently to a 'platitude of instrumental inadequacy' making 'it difficult to think through, the subtle and far more important truth of topology'. The power in discourse, according to Bryson, lies in the collision of discursive forms – and when discussing Gericault's portraits of the mad or Manet's *Olympia* at the Salon in 1865 he observes:

> its(Olympia) juxtaposition of Odalisque and Prostitute or Gericault's elision of the social fixity of the portrait with the social placelessness of the insane – occur *within* the social formation, not as echoes or duplicates of prior events in the social base that are then expressed, limpidly, without distortion, on the surface of the canvas, but as signifying work: the effortful and unprecedented pulling away of discursive forms from their normal location and into *this* painting, *this* image.[10]

Thus it is that 'signifying work' is achieved through painting in localized 'moments of change', 'in discourse', and not necessarily through the vast, centralized power located in the 'privileged zones' of the cultural superstructure: 'in capital, in the factory, in the production and distribution of wealth'.[11] Rossetti's images that do not sit complementarily with the traditional angel of Victorian womanhood are examples of such moments of change, provoking as they do a collision between existing conventional discourses and alternate, challenging and ultimately disruptive representations of women.

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10. Norman Bryson, ed. *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, (Oxford: Polity Press and Blackwell, 1991), p. xxii.

11. ibid.

Rossetti places himself and the viewer within a social code of recognition described in theoretical terms as a consequential social event, as consensual activity; and by Thackeray as, 'the life and talk of your sons'. W. J. T. Mitchell describes a ménage à trois between the painter, the poet and the reader. Subsequently '[I]f ekphrasis typically expresses a desire for a visual object (whether to possess or praise), it is also typically an offering of this expression as a gift to the reader'.[12] This, according to Mitchell is what characterizes ekphrasis as 'a social practice'. When Rossetti's portraits are read with ekphrastic texts the paintings are relocated within the field of social discourse. Rossetti exists within this social structure; he paints his model and returns her to society as 'fresh and renewing currents of discourse' stimulated by the signs he has appended her as *Helen* or *Lilith* or *Venus*. While contemporary portrait artists[13] contentedly manufactured benign feminine derivations based on themes such as Patmore's 'The Angel in the House' or Tennyson's 'Mariana', Rossetti offered an aggressive, powerful feminine figure that challenged these types of images; targeted to attract, captivate, and demand recompense from the male voyeur and heretofore, master of the house. Rossetti's personal opinion on the benign female type is perhaps best summarized in a letter to Allingham in which he praises 'The Angel in the House': 'Of course it is very good indeed, yet will one ever want to read it again?'[14]

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12. W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the other', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, xci/ 3 (1992), p. 164.

13. For example, Charles West Cope, *A Life Well Spent* 1862; Private Collection: or Edwin Landseer, *Windsor Castle in Modern Times* 1841-45; The Royal Collection.

14. Fredeman, II, 8.

In a 1988 essay 'Women, Art, and Power' Linda Nochlin[15] undertakes an examination of several visual images that eschews an iconographic reading in favour of an ideological one. Nochlin claims 'the operations of power on the level of ideology, . . . manifest themselves in a much more diffuse, more absolute, yet paradoxically, more elusive sense' than a thematic reading based solely on iconographic recognition. It is with this type of reading in mind that I will approach firstly the problem I perceive in the Barber Institute's decision to thematically and visually align these portraits with two paintings of the Venetian Renaissance. Secondly, I will examine two very different pieces of modern art to demonstrate the way Rossetti's innovative use of colour and repetition of form prefigured modernism in a way that, rather than suppressing a visual narrative, instigated an exchange that forced from the spectator a deliberated response to the painting. Thereafter I will consider four of the portraits from this period through a combination of iconographical and ideological reading, all of which assume, assert and ultimately undermine, in Nochlin's words; 'men's power over, superiority to, difference from, and necessary control of women, assumptions which are manifested in the visual structures as well as the thematic choices of the pictures'.[16]

Rossetti's admiration for the painters of the Venetian Renaissance and their subsequent influence on his work is acknowledged and well documented. However the deliberate juxtaposition of Rossetti's portraits with the Venetian works by Jacopo Palma il Vecchio: *Portrait of a Poet* (c.1516), and *Portrait of*

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15. Linda Nochlin, 'Women, Art and Power' in *Visual Theory*, ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Oxford: Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1991), pp. 13-46 (p. 13).

16. ibid.

a Young Lady (c.1522-4), is incongruous at best. In basing part of their assessment of the 'Blue Bower' portraits on the comparison between these paintings and by inviting the spectator to do so, this exhibition suggests a tradition that reduces Rossetti's work to reflections of the earlier pieces, which they are not. With the exception of *Beata Beatrix* (1880) and *Proserpine* (1882), the exhibition included ten portraits ranging from *Bocca Baciata* (1859) to *La Ghirlandata* (1873) that ostensibly reveal the artist consistently returning to the same discursive space, and re-enacting a ritualized, systematic representation of the female image. What remains is a significant body of work referred to in the Barber catalogue as 'subjectless'. I suggest that the complex manifestation of the male gaze is implicated through its absence from the visual portrait, by what is unspoken, even unthinkable, and is in fact, the 'subjectless' theme of these works.

Before continuing it is necessary to address the inherent assumption I have made that the viewer of these works is male. Clark proposes of the imagined spectator of Manet's *Le Chemin de Fer* that: 'It is above all in the pictures' intimation that the looking they invite, or anticipate, will only truly make sense if it is imagined as coming from an actual social and sexual situation that they open most fully, but also most unresolvedly, onto a vanished historical present'.[17] Accordingly, while I do not reserve the sole right of spectatorship of these works for the male spectator, my intention is to view them as coming from and returning to a specifically gendered male space. Indeed Rossetti's aversion to public exhibition was tantamount to the creation

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17. T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, rpt [with revisions] 1999), p. xxii.

of a select spectatorship for his work.[18] His patrons including Ruskin and McCracken in his early career, often commissioned work or recommended Rossetti to similarly minded benefactors. Several of the portraits included in this chapter were only publicly exhibited after the artist's death at memorial exhibitions at the Royal Academy and Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1883. Thus it is possible to discern the nature of Rossetti's primary spectator at least, and that would appear to be male. Finally I advocate, as Clark concludes, that 'it is what the picture does with its own identities that matters, not which identities it tries on first as its "own"'.

It is possible to identify no less than twelve Rossetti paintings (excluding their various copies and studies) completed during the period from 1863 to 1868 that fall into this category. All are portraits of women in various poses and costume, yet all redolent with the taint of Rossetti's poetical creation 'The Orchard-Pit' (*Works* 239) and its theme of the alluring, irresistible and ultimately deadly femme-fatale:

> Piled deep below the screening apple-branch
> They lie with bitter apples in their hands:
> And some are only ancient bones that blanch,
> And some had ships that last year's wind did launch,
> And some were yesterday the lords of lands.
>
> In the soft dell, among the apple-trees,
> High up above the hidden pit she stands,
> And there for ever sings, who gave to these,
> That lie below, her magic hour of ease,
> And those her apples holden in their hands.

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18. In a letter to William Bell Scott in 1853 (Fredeman, I, 254-57) Rossetti vented his frustration at the Royal Academy and announced his intention to withdraw from public exhibitions which he did so after the Old Watercolour Society Winter exhibition in 1852-3. He showed three watercolours that year: *Rossovestita*, *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies him her Salutation*, and *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*.

This in my dreams is shown me; and her hair
Crosses my lips and draws my burning breath;
Her song spreads golden wings upon the air,
Life's eyes are gleaming from her forehead fair,
And from her breasts the ravishing eyes of Death.

Men say to me that sleep hath many dreams,
Yet I knew never but this dream alone:
There, from a dried-up channel, once the stream's,
The glen slopes up; even such in sleep it seems
As to my waking sight the place well known.

My love I call her, and she loves me well:
But I love her as in the maelstrom's cup
The whirled stone loves the leaf inseparable
That clings to it round all the circling swell,
And that the same last eddy swallows up.

Rossetti's dream is that of the golden-haired siren who lures men to their death with her song, and kills them with an apple of desire. Their corpses lie strewn in the pit in various degrees of decay as mute and ineffectual testimony to any who may be inveigled by the woman's lethal charms. While it has long been the provenance of critical orthodoxy to limit the influence of these portraits by dismissing them as escapist fantasy – 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti . . . longed for an autonomous aesthetic dreamworld independent of reality, of existing time and space',[19] – this no longer seems a legitimate reading of these paintings. It is more productive to examine them as a creative reaction to a power imbalance perceived in Victorian sexual relationships and the representation of women therein. The narrative implied through these works may not be that traditionally associated with Victorian narrative painting, rather

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19. Wolfgang Lottes, 'Approaching Botticelli: English Approaches 1860-1890' in *Icons - Texts - Iconotexts*, ed. Peter Wagner (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), p. 261.

they demonstrate a different aspect of representation that urges new methods of reading images and their inherent meanings.[20] While Thackeray lamented the loss of potency suffered by artists of his generation through their unwillingness to identify and occupy the space of the 'absent' privileged male transgressor; Rossetti is willing to indict, implicate, coerce and scrutinize the actions of the male because of his and their place *within* the social structure rather than their absence from it.

Palma il Vecchio's *Portrait of a Poet*[21] [Plate 13] was purchased by the National Gallery in 1860 as part of the Beaucousin collection and was almost certainly viewed by Rossetti around this time. The subject, believed to be the poet Lodovico Ariosto, is seated before a pattern depicting the laurel foliage of a bay tree, traditionally associated with his profession. The colouring of this portrait is predominantly dark, relieved by the splash of red costume on the sleeves, the white undershirt and pale neck. Ariosto's pose is thoughtful, his face is contemplative and his gaze is directed away from the spectator. The immediate problem raised by the catalogue comparison is the fact that the sitter is male, whereas all of Rossetti's portraits included here are women. The catalogue compares the patterned laurel background in *Portrait of a Poet* to Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata* [Plate 14] and the abundance of marigolds featured there, 'which in Rossetti's language of flowers symbolize grief and regret'.[22]

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20. I would like to specify that I am not suggesting that these portraits are narrative painting as the term is generally used, and that portraits certainly are not normally regarded as narrative in the same manner as history or genre painting, in that they detach characters whom we might expect to encounter in narrative painting from their narrative context. My suggestion is that Rossetti's portraits are narrative in a new way, one that challenges us to read an implied narrative into, from and out of the historical moment of their conception, reinforced through the aspects of the artist's skill that has heretofore been regarded as avoiding a narrative context.

21. Spencer-Longhurst, p. 60.

22. ibid. p. 36.

Plate 13. Jacopo Palma il Vecchio, *Portrait of a Poet*.
c. 1516 oil on canvas, 83.8 x 63.5cm
The National Gallery, London.

This visual analogy apparently stresses Rossetti's deliberate reduction of the pictorial surface to two dimensions, 'often reducing his figures to elements in the design'.[23] What this comparison does achieve is the misleading pairing of two paintings based on their use of an iconographic backdrop, and is neither useful nor insightful.

Rossetti's portraits exercise a skill in conveying a narrative through colour and internal structure which critics have repeatedly overlooked. As with my analyses of both *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* and *Found*, the structural framework of the image is integral to the information articulated through the visual narrative and processed by the spectator. The deliberate systematic reconstruction of particular compositional features provides a template for the artist to repeatedly and consciously expose himself and the spectator to *this* particular image, in *this* particular site, designed to illicit *this* particular viewing response. The Barber catalogue informs the reader that 'Rossetti . . . did not wish his picture to be regarded as a portrait, but, rather, an object of beauty in its own right, devoid of specific associations'.[24]

Despite the attempted avoidance of specific narrative the painter supposedly intended, *Bocca Baciata* and the collection of this period to which it belongs informs and perpetuates its own narrative, one that continues throughout the series whether directly alluded to or not. The apparently random scattering of orange marigold heads on a predominantly dark background asserts the sitter's enclosed aspect, suggesting in the language of 'The Orchard-Pit' that she is waiting perhaps in a walled garden; a garden that

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23. ibid. p. 60.

24. ibid. p. 36.

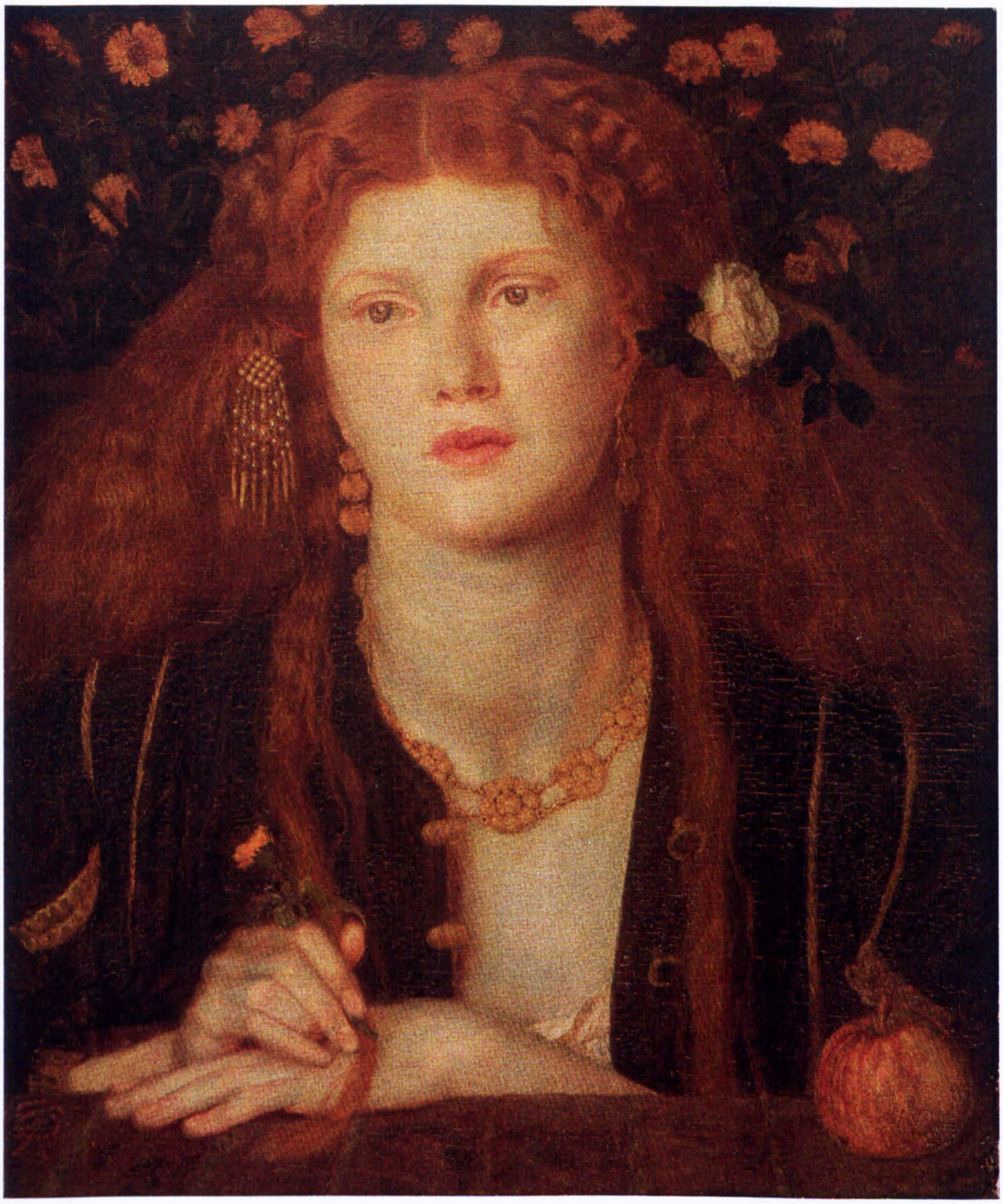

Plate 14. *Bocca Baciata.*
1859 oil on wood, 32.2 x 27.1cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

is designed specifically to surround her, to contain and inform her, permeating through her very appearance and saturating her with colour. The colour of the flowers works visually to direct the viewer around the painted image. From the background clusters of marigolds, through the abundant mass of orange hair to the face, itself tinged with the orange hue dominating this portrait, the viewer's eye is drawn to the lips. From this point the viewer is led by the tendrils of orange hair to the hands, which clasp both the hair and a single marigold stem. Framing the face are the exotic accoutrements that characterize these paintings, in this case a white rose and long vertical earring. These trappings are indicative of a subtle reiteration of male power, of the ability to dress the prostitute just as the artist does his model. Thus the repeated construction of the familiar married to the exotic becomes a template providing conscious re-recognition of the designated appearance of the female in relation to the male. This imbalanced discourse between gender implicates Thackeray's missing gentleman as one who actively engages, solicits, condescends and even creates women to suit his need and desire.[25]

When compared to the Ariosto portrait this painting breathes an air of rarified sexuality, a potent blend of saturated colour, a heady aroma of flowers and perfume. It is laden with intent, sealed by the accompanying verse from Boccacio: 'Bocca baciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna',

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25. Martin Danahay's fascinating article 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Virtual Bodies' investigates the relationship between Rossetti's portraits and the recent explosion of 'virtual' pornography available on the World Wide Web. Danahay comments on the commodification of the female body leading to the fetishisation of the female in order to incite desire in the male consumer. Thus the 'dressing' of the female body becomes essential in providing the illusion of power to the would-be male seducer, effectively, to 'pre-suppose the male gaze'. See Martin A. Danahay, *VP* 34 (Winter 1998).

('The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon'). Thus the invocation of 'The House of Life', and Rossetti's search therein for the desire of the mouth – 'which answers there for all' ('Fazio's Mistress'). That the painting is Venetian in style is not disputed, as Rossetti himself acknowledged, but the execution and effect are startlingly different to the Italian portrait. In the exhibition's second painting by Jacopo il Vecchio, *Portrait of a Young Lady* [Plate 15], the dark background is empty, typically so for the Venetian portraits of this period. The pose of the model seems forced, the right hand in particular is positioned unnaturally.

By painting his female models into structural artifice, Rossetti determines the narrative of assumptions regarding their position with relation to himself and his male viewer. However this theory does not rest simply on one structural similarity. Rossetti constantly returns to these sites with several signifiers that act, as the background does, to inform the spectator as to what these paintings are about. The model is consistently painted within a restricted space. Her existence as part of an 'unreality' is reinforced through saturated colour and exotic accoutrements that invariably perform some iconographic function. The 'secret grove' of Rossetti's 'The Portrait', wherein the beloved is painted in order that she must remain there forever, is as direct an appraisal of Victorian sexual inequities as Holman Hunt's artificial boudoir in *The Awakening Conscience* [Plate 16]. The allegorical function of the unread books, the gilded tapestry and the cat and bird in Hunt's painting is to disturb and implicate the spectator; particularly the male as a colluding witness in the spectacle of female virtuousness undermined.

Plate 15. Jacopo Palma il Vecchio, *Portrait of a Young Lady*.
c. 1516 oil on wood, 72 x 54.5cm
Derek Johns Ltd, London.

Plate 16. William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*.
1853-54 oil on canvas, 76.2 x 55.9cm
Tate Gallery, London.

In Rossetti's works the features that signify the subordination of the female image are more subtle, integrated as they are within the structural template of the portrait; recognizable by their function as implements which shape the portrait or determine its overall coloration, as much as their narrative significance. Bal indicates the subtle force of narrativity, in that 'it tells the story of its own making'.[26] Thus the viewer becomes aware of the process of the making of the image – perhaps not at the first viewing, or even the second, but they will become aware of certain connections, extant in Rossetti's portraits through structure, pose, colour and prop, as to the narrative truth of these works. These features are as important when reading these images as the overtly iconographic symbols appended to Hunt's painting; the difference however lies in their own awakening within the mind of the spectator, an activation consistently achieved through the artist's skilful emphasis on the model's hands.

In *Bocca Baciata* it is the hands that engage the spectator's eye, clasping the marigold and orange hair. Throughout these paintings the viewer is repeatedly drawn to the hands. Whether engaged in some activity or otherwise, they are always shown. Invariably they act to point the reader towards some iconographic object, or to facilitate in moving the viewing eye around the painting. I suggest also that their very appearance in the portrait engages their function as conduits of power throughout the history of images of male domination in the symbolism of both rape and marriage.[27] The neck also

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26. Bal, p. 208.

27. Diane Wolfthal's investigation into the imagery of rape demonstrates the importance of the female hand in symbolic interpretations of violation. This is confirmed when she quotes from Altieri's 16th century marital treatise *Li Nuptali*: "referring to the traditional clasping of hands in the marriage ceremony, Altieri concludes: 'when someone takes his wife by his hand, he is

is always bare, signifying a further possibility of the appropriation of the female body. These are Rossetti's signifiers of passivity, of submissiveness, of availability. This is where Rossetti's own ideology is most evident: in the circularity of his images, their insistent repetition and their resistance to classification. As my readings will demonstrate, these portraits are designed to decline their traditionally accepted role.

I began this analysis by stating that an ideological reading will recognize 'assumptions' manifest in the visual structure which tend to perpetuate male control over the female in Victorian culture. Conventional, traditional readings of these paintings inform us that they are objects without recourse to any particular narrative, that they merely anticipate the Aesthetic movement and the dogmatic doctrine of 'art for art's sake'. I have alluded to just one particular visual structural feature of these paintings that can be read as contributing to a narrative ideology. The foreshortening of the painting by filling the background forces the sitter forward, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere. The two dimensional aspect of these paintings performs a far more powerful function than reducing the figures to elements in the design, as the catalogue suggests. By forcing the sitter forward she is thrust into the viewing space, she literally spills over to disrupt the detached serenity normally afforded the spectator. Here Bryson's theory is realized – the 'effortful pulling away of discursive forms from their normal location and into this painting'. As a presaging of abstraction this image of the object forcing its way into the viewing ground is unprecedented. It is due to this 'two dimensional' aspect

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showing that he is using violence on her'". See Wolfthal, *Images of Rape* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p. 15.

that Rossetti is able to create the apostrophe that writes the spectator into the painting. It is here that the connection between Victorian narrative painting and the modern art Rossetti prefigured is discernible. By concentrating the viewer on specific features of the image, Rossetti is able to emphasize a subtle narrative reinforced by the structural repetition of form this series perpetuates.

I posed a question above regarding the ability of abstract form to enforce an implied narrative that is distinct from the overtly narrative painting characteristic of the Victorian era – whether in the social realist school of Redgrave for example, or in the classical revivals of Lord Leighton and others. Rossetti's deliberate repetition of form, particularly the emphasis on the internal framing of the model and the focus on her hands, coupled with his interest in intense colour and oriental pattern, is indicative of the relationship between these portraits and modern painting, whether presented under the guise of aestheticism, impressionism, or surrealism. This rudimentary connection is enhanced and indeed made distinct by Rossetti's use of words and titles, whether appended as ekphrastic poetry or otherwise, and informs the essence of this relationship.[28]

An examination of the modern expressionist painting *Grief* [Plate 17], by Jack B. Yeats and the ekphrastic response to it written by Irishman Paul Durcan will make this relationship clearer.[29] Yeats' early work was dominated by narrative scenes executed in dark tones and exhibited a hardline realism. In

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28. Had Rossetti been less reticent about exhibiting his work to the public then perhaps the famous Ruskin-Whistler trial would have featured the artist more prominently. The intimate connection he fosters between word and image undoubtedly prefigured the Nocturne's and Harmony's of Whistler that so raised Ruskin's ire.

29. Jack, B. Yeats, *Grief* (1951) The National Gallery of Ireland. Paul Durcan, *Crazy About Women* (Dublin: The National Gallery of Ireland, 1991).

Plate 17. Jack B. Yeats, *Grief.*
1951 oil on canvas, 102 x 153cm
The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

the postwar years his painting made a shift from narrative scenes to the swirling images of blazing colour *Grief* typifies. This image is almost indecipherable, containing a myriad of frenzied colours and activity. The rudimentary forms created by the straight edges of the building in the upper right of the image help to focus the viewer's eye. This internal framing is completed by the blue slash of paint running down the entire left border of the painting, bringing the viewer into close contact with the image itself.[30] The appearance of human figures creates a rough line between the first building and this vertical slash of colour. One can perhaps discern the image of a rider on horseback and a row of what might be soldiers, indicated by the two figures nearest to the left-hand edge of the painting, who may carry rifles or weapons of some sort. What this movement and colour succeeds in doing is focusing the viewer on the absence of the same from the right side of the image. The brushstrokes are thickly textured, giving the painting a quality of depth that concentrates the spectator on the dark black smear around which the violent pigments explode as if the canvas itself has been torn apart, scattering colour and form from the epicentre which is the black smear. The tumultuous imagery of the painting is given focus by the verbal title. The manifestation of grief is engendered by the black smear that immediately engages the viewer's eye, interrupting the blaze of colours which otherwise dominate the canvas. This intrusion into the abstract form and intense colouring of the painting is the visual progeny of Rossetti's female hands, acting as it does to manipulate the

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30. While readings of traditional landscape painting would probably claim that this type of framing works to distance the viewer from the scene depicted, it is my intention to demonstrate in this painting – as in the Rossetti work *Girl at a Lattice* [Plate 19], the frame acts to promote the proximity of the depicted scene by acting as a threshold between viewer and image.

viewer's eye and draw it through a narrative suggested by the title and given substance by the black smear.

In 1990 Paul Durcan was invited by the National Gallery of Ireland to publish a collection of poetry based on his responses to paintings in their collection. Durcan's ekphrastic representation of *Grief* in the poem of the same name closes the anthology. What is of particular interest to this study is Durcan's conclusion that conceptualizes the painting within the physical space of the gallery, and forms a narrative regarding the image and the role of the spectator in creating the inherent, (though imperceptibly implied through the title) narrative of this painting. The violence implied by the explosion of colour from the void of blackness is confirmed by Durcan as he imagines the abrupt interruption *Grief* imposes on the gallery spectator:

> By this time they have caught a glimpse of 'Grief'.
> They stop in their tracks. They stare up at it
> Like as if they have seen a horse come through the wall.
> All of us hanging about in the parade ring at a race meeting.
> Nervously they approach it and at the last moment they make
> A dive into the corner to sniff for the label.
> They canter up and down the length of the picture
> Before standing back out again in the middle
> Like connections in the middle of the parade ring
> Pleased with themselves to be at the center of the picture,
> Yet anxious to get back outside again and to watch
> - Or not to watch, as the case may be – from a safe distance.

What is striking about this response to the painting is that rather than the abstract form and colourful swirling imagery working to distance the viewer from reaching an understanding of the work, the image is given a presence within the viewing space, thrusting it from the canvas into an unavoidable confrontation with the viewer. Once thus implicated in an exchange with the

image, the viewer is drawn inexorably to the black smear that is the severe, dominant focus of this painting. This feature is then dynamised by the verbal title, thus giving the work a resonance far beyond that perhaps expected of this type of expressionist painting. The power of the painting *Grief* lies in its deliberate projection into the viewing space, and the subsequent involuntary and unsettling implication of the viewer in the artistic exchange instigated by the artist.

In another ekphrastic response to modern art, the importance and unavoidability of the exchange inherent in these works is emphasized. Poet Gillian Clarke's response to Antony Gormley's[31] installation *European Field* [Plate 18] provides a resonant acknowledgment of the power of repetitive form and structure. Gormley's installation consists of approximately 35,000 clay figurines of Lilliputian scale arranged literally on the floor of the gallery rooms that the spectator is invited to wander through.

Clarke's response is stark and disconcerting:

> Thirty-five thousand faces in a field
> the colour of clay and flesh and blood
> crammed between the white walls of a gallery.
> Thirty-five thousand on tip-toe
> craning their necks
> breathing like a field of corn.
>
> Thirty-five thousand voices asking

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31. *European Field* was installed in various galleries in Europe throughout the 1990's. Each figure is unique in appearance while maintaining a unified whole due to uniformity of production and material. The name of *Field* changed according to where it was installed, hence *American Field* and *British Field*. It was described by John Hutchinson as 'a landscape of gazes', in J. Hutchinson, E. H. Gombrich and L. B. Njatin, *Antony Gormley* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 94.

Plate 18. Antony Gormley, *European Field.*
1994 terracotta, approx. 35,000 figures, 8-26cm each
Installed, Muzej Surremene
Umjetnosh, Zagreb.

why, why, why
like the wind in the grasses
of graveyards and old battlefields.
Seventy-thousand ears listening
to no answer.

We have paid to see them.
We did not expect to be stared at,
or that they would move in to live with us,
taking root in the field of our minds,
whispering all night
'we are you, you, you.'

Thirty-five thousand figures
crumbling in my head
to bones and ashes
under a field of flowering grasses.

Galleries
should carry a health warning.[32]

Thus Clarke minimizes the safe distance between the spectator and the implied narrative of this installation, once again induced by the title of the piece. That *European Field* invokes in Clarke the images of war and death she writes about comes in part from the title appended by the artist, yet it is reinforced through the repetitive form, structure and texture of the work itself. Whereas Durcan's response is focused by the black smear that breaks the waves of colour in *Grief*, Clarke is moved by the recurrence of faces in the field, and like the spectator who attempts to step back from *Grief* within the gallery space, she is unable to leave *European Field* behind: 'We did not expect to be stared at,/or that they would move in to live with us . . . "we are you, you, you"'. The 'framing' of *European Field* within the formal structure of the gallery once again acts to focus the viewer on the dominating feature of the work, and here the eyes of the figures project the installation into the mind of the viewer. When Lela

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32. Reproduced from Michael Benton, 'Anyone for Ekphrasis?', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 37, (1997), p. 372.

Njatin visited the installation in Ljubljiana, her response confirmed Clarke's unease at the confrontation it engenders:

> I boldly proceed, but am forced, immediately, to stop. . .These figurines form a field, which, with a forbidding power, deflects the visitor's attention away from their fragility, and onto his or her inner being. My defensive stare in the face of this confrontation with this crowd of repeated forms becomes a weapon, which turns on me.[33]

Thus the exchange between art object and spectator is realized and occurs beyond the implicitness of a visual, readable narrative. Whether the 'discursive form' Bryson describes concerns the emotive viewing response to *Grief*, the consideration of conflict engendered by *European Field*, or the abuse of power in Victorian sexual relationships, the lack of an overtly visual, readable narrative does not prevent the artwork from influencing the spectator. When Rossetti's portraits of women respond to viewing with the abrupt apostrophe that self-consciously moves them into the spectator's space, they too affect the exchange inherent in *Grief* and *European Field*, and in Rossetti's case the exchange is one between male and female: whether husband and wife, client and whore, or gentleman and mistress.

The reduction of distance between viewer and painting is unsettling as it disrupts the barriers erected by the Victorian male against the women he encounters, provoking a collision between the separate worlds of the client and the whore for example. In the painting *Girl at a Lattice* [Plate 19] this effect is at its most dramatic. The girl's face is framed by a lattice window and she is leaning towards the viewer, her head pushes back the valance of the curtain

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33. ibid. p. 101.

above her. The girl's left hand is curled around the vertical frame and her right is over the sill, her potential movement restricted by the window frame. I am not suggesting that the girl is attempting to climb out of the window; it is the reiteration of enclosed aspect, suggested relationship between the girl and the outside, effectively *this side* of the canvas that are important. The coral necklace is twisted around her finger at one end while the other is tightened around her neck; it is decorative, but not devoid of meaning.

The catalogue refers to this painting as having 'no clear narrative, moral, or documentary purpose', before reporting that it was painted while Rossetti was'recovering from the shock of his wife's death'.[34] Thus the implied narrative provoked by the enclosed aspect of the sitter behind the symbolic 'bars' of latticework, her melancholic expression and the evocative manner in which she clings to the necklace in her fingers while the other end tightens around her throat, bring a clarity and resonance to this painting in a similar way the black smear in *Grief* focuses the viewer's eye. The personal details of Rossetti's relationship with Elizabeth Siddal inform this image, and while it isn't necessary nor may it indeed be profitable to consider their relationship in detail, the fact that it permeates through the psychological hinterland of this image contributes to our reading of the painting. In both cases the viewer is perhaps unable to pinpoint the details of the narrative, but the implication of the viewer as part of an exchange between artwork and viewing space patently apparent.

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34. The catalogue also commits this image to a 'vogue' created by 'Millais, Ford Madox Brown and others of the Pre-Raphaelite circle' for 'small-scale studies of the heads of women and children'. This deliberate contextualizing is again misleading, as this portrait clearly belongs to this particular genre of Rossetti's work, and Rossetti very rarely painted children. With the exception of the Virgin Mary and the black child in the foreground of *The Beloved*, I can find no evidence that Rossetti ever painted the portrait of a child.

Plate 19. *Girl at a Lattice*.
1862 oil on canvas, 29.2 x 26.3cm
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

The way we look at these images may not bring us to an implicit understanding of the artist's mood and thought at the time of conception, but the visual stimuli provoke within us a response to the viewing experience that should not be overlooked.

The Barber Institute included in the exhibition a contemporary portrait by one of Rossetti's close friends during this period, and suitably so for it allows a fitting illustration as to how Rossetti's portraits convey what others do not. Frederic Sandys' *Medea*[35] [Plate 20] was completed in 1868 while Sandys lodged with Rossetti in Cheyne Walk. Sandys' work is a study in narrative painting, heavily biased towards an educated audience schooled in classical mythology. Medea, the sorceress wife of Jason, hero of the Golden Fleece, sits before a surface laden with visual allusions to her evil nature as she prepares a poisoned robe for the woman who has supplanted her in the hero's affections. The golden screen comprising the background bears the signature icons of Jason's story; the ship of the Argonauts, and the fleece they were sent to retrieve. The portrait itself is unashamedly excessive: with one hand Medea concocts the fatal toxin and with the other she claws at the coral red necklace the artist had borrowed from Rossetti, and which would later become the seed of a dispute between them. The woman's pale face stares out of the painting as she writhes in an almost comically 'witchy' trance.

The catalogue reports that Sandys was 'heavily influenced' by Rossetti's 'sublimely evil' *Lady Lilith* [Plate 27], which I discuss later in this

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35. Spencer-Longhurst, p. 74.

Plate 20. Frederick Sandys, *Medea.*
1866-68 oil on wood, 62.2 x 46.3cm
Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

chapter. However a cursory glance at the Rossetti painting will ensure the reader of just how different Rossetti's vision was to his contemporary. Rossetti's subtle portrait permeated the works of Whistler and others of the Aesthetic school, and his portrait contrasts immensely with Sandys's melodramatic witch. Rossetti's subtlety is evident in his avoidance of such tacky props as Sandys copulating toads and miniature Egyptian goddesses. The coral necklace Sandys borrowed for this painting, which his Medea claws at in her frenzy, was the same Rossetti painted in *Girl at a Lattice*, and far more effectively than Sandys. There is nothing in this portrait that works to draw the viewer into a relationship with either the model or the artist. As I move to discuss several of Rossetti's portraits in detail, it will become evident that his recurrent focus and manipulation of the viewer's eye consistently involves the viewer in the exchange I have outlined above. Within the context of Thackeray's 'clubs, colleges, and mess-rooms', these portraits create their own extremely resonant reflection of relationships between men and women in Victorian society.

Helen of Troy [Plate 21] is perhaps the clearest of the portraits analysed in this chapter for the reader to approach; the pre-existent narrative mythology that surrounds her is definitive in this case. Annie Miller sat for the portrait, the reverse of which is inscribed: '*Helen of Troy*, destroyer of ships, destroyer of men, destroyer of cities'.[36] Rossetti approached the subject in his poem 'Troy

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36. Aeschylus, *Agaemennon*, 688.

Town' (*Works* 214) for which he also illustrated a scene.[37] Although the existence of the other drawing somewhat divorces the poem from this portrait, it is a useful indication of Rossetti's ideas regarding the subject. Helen is described in the poem as having a 'golden head', indicative at least of a pictorial consistency; several other iconographic signifiers are employed in the poem and I will discuss them later in relation to the *Venus Verticordia*. The painting is remarkable once again for its vivid use of colour: the blond hair of the model and the golden garment foregrounding the burning fires of Troy over her shoulders. Swinburne described the gaze as 'the sweet sharp smile of power' and the mouth 'of ardent blossom'.[38] The gaze is almost one of negligent boredom, a 'Neroesque' indifference to the burning city, a fate to which she had become inextricably linked.

The viewer is compelled to recall the mythology surrounding this painting. Helen is the daughter of Leda and Zeus, the product of rape, an act of violent sexual aggression from a male aggressor. Helen herself is abducted (raped)[39] by Paris, an act which leads to the Trojan war and the scenes of destruction with which Rossetti backgrounds this painting. The painting then becomes one of violence, possession and male dominance. The male viewer becomes a colluding witness to the violation of Leda, of Helen, and of the city of Troy. Thus the viewer is led to contemplate *Helen's* gaze, which is one of

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37. The poem 'Troy Town' was accompanied by a drawing (black chalk and violet wash) of Helen dedicating a goblet at the temple of Venus. See Surtees, I, 123.

38. Spencer-Longhurst, p. 42.

39. Heywoode's *Gunaikeion* – 'Women Ravished' (p. 422) will have reminded Rossetti that Helen was actually raped twice, as she was abducted by Theseus when she was a girl. It also reports that after the death of Paris Helen was married to Deiphebus – whom she slew.

Plate 21. *Helen of Troy*.
1863 oil on wood, 32.8 x 27.7cm
Hamburger, Kunsthalle.

resignation, of accusation and of satisfaction. *Helen's* revenge is to look past the viewer, reflecting on the fate of her mother, herself and the city that burns with a sullen, sombre red flame. She is impassive, quite deliberately un-engaging, and consequently the viewer's eye is drawn to the hands, to the long elegant fingers that are characteristic of these portraits. The principal features on which Rossetti concentrates the viewer are those of the eye and the hand and here the hand is predominant, as the eye is somewhat withdrawn and introspective, captivating and yet not reciprocating the viewer's glance.

The viewer's gaze, once drawn to the hands, subsequently centres on the pendant that Helen is absentmindedly playing with. The burning torch represented there duplicates and reinforces the image of the burning city that fills the background of the painting. The torch is also a symbol of life to the Greeks; effectively Helen holds life in her hands while Greeks slaughter Trojans in a burning city behind her.[40] Rossetti here exercises his power over the eye of the viewer; he manipulates it away from the initial glorious golden beauty of the admittedly cold Helen and focuses on the slender hands, directing the viewer to the pendant and consequentially to the destruction invoked by his inscription. The reversal of the power of the male gaze evident in this painting contrasts immensely with the type of image being produced by Rossetti's contemporaries. Helen undermines the assumed authority of the male voyeur by manipulating the gaze to contemplate the strength of her sexuality, the cost of her purchase. The transaction embodied in this portrait imbues this female with power well beyond that of her painted contemporaries through a blatant display of sexuality and the knowledge implicit in the exchange, whether

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40. The 'flaming brand' has alternatively been interpreted as the symbol of Paris.

prostitute, bondswoman, wife or mistress. What this portrait achieves is a demand for recognition, an insistence at understanding that forces from the male spectator an acknowledgment pertaining to its narrative meaning. In this it differs from so many Victorian portraits that make explicit attempts to avoid demanding anything from the viewer, male or otherwise.

The Sisters [Plate 22] by Charles Baxter was painted in 1845 and is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The portrait is of two girls and is of the upper body only. The sister on the left is demure and has a scarf around her head, she looks out placidly at the viewer. The sister on the right however has her dress off the shoulder and clasps it to her bosom in both hands. Her hair is loose and trails across her shoulder while her gaze is deep and penetrating, and she has a slight smile. Fraser Harrison points to the sisters as a schizophrenic embodiment of the perfect Victorian woman.[41] One girl is of 'ideal demeanour', the acceptable face of society; and the other 'sensual, playful, but unimpeachably submissive'. Harrison argues that the state of dishabille renders the woman powerless – 'offering up her femininity to be displayed'.

This view however disregards the implication that is characteristic of voyeuristic exchange, the transaction. In using the term 'display' Harrison ignores the anticipated consequence of desire – possession. It is my contention that Rossetti's portraits are accusatory, they represent the corollary of violation that force the male gaze to contemplate that violation. Baxter's 'unimpeachably submissive' sister demands no such forced self-examination from the voyeur, the prospective male possessor.

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41. Fraser Harrison, *The Dark Angel* (Sheldon Press: London, 1977), subsequent quotations from pp. 26-27.

Plate 22. Charles Baxter, *The Sisters*.
1845, 45cm diameter.
The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In Rossetti's portrait of Helen this dialectic of submission and accusation in the face of male domination is evident through Rossetti's technical skill. A close examination of the portrait reveals this dialectic in terms of the aesthetic beauty often attributed to these portraits, a beauty that renders them 'subjectless'. The right side of the face [Plate 23] exhibits the beauty and perfection with which the name of Helen is associated, the full red lips and pale smooth skin of the mythological *face that launched a thousand ships*. However as [Plate 24] demonstrates the left side is strikingly different. The cheek is blotched and discoloured, and the inclination of the head creates an unsightly shadow and distortion of flesh around the throat, in contrast to the clean smooth curve from the chin to the model's left ear. Helen's right eye is distinctly shaded under a jaundiced brow, and the saturated golden brilliance of the portrait takes on a sickly hue [Plate 25]. The skin seems broken and bruised as if it has received a heavy blow and the eye itself is tainted with the colour and the reflective glow of death in the city behind her.

Viewed in this way the face of Helen seems almost disfigured, a symbolic representation of the abuse to which she has been subjected.[42] In this she is indicative of what Deborah Nord calls 'infected female sexuality' when writing about Dickens' polluted city.[43] Nord makes the point that the visual representation of tainted womanhood coincides with a threat of 'epidemic illness' and 'disease and degeneration'. In Rossetti's portrait this degeneration is visible on the face of a beautiful woman, suggesting considerably more than

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42. In this she is reminiscent of Rosa Dartle, the mysterious maimed female companion of Steerforth's mother in Dickens' *David Copperfield.*

43. Deborah Epstein Nord, '"Vitiated Air": The Polluted City and Female Sexuality in *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*', in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996), pp. 38-59 (p.39).

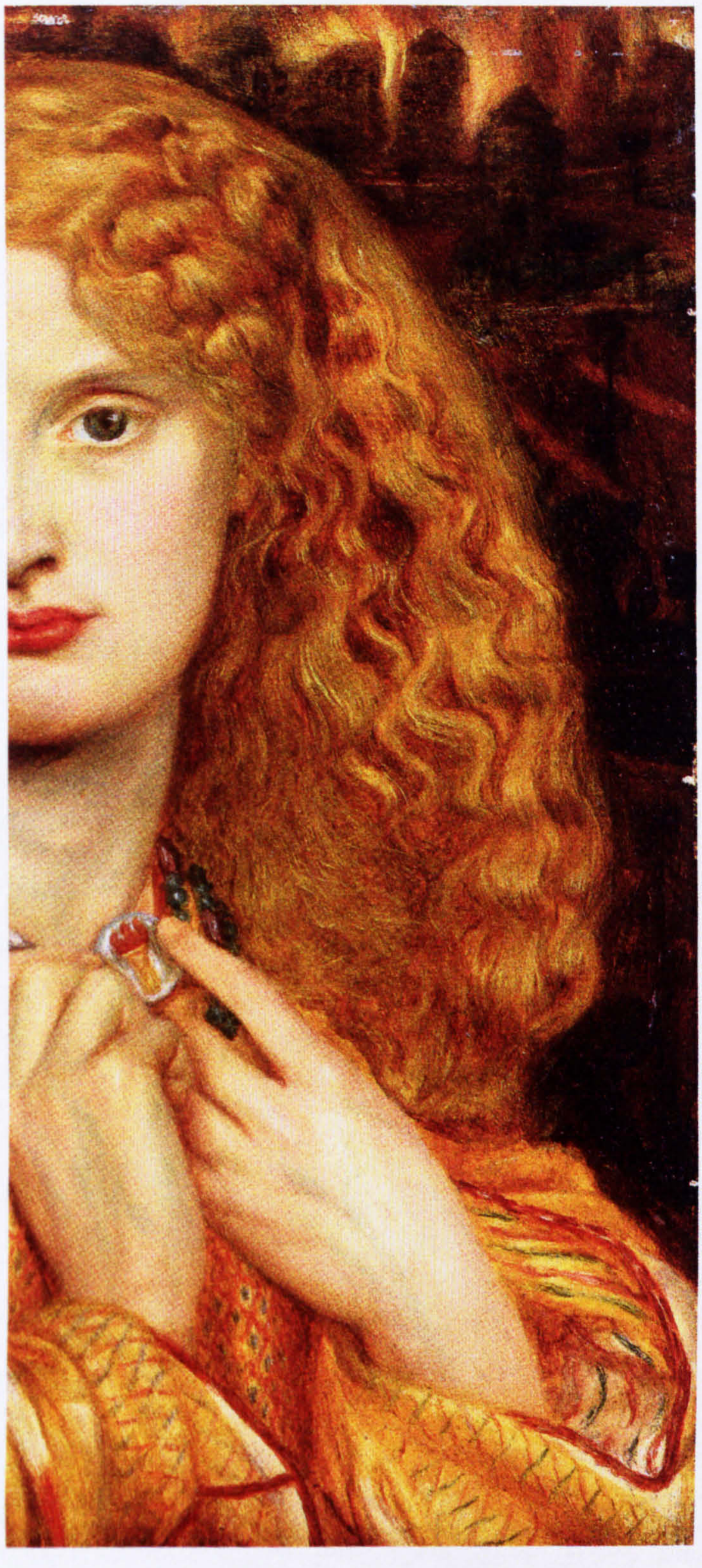

Plate 23. *Helen of Troy* (detail).

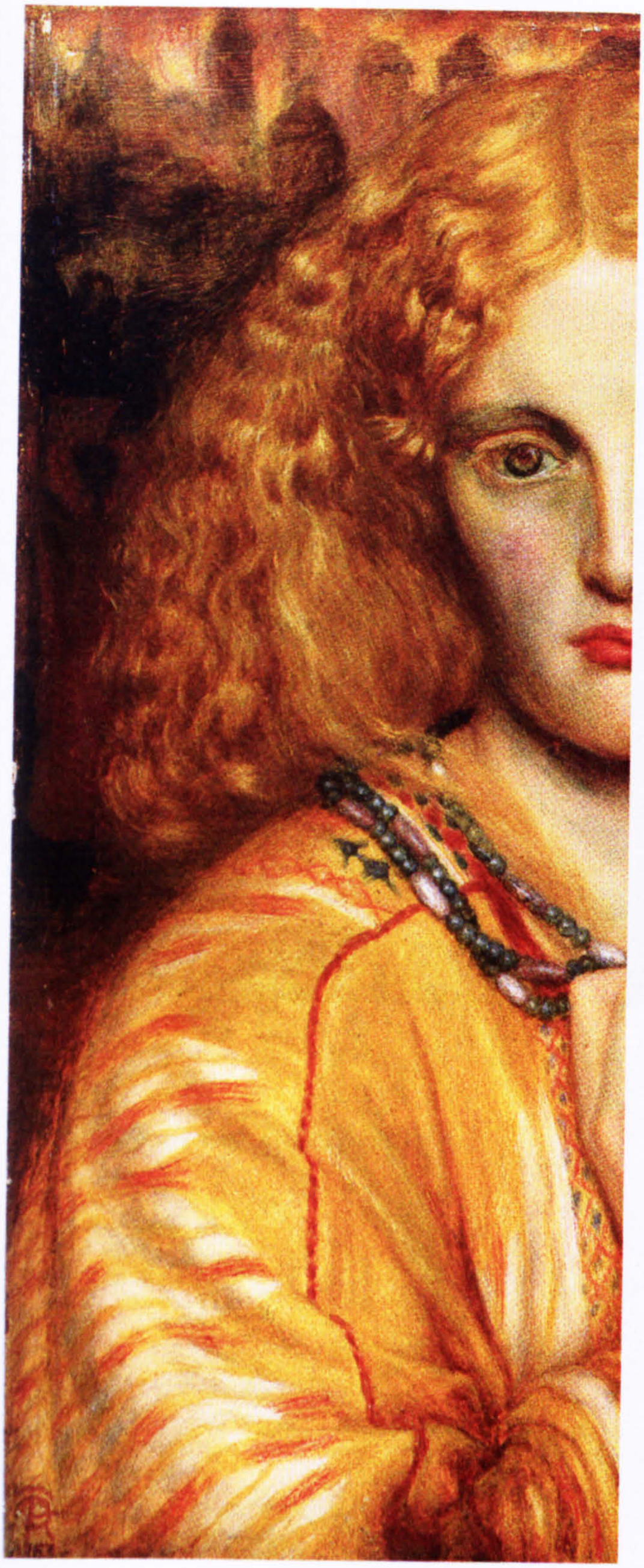

Plate 24. *Helen of Troy* (detail).

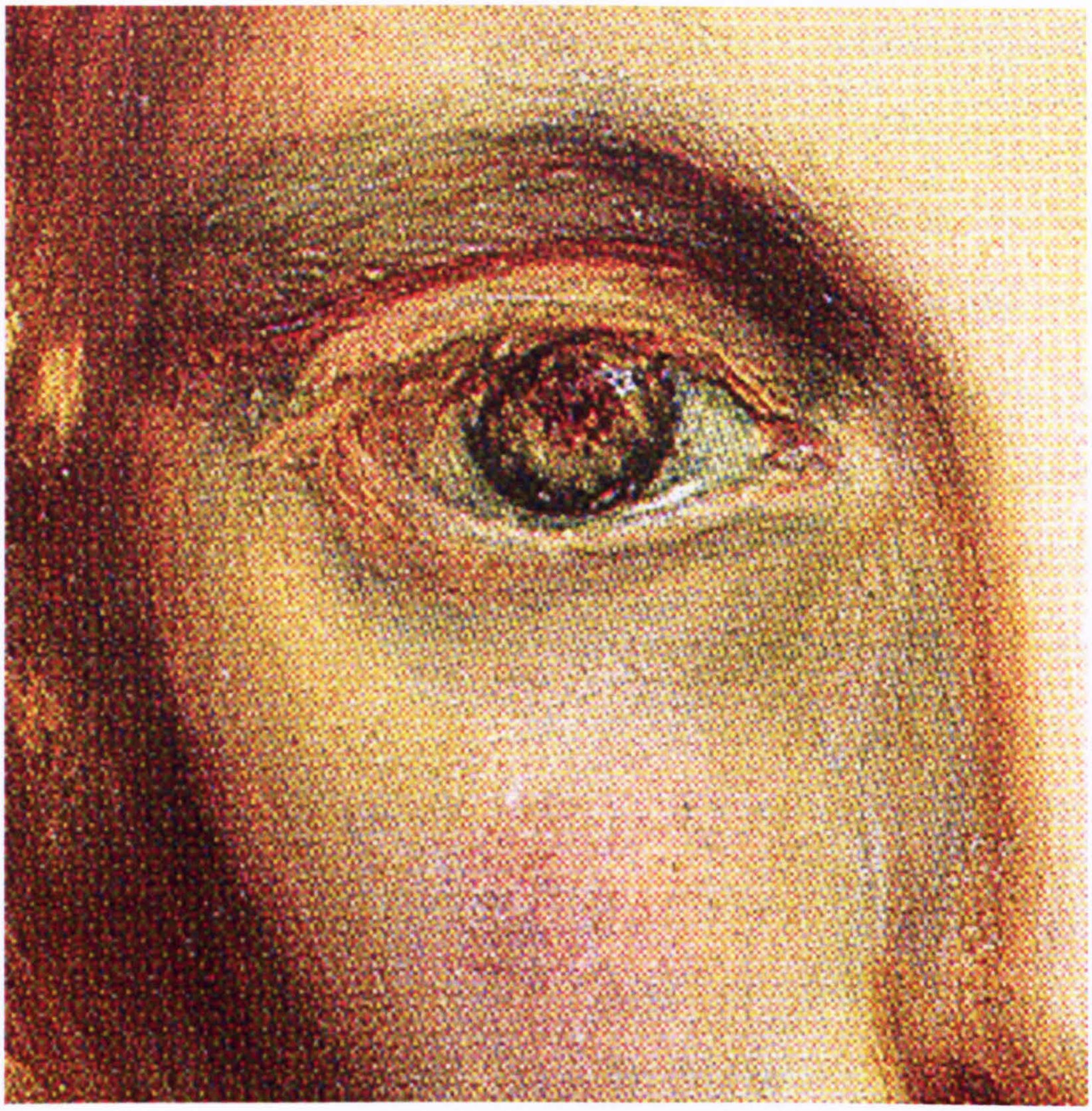

Plate 25. *Helen of Troy* (detail).

the 'paragon of female allure'[44] described in the Barber catalogue. What Harrison describes as the 'schizophrenic embodiment' of Victorian womanhood is realized in this image, but it is perhaps more aptly described as the schizophrenic representation of male desire. The viewer observes two faces of the same woman. The narrative pre-text tells the spectator they are looking at the 'most beautiful woman of the ancient world',[45] and the pictorial evidence, the painted statement manifest in the contrasting sides of her face undermine that narrative, suggesting the darker side of abduction, abuse and display.

The politics of Victorian sexuality are rife with elements of illicit sexual transgression and clandestine concealment. A considerable portion of Victorian literature concerned itself with the machinations of female exploitation. Mrs Gaskell explored various manifestations of female subjugation in her novels *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. The plight of the fallen woman was explored intimately by Elizabeth Barrett in 'Aurora Leigh'. Other more subtle versions of exploration into the female psyche of self-appraisal include the characters Hetty Sorrel from *Adam Bede*, Bathsheba from *Far From the Madding Crowd* and Elfride from *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. The importance of these characters is that they indicate a shift away from the desexualized, passionless woman that had come to be the archetypal representation of the fallen woman in common society. *Ruth* in particular indicates a reaction against the common male assumption that fallen women

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44. Spencer-Longhurst, p. 42.

45. ibid.

were powerless to halt their own demise and were the pollutants of male society.

Rossetti's portraits when seen in context with this type of public deliberation on the nature of women, expose and implicate the male gaze as not existing without recourse and responsibility. It was a debate to which the male had been rendered marginal through the writings of Acton and Greg. Their arguments urged that fallen women were the chief pollutants of men. It wasn't until the strong feminist movement of the 1870's that these perceptions would be challenged outside of the literary field. Gaskell deposited the fault of sexual exploitation firmly at the feet of the male pollutant. Judith Walkowitz[46] confirms that the common assertions of the likes of Acton and Greg were interrogated later in the century, arguing that women were the 'victims of male pollution'. Bristow[47] reports that fallen women were later hailed as 'martyrs of purity'. What the far-reaching sermons of Acton achieved during the mid-century however was a prescription literally for the social control of women. The closeting of a woman would therefore shield her from any 'exciting causes' that could lead to her corruption.

The prostitute then became an essential part of the Victorian male psyche as these women existed to ensure, through their own misfortune as it were, that there would be other suitable women to marry - provided they had been closeted in the sound environment created and controlled by the male.

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46. Judith Walkowitz, 'Male vice and Female virtue: feminism and the politics of prostitution in nineteenth century Britain' in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. A. Snitow, C. Stansell and S. Thompson (London: Virago, 1984), p. 45.

47. E. J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillian, 1977), p. 98.

Consequently the illicit side of sexual transgression served to legitimate a class divide which upheld ideas of the social superiority of the middle-class. Perhaps more importantly they maintained the sexual superiority of men as these women remained on the underside of society and the underside of any transaction between men and women.

These stereotypes are exposed by Gaskell in *Ruth*; the gulf between the subsequent lives of fallen women as opposed to the men who exploit their need for concealing their identity becoming all too clear. The development of an under-class that served to legitimate the sexual transgressions of the privileged male population, was eloquently lamented by William Lecky in the *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*:

> That unhappy being whose very name is a shame to speak . . . appears in every age as the perpetual symbol of degradation and sinfulness of man. Herself the supreme type of vice, she is ultimately the most efficient guardian of virtue. But for her the unchallenged purity of countless homes would be polluted . . . On that one degraded and ignoble form are concentrated the passions that might have filled the world with shame. She remains, while creeds and civilisations rise and fall, the eternal priestess of humanity, blasted for the sins of the people.[48]

There is a discernible balance then between the virtue and vice which the fallen woman embodies. Acton claimed that it was possible, perhaps even likely that at some point in her life a woman would resort to prostitution in order to survive. We have seen that these illicit sexual transgressions were even

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48. From Harrison, *Dark Angel*, p. 244.

necessary to ensure the sanctity of womanhood as wifehood: Harrison's acceptable face of society. The implication is not that Rossetti is painting lascivious portraits of prostitutes with these works, rather that these paintings accentuate the discriminatory relationship that exists between men and women; and the crux of this relationship lies in the exchange, the transaction that is solicited by the artist.

Rossetti's personal relationship in the early 1850's with William and Mary Howitt can be seen as possibly shaping his attitude towards the plight of women.[49] Rossetti may even have conceived his picture of a contemporary fallen woman in *Found* as early as 1852. William Howitt was the author of several titles celebrating the ideal of rural country life and may have influenced some of the ideal behind the rural excellence I have commented on in *The Education of Mary Virgin*. Mary Howitt published a poem in 1846 in *The People's Journal* that advocated a more sympathetic consideration of women forced into prostitution.[50] Both Howitts were contributors to Dickens' *Household Words*, founded to expose 'All social evils, and all home affection and associations'. It was through these associations that Rossetti became familiar with female emancipators Barbara Leigh Smith, Josephine Butler, and Bessie Parkes, who also took Elizabeth Siddal into their acquaintance. This familiarity with a society of strong-minded women cannot have failed to influence the artist, and is perhaps reason behind his attempt to address the

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49. For an explication of the history of the painting *Found* and Rossetti's relationship with the Howitt family see A. I. Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Found* (Norwich: Real World Publications, 1976). Culler also confirms Rossetti owned a copy of Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861).

50. Mary Howitt, 'Judgement', *The People's Journal* I (London, 1846).

problem through his female portraits. This is certainly consistent with his selection of models from his local underclass. Rossetti regarded Siddal herself as having hardly escaped 'from degradation and corruption'.[51]

Fazio's Mistress [Plate 26] was completed in 1863, after *Helen of Troy*. The painting is an accompanying portrait to a poem translated and published by Rossetti in 1861. The painting is distinguished from the *Helen* portrait in that it does not represent a common theme that is relatively easy to identify. Neither is it burdened however by the weight of mythological baggage associated with Helen. Being unaware of the details of the poem on which it is based does not render the viewer powerless in this case. Fazio degli Uberti's poem [Appendix 1] is highly sexual and presents the female figure as a desirable unattainable mistress while using explicit physical references to arouse the male reader. Rossetti's painting is an intimate portrait of Fanny Cornforth that he considerably retouched in 1873. The model sits looking into a mirror that removes her gaze from that of the viewer and places the viewer in the position of voyeur. While *Helen* seemed somehow to look past the viewer in her solemn self-contemplation, the *Mistress* actively disengages the viewer by visually contemplating herself. As the *Mistress* seems to ponder over her own beauty in the mirror the viewer simultaneously observes her, and as Bullen[52] remarks, the canvas also becomes a mirror. It is through this deliberate act of 'not looking'

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51. *The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* 4 vols. eds. Oswald Doughty and J. R. Wahl (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, 209.

52. Bullen, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Mirror of Masculine Desire', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, Vol. 21 (1999), pp. 329-52 (p. 332).

Plate 26. *Fazio's Mistress.*
1863 oil on panel, 43.2 x 36.8cm
Tate Gallery, London.

that the portrait attracts the viewer's gaze; a gaze that Bullen ascertains is representative of masculine desire.

Although I have identified this as an act of 'not looking', I suggest the *Mistress* is not actually looking at herself in the mirror. Rather she is engaged in some reverie beyond the visual contemplation of her physicality. She casually braids her hair in an echo of *Helen* playing with her pendant. In the next portrait I discuss the viewer can see that *Lady Lilith* is blatantly looking at herself in the mirror, but *Fazio's Mistress* is not. In reinforcing this proposal the viewer should venture deeper into the portrait. The viewer does not know what the *Mistress* is looking at; therefore, in the act of 'not looking' at either the viewer or herself, the *Mistress* actively rejects the viewer.[53] So absorbed is the *Mistress* in the contemplation of an unknown other that she compels the male *reader* now, to search for an entrance to her inner sanctum, to find a way to interrupt her gaze. Thus a vital component of this reading is revealed in the model's awareness at being observed, imperceptibly altering her demeanour. The frisson of the secret voyeur is nullified by the deliberate disengagement of the model, echoing the Mistress in her rejection of Fazio.

In Uberti's poem the narrator fantasizes about the hidden pleasures of the 'Paradise' that lies beyond sight: '—what of that which she doth hide?/Only the wondrous ride/Of sun and planets through the visible heaven/Tells us that there beyond is Paradise' (*Works* 488).[54] Once the voyeur becomes a poet he becomes the controlling force in the relationship. Fazio subtly implies the

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[53] My reading here is based not only on the visual portrait but the poem Rossetti translated. In the poem it is implied that Fazio's Mistress rejects his overtures and it is my belief that Rossetti has built this rejection into the painting, hence the deliberate act of 'not looking'.

[54] Rossetti included this translation in his volume of 1861, *The Early Italian Poets*.

darker side of desire, echoing that which we have seen on the face of the beautiful Helen, the physical evidence of abuse disguised by the sexual language of the would-be seducer: 'To have that neck within thy two arms caught/And kiss it till the mark were left behind?' Fazio is at liberty to discuss his mistress in any terms because those terms are his. His rejection by the mistress becomes irrelevant for he is able, through his language, to become her possessor, much like Browning's Duke of Ferrara.[55] Rossetti inverts this relationship by placing the reader in the presence of the *Mistress*, by returning control of the implied relationship to her through her act of not looking. Even though the reader may be aware that in the very act of attempting to control his 'mistress', Fazio is admitting his own imprisonment; his knowledge will not prevent his false assumption that it is in fact he who controls the painting rather than the other way around. In this Rossetti is both accomplice and victim. The reader of this painting is manoeuvred into a similar scrutiny of female sexuality with the ultimate objective being physical possession. This is the search for the genitalia implied by the poet's 'Paradise'. This is not a physical search, it is a search during which the male gaze becomes implicated by the design of Rossetti to join him in his contemplation of womanhood – leading to the desire for sexual union. Once the gaze has been implicated, once Rossetti has gained the reader's complicity, the physical portrait comes into focus.

Rossetti creates intimacy from the outset with this portrait. His subtle physical confinement of the *Mistress* forces the reader to engage her immediately, thus immediately realizing that she does not reciprocate his gaze. From the arm of the chair the eye is directed across the sweep of her shoulder

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55. See chapter three for my explication of Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess'.

and is held at the earring. The blue trim of the gown leads the eye across the bosom and upwards to the hands. As with the previous piece Rossetti has placed an intimate emphasis on the hands, as the gaze is directed to them from whatever part of the portrait it rests on. The hair is intricate and distinctly Rossettian. The poem describes the hair as a net, twisted by love, and the pearl of the lady's earring acts as the bait. The hair of the *Mistress* is designed purposefully as analogy to the process of undressing: she is untying, removing, perhaps getting ready for bed. Rossetti paints three types of hairstyle in this portrait and his intention is to rivet the male gaze while once again leading it to a final resting place on the hands. From loosely bound curls to the tighter wavy hair on the crown over the forehead and down to the un-braided tresses clasped in the hands, the gaze is swept around the face of *Fazio's Mistress* searching for the meaning behind the act of not looking.

Fazio's Mistress is not dangerous in the way that *Helen of Troy* is, hers is a more intimate and subtle version of the femme-fatale from 'The Orchard-Pit'. The apathetic fatality inherent in the *Helen* image is contrasted here by the involuntary inescapable fate of the reader. The *Mistress* compels the reader through the act of not looking - to seek her out, and although the apple of desire is not yet visible, its implied context is certainly not far behind the captivating *Fazio's Mistress*. Once again Rossetti's portrait compels the reader to contemplate violation. In the previous painting this violation took on the threefold history of Helen, Leda and Troy; here it is an attempt to penetrate the private reverie of the *Mistress*, to interrupt her and force her to contemplate the reader, to assimilate him.

Lady Lilith is also a portrait of Fanny Cornforth, although in the repainted oil [Plate 27] Rossetti substituted the head for that of Alexa Wilding. Rossetti deliberately paired the painting with one of his own sonnets, 'Lilith', later re-titled 'Body's Beauty' from *The House of Life*:

> Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
> (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)
> That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
> And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
> And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
> And, subtly of herself contemplative,
> Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,
> Till heart and body and life are in its hold.
>
> The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
> Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
> And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
> Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
> Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
> And round his heart one strangling golden hair. (*Works* 100)

Rossetti included some lines from Goethe's *Faust* on the reverse of the watercolour that reinforce the image of the 'strangling hair': 'Hold thou thy heart against her shining hair,/If, by thy fate, she spread it once for thee;/For, when she nets a young man in that snare/So twines she him he never may be free' (*Works* 541). In stark contrast to *Fazio's Mistress* the verbal representation of this painting accentuates the vices associated with 'The Orchard-Pit' siren. *Fazio's Mistress* was based on a poem in which the male voice develops from that of a devoted lover to a lascivious voyeur in contemplation of the object of his unattainable desire. I have remarked on the reversal of this image in Rossetti's painting.

Plate 27. *Lady Lilith.*
1868 oil on canvas, 97.8 x 85.1cm
Delaware Art Museum.

With *Lilith* the next step toward the doom of 'The Orchard-Pit' is taken. Surtees[56] includes two references to the legendary Lilith, both derogatory: 'The Thalmudists say that Adam had a wife called Lilis, before hee married Eve, and of her he begat nothing but diuils' (*Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton, 1624); 'Lilith is, in the popular belief of the Hebrews, a female spectre in the shape of a finely dressed woman' (Commentary on Isaiah, Gesenius, Leipzig, 1821). Rossetti's 'Lilith' is presented as this pre-Eden wife of Adam, 'young while the earth is old' and 'ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive'. The sense is one of the primordial essences of her nature: powerful, brooding and vengeful.

Rossetti's poem 'Eden Bower' relates a story of how 'Lilith' was responsible for the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, ending with the portentous doom of Cain and Abel: 'the soul of one shall be made thy [the snake's] brother,/And thy tongue shall lap the blood of the other . . .' (*Works* 109). Rossetti removes this primeval witch from her mytho-religious environment and re-situates her within the context implied by *Fazio's Mistress*, that of a contemporary Victorian female. F. G. Stephens wrote 'she appears in the ardent languor of triumphant luxury and beauty, seated as if she lived now, and reclining back in a modern robe', and of the 'haughty luxuriousness of the beautiful modern witch's face'.[57] It is significant that Stephens used the word modern twice during his review of the painting and I shall refer to this when considering the cumulative effect of this series of portraits.

That *Lilith* is identifiable as a 'modern' woman can be attributed to one of two factors. The first is extant in the purely visual present that is this

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56. Surtees, I, 116.

57. F.G. Stephens, *The Portfolio* (May, 1894), pp. 68-9. Quoted in Surtees I, 116-7.

portrait, the second I shall return to later. Once again the model is enclosed within a private bower of sorts. *Lilith* is seated beside a dresser of ornate design surmounted by a mirror, which reflects back past the viewer. The craftsmanship of the dresser and mirror are perhaps an indication of the modernity Stephens alludes to. The other more convincing factor is that of her dress. The robe closely resembles that of *Fazio's Mistress*, as does the model's state of undress. A symptom of this dishabille is that *Lilith* appears to be in a more secluded private boudoir, thus heightening the effect on the viewer to that of voyeur. The white, creamy flowing robe has been discarded from the shoulder and the gathering at the bodice accentuates the bosom. The bare sweep of the neck leads the eye to the hair that, again in contrast to the *Mistress*, is completely unbound. Gitter writes that 'the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation';[58] here *Lilith* is combing out her hair as she looks in the mirror, fanning it across the canvas. The *Mistress* had some of her hair still bound; as none of *Lilith's* hair is bound or controlled in any way, her invitation is made more explicit.

She is enclosed by a border of wild flowers, indicating her affinity with nature, her base earthiness. Rossetti has painted white roses in abundance around her head, seemingly still attached to the bush; white being a mythological indication of the colour of roses before Eve encountered them, causing them to blush. Whereas white is often used to indicate purity or virginity, Rossetti uses it in this painting in an almost fin de siècle decadence: the wild roses, the luxuriant robe and sumptuous fur on which *Lilith* is seated.

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58. Elizabeth G. Gitter, 'The power of a woman's hair in the Victorian imagination', *PMLA*, Vol. 99 (1984), p. 938.

Thus Rossetti builds the effect of the white roses, reinforcing this with the other objects. This is once again an example of the reiteration of structure throughout these paintings by use of repetitive colour I discussed with reference to *Bocca Baciata*. In this instance the accumulation of colour incorporates the sumptuous fur and gown that flow together with the white roses, connecting *Lilith* at the basic level of simple colour recognition to the wild flowers and blossoming woods that surround her. Close examination reveals that the roses are painted attached to a trellis frame, a symbol perhaps of the necessary restraint of nature, and *Lilith* herself subject to the restriction and control of man. It also places her in the site of vulnerability that attracts the male viewer, coercing him into the voyeuristic transaction that perpetuates the social control of women.

I have noted above that the distinction between the gaze of the *Mistress* and that of *Lilith* is important because it controls in turn the gaze of the male voyeur. While the *Mistress* deliberately disengaged and re-engaged the viewer in the act of not looking, *Lilith* challenges them to contemplate her while she admires her own beauty. The slight inclination of the head towards the viewer and the active fanning of the hair contribute towards trapping the viewer's gaze. The viewer's eye is locked and held between the mirror in *Lilith's* hand and her face, held by the blood red of the lips and the sash around the wrist. The male viewer here is already a violator; having entered the seclusion of *Lilith's* grove he is doomed to die in the Orchard-Pit that Hillis Miller[59] proposes is reflected in the standing mirror. The wild pre-Eden wood beyond the boudoir promises the male viewer more than a glimpse of the 'Paradise' for which they were

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59. J. Hillis Miller, 'The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art', *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 29 (1991), pp. 333-49.

determined to penetrate the gaze of *Fazio's Mistress*. Here we find that *Lilith* is waiting for them, that she has always been waiting.

Furthermore, I suggest the reflection in the mirror *Lilith* holds in her hand is not the Orchard-Pit as Hillis Miller suggests: 'Though the back of the mirror is turned toward the spectator, the image in the mirror on the wall tells him what chasm is no doubt pictured there behind the screen of reflected hair'.[60] The reflection is rather more sinister than this, it is the reflection of the male gaze. It is the result of Rossetti gaining the complicity of the male gaze through the violation of *Helen*, of *Fazio's Mistress*, and now of the repeatedly violated *Lilith*, rejected by Adam after having borne him children, rejected by God, the symbol of woman used and discarded by man since time immemorial. Rossetti is pointing the finger at me; the reader has become the object of the female gaze. The culmination of this reversal of the male gaze will become evident in the apostrophic painting that follows, the *Venus Verticordia*.

The tension Rossetti builds between word and image is one of reception and knowledge. This outlines the second feature of the work enabling us to identify *Lilith* as a 'modern' woman. Having manipulated the male gaze, Rossetti now works to manipulate the way the reader processes his combined verbal and visual work of art. The 'Body's Beauty' is a sonnet describing the mytho-religious *Lilith*, quite clearly a witch, the enemy of Eve, the antithesis of the Virgin Mary. She is close to the earth, nature in its primordial form, she is likened to the snake and she takes its shape to corrupt Eve in 'Eden Bower.' She is identified with death, the poppy, and with a form of trap, the snare. Nowhere in this ekphrasis however is there any allusion to a 'modern' woman

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60. ibid, p. 336.

in the sense that Stephens describes. Rossetti creates a dialectical conflict between the ancient witch 'Lilith' and the modern woman *Lady Lilith* by inviting his male audience to see her as such.

Mieke Bal uses the term 'visual verbality'[61] to explain the concept of reading words and images by assigning equitable value to them both. Rossetti's word-image interaction here juxtaposes the reader's pre-existent narrative (so informed by the sonnet) with the purely visual present of *Lady Lilith* on the same plane of hermeneutics. By elevating them both rather than, for example the word dominating the image, the reader can begin to decipher new meanings from the tension created; these new meanings will become evident after my discussion of the next portrait. The battle that ensues within the mind of the reader is whether to trust one or the other. Will the reader substitute what they know for what they see? Rossetti offers the choice between what he tells the reader and what he shows them. Either the reader accepts that 'Lilith' and *Lady Lilith* are the same woman, or actively he chooses to dissociate the verbal from the visual. This illustrates the contention between word and image known as the *paragone*, and it is the central conception of the 'ekphrastic encounter', described by Mitchell as 'the conversion of the visual representation into the verbal representation' followed by 'the reconversion of the verbal representation into the visual object in the reception of the reader'.[62]

This is the last of the portraits where Rossetti will offer this choice, even here he has almost removed the possibility of escape. If the contemporary reader of this portrait is an acquaintance of Rossetti's, then they may be well

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61. Bal, p. 65.

62. Mitchell, p. 164.

aware that the model is Fanny Cornforth, a woman they have seen in the local neighbourhood. Admittedly in this instance she is dressed in fine clothes and is in a state of less than modest propriety. If she is unknown to them, as she is to a modern reader - she could be identified with an upper-class courtesan such as Laura Bell or Skittles. The woman could either be a familiar then, or an unattainable desirable other, as was evident with *Fazio's Mistress*. Being familiar with the object of one's desire may not of course render her any more attainable.

The distance between the voyeur and the desirable object is reflected by the physical distance between the canvas and the viewer. The inherent danger of Rossetti's women who threaten to spill over the canvas and into the viewing space is confirmed as the viewer is compelled to interact with the image. The compelling power of the image should not be underestimated once absorbed by the spectator, particularly when that image is reinforced within the social sphere. This is the prostitute 'Jenny': 'Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea'.[63] This is the same fallen woman he attempted to paint in *Found*. She remains familiar and yet distanced; Rossetti has rendered her familiarity reciprocal, knowledge is both given and taken away. As will become evident during the conclusion to this chapter, Rossetti seeks with these portraits to investigate the delicate balance between virtue and vice, day and night, redemption and damnation. The point remains that the reader is in a state of indecision. The visual portrait promises much; a beautiful woman in a private chamber, yet her identification with 'Lilith' poses a problem. She is a witch, she will 'cost' the male viewer, whatever her function. Whether the cost is death in 'The Orchard-

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63. For a detailed explication of the poem 'Jenny' see chapter four.

Pit' or some less hazy although distinctly more relevant price, such as the degenerative sexual disease threatened through the portrait of Helen, there is a payment attached to the possession of *Lilith*. Stephens's comments on the image mention a detail that Rossetti excludes from his sonnet, that of her clothes, these identify her as a woman of the time – quite contrary to Rossetti's insistence on her being 'young while the earth is old'. Rossetti's verbal representation of *Lilith* is imbued with a hypnotic patience; she has been waiting since before the time of Eve. She has carnal knowledge of Adam – representative of all man – and she snares men throughout history without remorse, she is omniscient. She is here the antithesis of Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott', the woman who waits watching for the man that will mean her death. The next man to appear in *Lilith's* mirror will himself die for the pleasure.

The *Venus Verticordia* [Plate 28] was completed in 1868 and is one of only two nude portraits Rossetti completed. Although the model for the painting was a cook whom Rossetti encountered in his neighbourhood, the face is that of Alexa Wilding, one of his favoured models during this period. The accompanying sonnet appears in the background in some of the studies for the work.[64] William Rossetti wrote to his brother after the completion of the painting to inform him that perhaps he had been mistaken to assign the 'Verticordia' to the title.[65] The term indicates a double purpose attributing the Venus of the

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64. Surtees, II, plate 249.

65. Doughty and Wahl, II, 727.

Plate 28. *Venus Verticordia.*
1863-68 oil on canvas, 83.8 x 71.2cm
Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth.

painting with the ability to 'turn the hearts of women to cultivate chastity', perhaps contrary to those qualities usually associated with any Venus, goddess of love. Although Rossetti removed 'Verticordia' he restored it in 1881- suitably, due to the ambiguous nature of this *Venus* as represented by word and image.

Rossetti has removed all vestiges of the 'modern' Victorian environment that surrounded *Fazio's Mistress* and *Lady Lilith*. The model is still familiar, one recognises the Italian 'towering throat' and distinctive auburn hair. Due to the cumulative effect of the progressive links between this painting and the others the reader must process Rossetti's *Venus* in terms of her pre-text, context and co-text.

Once again the reader is obliged to consider the pre-existent mythology of the character Venus; Rossetti's appropriation and assimilation of that character in his painting, and the sonnet that provides the verbal representation. As an ekphrasis in the broader sense this series of portraits when considered together introduce an additional field of hermeneutics to Rossetti's creative process due to the ritual restructuring of form and the use of colour I have commented on.

The primary and striking difference between this painting and the previous portrait is that the *Venus* immediately engages the male reader; she calmly gazes straight at the spectator. I will return to this feature during my discussion of the sonnet, and subsequently to Rossetti's use of the 'apostrophe' as a device in both word and image. The surrounding flowers that so incensed Ruskin[66] are honeysuckle and roses, a study in Pre-Raphaelite 'nature' painting.

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66. Surtees, I, 99. Includes Ruskin's complaint and a rebuttal from Graham Robertson.

Beyond this however the structural foundations of this image comply with those I have discussed previously. The model is restricted by the surrounding flora, her hands are visible once again and in this portrait they contain iconographic signifiers which confirm the identity of the subject.

The mythology surrounding Venus is so vast that the visual iconographic elements become crucial in distinguishing Rossetti's *Venus* from the manifold versions in existence. The association of the mythological Venus to the rose has long been a tradition, particularly in Renaissance art. Here *Venus* is likened to the flower on a sensual level, its beauty and fragrance, its pricking thorns are compared to the wounds of love. The use of honeysuckle evokes symbols of fertility and sexuality. However the variety of iconographic images the reader of this painting encounters is confusing. Until Rossetti names the woman he has painted she could be reasonably argued as any of three or four women from mythology or theology; or she could merely be a girl off the street painted nude.

Once the title is appended and she becomes *Venus Verticordia* the symbols can be identified and processed as part of the pre-text for this particular *Venus*. The less specific connotative tools Rossetti employs are the butterflies and the golden nimbus, which can be read as generic signifiers of deification. An iconographic reading of this painting needs to avoid the eclecticism characteristic of iconography. Mieke Bal advocates that the reader should avoid citing loose elements in order to utilize the full potential of iconography as a discursive tool; and that they should favour innovation over tradition, in order to create tension between the two. In this painting the key signs that instruct our

interpretation are the arrow and the apple. These are two objects that have vast iconographic resonance throughout art history.

For Rossetti's V*enus* they move from their status as random generic signifiers to denotative tools. The arrow becomes the dart of Cupid, her son; traditionally when struck by the arrow a man is compelled to fall in love. In *Venus's* hand it also invokes her own misfortune when accidentally struck by the arrow; she fell in unrequited love with Adonis but was powerless to prevent his death while hunting.[67] Thus the arrow becomes implicated in themes of obsessive love, love unrequited, and death. Similarly, the apple moves from random signifier to denotative tool. In mythology it becomes the apple thrown down at the Banquet of the Gods in honour of the most beautiful Goddess.[68] It was retained by Jupiter and given by the judgement of Paris the Trojan prince, to Venus. It is the symbol of her beauty, awarded by Paris after Venus had promised him the love of Helen of Sparta, the consequence of which is the Trojan War recounted in the *Iliad*.

Once these signs cease to be random and become specific they move to define the portrait, becoming part of the representational tradition that surrounds this subject. They place the work within any canon of Venus portraits that include them as signifiers. Once the reader has recognized the traditional story represented by an iconographic reading of the work, it then needs to be processed as part of a visual-narrative reading, in order to differentiate between

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67. This story was adapted by Shakespeare. In attempting to save Adonis, Venus was pricked by the thorn of a rose, her blood staining the flower red.

68. The myth of 'The Judgement of Paris' is recounted in Euripides, *Trojan Women* [920-932], Hyginus, *Fabulae* [91, 92, 110], and Appollodorus, [3.12.5-6 "Epitome" 3.1-5, 5.8]. It is mentioned briefly in Homer, *The Iliad* xxiv.

this rendering of the Venus 'story' and any that preceded it or may follow. Thus the painting becomes part of a continuous tradition in the history of Venus portraits, and will remain so.

As was evident with both the *Lilith* and *Mistress* portraits, Rossetti manipulates the viewer's eye and transforms it into that of the voyeur. He achieves this through constricting the space behind the model in both cases and their comparative states of dishabille. Rossetti removes the voyeuristic element from the *Venus* by presenting her naked, thus removing the latent eroticism of the woman undressing. The other erotic feature of the previous portraits was the state of the hair, whether bound or styled in any way. *Venus's* hair is completely unfettered whether by binding or combing, she is presented in a wholly unreserved and therefore empowered context. She is hiding nothing, she faces the male viewer front on; this portrait contains nothing that identifies her as existing exclusively for the pleasure of a man. *Venus* offers nothing while offering all.

The ambiguity of the portrait is heightened by the non-threatening pose of the hands and the passivity in the eyes. There is no lure as with *Lilith*, for there is no trap. The male voyeur cannot gain possession of *Venus* as with the *Mistress*, because *Venus* has removed the interpretive bias of the voyeur, which exists in the ability to determine what exactly the female will offer. The dart the *Venus* holds reinforces the ambivalence that prevails in this portrait. The reader identifies it as dangerous, an arrow with the power to compel him, yet *Venus* holds it with the point deflected away from the viewer. The arrow points across the body and is aimed at the heart. While this may be a further indication

of the Adonis story wherein Venus herself was struck, it is worthwhile to investigate an alternative possibility.

I have argued above that the dominant theme of these portraits is accusatory; inferring that the male gaze is a violation. The story of *Helen* is quite clearly linked to that of *Venus* through the judgement of Paris noted above; hers was a threefold story of violation. The *Mistress's* violation occurred through attempted possession and *Lilith's* was a recurrence of her primal rejection. *Venus* holds the arrow in such a way as to indicate self-harm, self-mutilation. If the *Venus* figure can be taken as synecdoche for all women, as aspects of *Helen*, the *Mistress* and *Lilith* all reside in her, then the self-endangering attitude of the model becomes extremely significant. The *Venus* is a victim here then of an implied violation leading to self-harm – suicide. The semiotics of rape identify this act as one of consequence, of occurring as a result of violation.

Bal's explication of Rembrandt's *Lucretia* paintings confirms this: 'rape itself cannot be visualized. It cannot be visualized, not because a 'decent' culture would not tolerate such representations of the act, but because rape makes the victim invisible'.[69] *Venus* then is the visible representation of violated womanhood. Her symbol of suicide acts as a metaphor for rape. This is the point where Bal's reading of Rembrandt and my reading of Rossetti

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69. The visual representation of the physical act of rape itself is not what is at stake here. The implication is that by signaling the act of rape through the self-killing enacted by Lucretia, Rembrandt avoids the 'invisibility' of rape scenes such as those celebrated in paintings such as Apollo and Daphne or indeed the Lucretia paintings of Titian. Whereas in paintings like those – where the rape itself is subordinated to narrative 'visuality', here the sign is of paramount importance, the sign dominates the image and, in the language of Derrida, its 'truth' is unavoidable. Interestingly Titian's Lucretia paintings put the blade in the hand of the attacker – as a symbol of his forced authority. In a prefiguring of Rembrandt's versions, the blade still acts as a visible sign of the self-killing that follows the act. Bal, p. 64.

differ. I concur with Bal when she proposes that the act of suicide 'conveys the idea that the victim is responsible for her own destruction'.[70] The case here though is still ambiguous, for while the rape of Lucretia is perhaps the most celebrated and frequently depicted in European painting, Rossetti's *Venus* does not exist within the same pre-conceived narrative. Hers is not an active pose, she does not 'move' in the way that Rembrandt's subject does. She is the symbolic representation of the possibility of the rape of woman. She does not represent the act in the aftermath; she represents it as it exists behind the eye of the male viewer. She is at once representative of this possibility as she actively rejects it, and the tension she creates is reflected in the viewer's eye.

The function of the struggle in terms of reading Rossetti's work is to place it in a contextual history, social and cultural, and this brings us to the accompanying sonnet wherein Rossetti begins to challenge the male reader:

She hath the apple in her hand for thee,
Yet almost in her heart would hold it back;
She muses, with her eyes upon the track
Of that which in thy spirit they can see.
Haply, 'Behold, he is at peace,' saith she;
'Alas! The apple for his lips,-- the dart
That follows its brief sweetness to his heart,--
The wandering of his feet perpetually!'

A little space her glance is still and coy;
But if she give the fruit that works her spell,
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. (*Works* 210)

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70. ibid.

The initial impact of the sonnet brings this analysis directly back to the impact of the painting achieved through the rhetorical apostrophe, or address to the reader I commented on earlier. The conflict is primary and significant. *Venus* immediately engages the viewer by looking straight out of the painting, forcing him to contemplate her, to address her naked form, her generic signifiers and her denotative tools, the arrow and the apple. In short, she forces him to identify her. 'Venus' however does the opposite: she immediately addresses the reader, thus identifying him. She places him in a passive position. The reader is immediately subjected to the control of 'Venus'. Rossetti empowers 'Venus' by intimating that she knows what it is that lies behind the male gaze. As I have noted above this sonnet represents contradictions, some with the painting, and some internal. This tension is created once again by challenging the reader of the ekphrastic text, by confusing the distinction between what they know and what they see.

The first two lines of the octave are intimate: 'She' and 'thee' together are reinforced by the image of 'her heart'. *Venus* becomes sensual, caring, the reader re-evaluates the function of her nudity; she becomes vulnerable. She becomes the weaker part of the dialogue between viewer and image. The apple is now a gift, not a dangerous signifier as before; her reluctance is reminiscent of *Lilith*, a weary resignation to male subjection and domination. As 'Venus' becomes weaker she becomes anonymous, invisible, the goddess of a dead religion. Just as the male reader is rendered powerful however he is undermined; 'Yet almost in her heart would hold it back.' 'Venus' once again is in control, she 'would hold it back'. Why? the male reader asks, and how? Then she muses, she wonders whether or not her gift should be bestowed; this is

the beginning of the exchange or 'transaction', the importance of which I will return to. The end of the octave sees the 'Venus' remain coy, still, but contemplative; she is aware of the male and the consequences of his gaining possession of her - even though the male is not.

The sestet begins by re-associating the apple with that of desire, immediately invoking 'The Orchard-Pit' and its consequences. Rossetti balances the pure maiden and the siren deliberately, ensnaring the reader as he did with *Lilith*. The trap is once more one of indecision. If we look again to the portrait; the gaze centers on the face, the framed nimbus of golden flaming hair, the breast, the apple, the arrow, all indicative of desire and destruction. The sonnet re-situates 'Venus' within her mythological power-base. The portrait of *Helen* is evoked and the judgement of Paris is re-associated with the apple. The apple was given to Venus in exchange for the possession of Helen. Now *Venus*/'Venus' is returning the apple to man; the consequence of which is clearly echoed in the references to the Trojan massacre we have seen earlier. *Helen's* ruined face is evoked through this gesture, her damaged eye reflects the light of the fire which burns Troy; a city violated in return for her violation, an act instigated by her 'Phrygian boy'. The sestet ends with distinct references to the 'Paradise' implied by *Fazio's Mistress*; images of moaning seas and the dark grove that remain beyond the reach of the male gaze.

The canvas then provides a set of signifiers. Rossetti's sonnet subsequently provides the criteria for the recognition of those signs. Rossetti empowers the image by providing it with verbal representation. This does not however render the image redundant or impotent because the image once empowered then re-empowers the word and creates a new field of

understanding. The corollary of this is a new plane of hermeneutics permitting the 'relocation of painting within the field of powers from which it had been excluded'[71] thereby creating a new field of discourse. The sonnet does not exist as a companion piece for this painting - a decorative aside, rather Rossetti challenges the painting's representation of the alluring maiden. He momentarily fixes on its ambiguity, he magnifies its danger, he gives words to the fear felt inherently by the viewer of this most blatant yet most forgiving of femme-fatales.

Rossetti provides a challenge to the male viewer to face certain contradictions. The artist's own battleground is transposed onto the viewer/reader. The key ekphrastic notions within this text insert hesitancy in the mind of the male viewer. These hesitant moments exist when the *Venus* seems undecided, yet her indecision serves to implicate and trap the male gaze. Her physical beauty, her non-threatening environment, the mass of honeysuckle and roses which surround her, her golden halo and flowing hair, all Rossetti's painted invention work to communicate this ambiguity. However the crux of the word-image relationship lies in the passive objects she holds, random signifiers in the iconographic tradition of Venus that Rossetti employs as denotative specifiers in order to manipulate the male gaze in the act of recognition. This event is a 'moment of change' that occurs due to the position of painting within the social structure rather than apart from it.

If the social act of recognition is key to understanding the word-image relationship then it becomes vital that we as readers are able to place the images within the social structure. This is a structure that contains the pre-text, or pre-

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71. Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, p. xvi.

existing narrative, the context, or history, and the co-text, the cumulative word-image effect of the ekphrastic encounter. This method recognizes the relationship between the painter and his society and confirms that creation is a social act. If an occurrence of the word-image relationship can be regarded as an 'ekphrastic text', simply the representation of something that in itself is representational, and can be examined on a co-empowered plane of hermeneutics, then it is possible to view Rossetti's femme-fatale portraits as important social signifiers in a contiguous relationship with not only his own contemporary culture, but ours also. This theory is particularly relevant when considering Rossetti's unique role as creator in many cases of both word and image.

I mentioned previously that these portraits exist as antitheses of women such as Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott' who is indicative of just this type of social closeting of the female form. Harrison's comments on the semi-nudity of the Baxter sister reiterate this move to disempower the female: 'deprived of her capacity to take the initiative; she can only accede to the wishes of others.'[72] This statement could quite easily be mistaken for a comment on Tennyson's sequestered lady. The subjection of women proliferated in literature at this time. This is the cultural discourse which Rossetti enters into through these ekphrastic texts. The discourse he stimulates transcends the boundaries of art history to become social, literary - textual history; once again 'the life and talk of your sons'.

If as I have argued, Rossetti's representation of Venus can be considered as synecdoche for woman, then the implication and manipulation of the male

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72. Harrison, p. 26.

gaze with his own defines that gaze as synecdoche for man. This ultimate reversal is manifested in the *Venus Verticordia* as individual to each male viewer; the result of which is that *Venus* becomes mistress, wife, mother, sister and whore, the acceptable or 'other' face of the Victorian male psyche. The very essence of the effect of these portraits lies in their ambiguity. This ambiguity forces a re-evaluation of the male gaze, the female persona, and the social implications of the art-form. Mitchell[73] identifies Shelley's manuscript poem, 'On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery' as the 'primal scene' of ekphrastic poetry, 'the perfect prototype for the image as a dangerous female other who threatens to silence the poet's voice and fixate his observing eye'. Mitchell explicates the poem in terms of desire and counter-desire, examining the power of the Medusa's voice and the removal by Shelley of 'painterly authority'. In this instance Shelley becomes the frame. In Rossetti's ekphrastic text of *Venus* the frame is removed, the ocular viewing apparatus that is forced upon the reader is Rossetti. As with so many of his word-image constructs there is no inter-textual mediator; there are word and image on one plane of hermeneutics.

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73. Mitchell, pp. 171-3.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POETICS OF OWNERSHIP

In chapter one I traced Rossetti's images of the Virgin Mary through several manifestations to the story of *St Agnes of Intercession*, and the portraits of Elizabeth Siddal as Beatrice. The resulting confusion of the concepts of worship and desire culminated in the sensual portraits of Jane Morris as Proserpine (her hair painted Siddal's red), and the intermingling of divine and secular that dominates Rossetti's work. In his major cohesive collection of poetry, *The House of Life*, Rossetti can be seen to rework this concept of divine passion within similar notions of femininity, and yet again his work can be situated at the heart of Victorian debates surrounding sexuality rather than at the periphery, as has previously been perceived. This chapter begins with an evaluation of the subjugated female voice within ekphrastic representation and situates Rossetti's 'Poetics of Ownership' within a tradition of literary examples of this concept. I will examine the idea of the ownership of the female through Rossetti's poem 'The Portrait' and the image *How They Met Themselves*, before considering the origins of his poetic voice in Dante and the early Italian poets he translated, their effect on *The House of Life*, and the unique position that collection holds as a realisation of a notion of Victorian sexuality within the atmosphere of a Christian society.

Rossetti's interest in the victimised women permeating through this narrative is confirmed through his reading, particularly his ownership of Heywoodes' *Gunaikeion*, and various works by Ovid, including *Metamorphoses*. Both of these texts relate an example of the imitation of

immortal rape by a mortal man in the story of Philomela, and it acts as a prototype for this discussion.[1]

Philomela was the sister of Procne, who was married to the King Tereus. Tereus, upon meeting Philomela was overcome by her beauty and determined to possess her himself. Through an unfortunate act of paternal trust, Philomela's father gave her safety over to Tereus and the consequence was an appalling act of assault and rape. Tereus absconded with Philomela and imprisoned her in a faraway forest. There he raped her while she was enchained. When Philomela threatened to expose Tereus, he cut out her tongue and repeatedly ravished her once more. Philomela, viciously silenced, was left in contemplation of her doom. However in her imprisonment she wove a cloth disclosing the dreadful events that occurred, thus communicating to her sister the crimes of Tereus.[2] Philomela does actually beg for Tereus to kill her after he violates her, in an echo of Lucretia, 'Stab here, and let my tainted blood be spilt'(*OM* 200). She is driven to communicate her violation in another manner because the option of death is denied her.

The images of rape and violence which have befallen Philomela and which are illustrated on her woven statement are only described by Ovid as 'in-wrought letters, upon white display'd,/in purple notes, her wretched case betray'd'(*OM* 201). They are later described as 'cyphers' when decoded by Procne. This story can be seen as a prototype for the narrative tradition of

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1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* trans. Garth, Dryden et al, reprinted in *The Rennaisance and the Gods* ed. and introd. Stephen Orgel (New York and London: Garland, 1976), Book VI, pp. 197-206. Subsequent quotations will be indicated by page number in parentheses with the abbreviation *OM*.

2. The outcome of the story has often overshadowed the crimes committed by Tereus, as he unwittingly eats the flesh of his own son – a meal prepared by Procne and Philomela in revenge.

female suppression. Tereus physically violates Philomela and imprisons her, in Philomela's words 'Obscur'd and bury'd from the sight of men'(*OM* 200). He then silences her literal voice by removing her tongue. Tereus returns to society and imprisons her verbally by lying about her whereabouts, 'with feign'd grief, and false, dissembled sighs,/begins a formal narrative of lies'(*OM* 201). Consequently he verbally encloses her in a figurative prison as restricting as the physical one he has placed on her; he is in complete control of an illusory reality of his own creation. When Philomela exerts her power through the woven cloth she disrupts Tereus' reality and imposes on it her own, thereby gaining her release from both literal and figurative prisons. In the case of Rembrandt's *Rape of Lucretia*, the reality imposed upon the male fantasy by the female victim is that of death, suicide. In Rossetti's *Venus Verticordia* the reality is that of recognition, an accusation of latent male persecution prior to the act of rape. My re-evaluation of Rossetti's artistic process implicates it in an attempt to resurrect and control the female voice through a narrative that provokes a gendered power struggle in an environment beyond male introspection. I do not dispute critical assertions regarding the restless search for an ideal female image or the gendered power relationships within art for example. I rebut the conclusion however that this all takes place within an arena of masculine desire and does not recognize or even brook the expression of the female voice.

Martin Danahay[3] espouses these sentiments in his discussion of the 'Pygmalion' artist: 'The male artist maintains a unified self by splitting off aspects of himself that he denies and projecting them on to women. Women

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3. Martin A. Danahay, 'Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation', *Victorian Poetry* 32 (1994), pp. 35-54 (p. 46).

can thus be simultaneously venerated as the site of the loss of ego in their selflessness and passivity, and despised for their vanity and self-absorption'. Danahay's persuasive depiction of Rossetti as an artist whose divided subjectivity has its origins in masculine desire acknowledges the 'angel/whore dichotomy' familiar to Victorian scholars and yet fails ultimately to address the female subject as it exists beyond or prior to its appended status as schizoid reflection of that masculine desire. This type of criticism alarmingly resorts to traditional patriarchal models that rely on a constructed cultural code situating women within a sphere delineated and controlled by men. While asserting the need to consider the gendered power struggle inherent to this debate, such criticism neglects a number of possibilities that could help explain that aspect of artistic creation that seems somehow to exist beyond the control of the artist. Chiefly among these possibilities are the existence of the artist's own unconscious and the unmanageable contradictions inherent in the notion of femininity. The alternative I will concentrate on with regards to Rossetti's work is the possibility of the female voice represented in narrative tradition as an autonomous phenomenon and manifest in the exchange outlined above.

Danahay utilizes Derrida's theory of *différance* to propose that the appearance of a female image indicates the artist's attempt at self-contemplation. He concludes that any such attempt must pass through the mediation of that which is not the self, and will become contaminated by outside influence. The resultant impure representation of the perceiving 'I' therefore prompts the artist to seek an image of the self through 'artificial secondary media, such as mirrors, texts, or paintings'. Danahay explains that such 'secondary representations necessarily involve a recognition of the way in

which a subject is not autonomous but mediated by, and perhaps determined by, others'.[4] Unfortunately these 'others' remain undisclosed. It is my contention that the 'others' here are representative of the female whose voice is active prior to her metamorphosis into the object of desire described above.

In the context of difference described by Derrida, desire and the mirror image of desire are not the same thing. The concept of sexual exchange and its replication in art reiterates this idea. The object of desire becomes the desired object within the mirror of lascivious misogyny, but the existence of the female voice acts to disrupt that mirror image. The impression of desire acted upon and created by the male is resisted in an expression of emancipation by the female representation, thus suggesting a model of representation similar to Mitchell's structural interpretation of the ekphrastic encounter. The encounter involves 'the conversion of the visual representation into the verbal representation' followed by 'the reconversion of the verbal representation into the visual object in the reception of the reader'.[5]

While the stress of the rhetorical ekphrasis rests firmly with the metamorphosis that occurs between word and image, if the image, verbal or visual has its origins within society and ultimately returns to society, the creative act is mimetic only in its original manifestation as the outward projection of male desire. Thereafter the recreation signals a change in form, a fantasy version of an unattainable reality, effectively a flawed resurrection.

This relationship between the subject and the reader/viewer is one that the artist

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4. ibid, p. 38.

5. The similarities exist in the concept of representation and conversion. The ekphrasis assumes the voice of the silent visual object in the same way the male assumes to re-present the female body – whether in word or image. Mitchell, p. 164.

cannot control; while one would be ill-advised, therefore, in granting the image a fully autonomous status, it is equally imprudent not to acknowledge the ability of the artwork to act independently from its creator.

Danahay documents the failure historically of the Victorian male and his predecessor to create a female after his own image and under his control, represented by examples such as Sarah Walker in Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris*, or Hannah Cullwick's refusal to don ladies' dress for Arthur Munby. While acknowledging these instances he disregards the correlative conclusion in art that the female voice exerted by these women exists in fact in dialectical opposition to the male desire for power over them. The idea that the male could create and control the female through representation leads to the activation of the female voice in order to maintain the very autonomy the male would deny it.[6]

While Rossetti's search for the beloved is engendered within his own psychological processes, the implication of the female voice situates this work within the discursive narrative originating in the mythologies surrounding Arachne's web and the instances of immortal violation therein. Danahay concludes by quoting Burne-Jones's words on his own art; 'I mean by a picture a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be - in light better than any light that ever shone - in a land no-one can define, or remember, only desire'.[7] Danahay proposes 'that masculine desire could never be fulfilled

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6. It is important to acknowledge that the uncontrollable voice of the image does not necessarily *always* belong to the female subject, as it could originate from a melange of voices – from the artist's unconscious to society itself. What is striking about Rossetti's poetry (and his portraits) in this sense is that it perpetually engages a notion of femininity that I feel has yet to be explored thoroughly, and while that 'notion' may indeed belong to the unconscious of the artist, it is my contention that it has further and more interesting implications for ideas on representation when afforded a semi-autonomous voice it has previously been denied.

7. Danahay, p. 47.

by any actual woman in an actual time and place', and that 'the displaced eroticism of Rossetti's women has been aestheticized in Burne-Jones's paintings to such a degree that it self-consciously eschews any reference to contemporary sexuality'.[8] However it is precisely this absence of male sexuality that makes masculine desire, particularly unfulfilled masculine desire, such a threat to female autonomy. The failure to find the ultimately non-existent 'ideal' woman leads to the desire to dominate, manipulate, subjugate and misrepresent the female image. The latent sexuality in Burne-Jones's paintings is important and patently dangerous because it seems invisible, innocuous. This dissembling of male desire is embedded in the narrative tradition of female subjugation. In the *Metamorphoses* the immortal male is disguised when he approaches his female victim, his threat heightened by the fact that he is perceived as non-threatening. Whether he is the bull that abducted Europa or the swan that raped Leda, his 'absence' is what enabled him to violate his victim. Even the mortal Tereus was 'granted' possession of Philomela because her father did not perceive his threat. These instances of violation exist within a wider framework of male authority sanctified by divine patriarchy and reinforced by physical strength within the sphere of the superiorly educated man. They are extant within the immediate context of Victorian culture in addition to the wider male-female discourse from Ovid to the present day. Critical orthodoxy incorrectly assumes artistic responses to this phenomenon are simply expressions of self-reflection, and are therefore indicative of the artist's sole desire to reproduce aspects of his own personality. Closer examination reveals a more complex interrogation of self-expression

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8. ibid, p. 48.

than this suggests, resulting in a more problematic reading of male desire, worship, and fantasy.

This conflict between desire and worship is revealed throughout Rossetti's art; its immature origins lie in *Hand and Soul* and imbue much of 'The Blessed Damozel'. At its most developed it offers a deep insight into the processes behind the writing of what Catherine Maxwell calls 'the Female Sublime' when analysing the poetry of Milton, Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne.[9] Maxwell advocates that these poets were at times able to write with a 'female voice'. I propose that Rossetti wrote and painted in an attempt to control the female voice, the Beatrice figure that he sought to resurrect, an autonomous female presence over whose responses he had no control and whose knowledge was independent of his own. Bullen's categorization of Rossetti as the 'Pygmalion artist' creating images which act as 'a prophylactic against the threat of self-disintegration'[10] fails to recognize the independent female other which threatens an external collapse through the ekphrastic voice.

Mitchell's somewhat ungainly exposition of the effect of the ekphrastic image may shed some light on this process and its inherent danger. Mitchell argues that the 'voyeuristic masturbatory fondling of the ekphrastic image is a kind of mental rape that may induce a sense of guilt, paralysis, or ambivalence in the reader'.[11] It is the idea here that is intriguing. Masturbation in this context eliminates the female voice, removing the possibility of rejection for the suitor, similar to the way Fazio degli Uberti's poem attempted to remove the

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9. Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne* (Manchester University Press, 2001).

10. Bullen, p. 332.

11. Mitchell, p. 169.

power of female consent. The resultant elimination of the 'reality' of the female voice provides the aspiring male possessor with what is in effect, a blank canvas. It is here that the expression of female containment can then be realised – the 'unreality' of the desired image replaces the reality of rejection or unavailability. The consequence of the voyeuristic nature of the ekphrastic image is not that it induces 'guilt, paralysis or ambivalence'; rather that it offers to the male reader the possibility of desire, the desire to possess, the desire to own and the desire to dominate.[12] There is another side to this relationship however and it should not be discounted. If the female voice is found or exposed in the ekphrastic representation, as I have argued, how is this possible?

Bal considers that the inevitable weakness of the voyeur lies in their latent desire to exhibit that voyeurism. A consequence of this is the evident *need* for the display of ownership or power of the male possessor of the female object of his desire. In the next chapter I will discuss the 'Humanity Show' Henry Knight observes in Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and in Knight's eagerness to share the enjoyment of his voyeuristic pleasure he too engages in this overt display characteristic of the male possessor. Bal notes that:

> In Freud's positive view of looking, shame is the counterforce that has to be overcome in order for voyeurism and its counterpart, exhibitionism, to be possible . . .the active and passive tendencies of what he calls 'perversions' are two sides of the same thing. He claims that every voyeur is also an exhibitionist.[13]

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12. The ultimate danger inherent in this exchange is the consequence of male ideas of fantasy and reality becoming blurred.

13. Bal, note 25, p. 245.

Thus it is in their eagerness to exhibit their power, the expression of their desire, that the male is repeatedly undone. The female image is given opportunity for self-expression through the male's uncontrollable urge to exhibit that image, to exert power by exercising it. What I am not suggesting here categorically is the possibility of pigment on canvas that speaks! The verbal and visual images I am discussing are inevitably spoken for, and invariably they are given expression in terms that relate them directly to the reader or viewer of their image, a consequence of the male desire to exhibit their ownership of the female body through that image.

Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess'(1842: Appendix 2)[14] is a powerful meditation on male possession and violation being challenged by female subversion. The Duke of Ferrara has among his gallery of *objets d'art* a portrait he insists is kept covered by a curtain only he is permitted to draw. The portrait is of the Duke's former Duchess and he is presenting it to an emissary of her probable replacement. The painting is one that he probably commissioned, he is in physical possession of the painting, he controls where and under what circumstance it is exhibited. The reader can recognise the specific characteristics surrounding the fantasy of male domination here. The recurrence of particular forms acts as a sign that metonymically engages the reader's co-textual knowledge. Here the persistent signifier of violation is the image of the *prison*, the sign that refers the reader to the narrative tradition of Arachne and Philomela, a history of male misanthropy, an absolute denotative reference to female subjugation. The narrative tradition of male dominance is imported onto the image through the incarceration of the female form.

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14. Robert Browning, *Poetical Works 1833-1864* ed. Ian Jack (Oxford: OUP, 1970) p. 367-8.

The Duke exercises a control over the Duchess which echoes that of Tereus although once again any physical act of abuse is not visualized. The Duke has removed the voice of the female image in several ways. The first is the silencing of the living Duchess, of which the reader only learns at the close of the monologue; 'I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands/As if alive'. The second occurs in the imprisoning of her image; 'none puts by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I'. This enables the Duke to concoct the illusory reality that he is presenting to the emissary. The illusion of power lies in his physical ownership of the painting and originates in the connotation of sexual revelation provided by the act of drawing the curtain. It is a reality dependent on his ability to control the painted portrait, which to him is a mere extension of his ability to control the living Duchess.

Within this illusory reality the Duke manipulates the vision of the spectator to fit his reality of the Duchess while alive. Tereus' 'narrative of lies' is bound up in the Duke's monologue. It begins with the marriage of Tereus to Procne, a marriage 'of seeming joy' and ends with the assault on Philomela; 'I was compelled to wrong my sister's bed' (*OM* 200). It is Tereus' dissatisfaction combined with his insatiable lust which drives him to violate Philomela, and while the Duke is more subtle in his monologue, his wife contains both of that which in Procne and Philomela existed separately, neither returning his love nor his lust. His wife was 'too soon made glad,/Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er/She looked on'. The Duke attempts to kill the reality that was the Duchess by replacing it with his own. He has already effected her actual death as we have seen quoted above; however it is the

conflict between his reality and the reality implied by her image that creates the tension within this ekphrasis.

During the monologue the mute female image begins to fashion her own reality. In this case the conflict ensues when the Duchess weaves her own representation of the unrepresentable. This occurs at line thirteen with the 'spot of joy' and its consequences. The reader can sense in the verbal representation that the Duke's illusory reality is beginning to fail, the hesitant pre-emptive questioning, the supposition that the spectator has noticed the 'spot of joy' and the 'flushed cheek' give way to suspicions of promiscuity and the punishment meted out for the offending Duchess. The Duke's unrequited lust becomes apparent in the thinly veiled allusions to the painter's own reflected desire; 'the faint/Half-flush that dies along her throat'. His frustrated libido projects upon the Duchess adulterous tendencies, 'She thanked men,—good! but thanked/Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked/My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name/With anybody's gift'. Just as the Duchess rejected his sexual desires in life she rejects them in death, prompting the Duke to invent a reality wherein she is a promiscuous wife whom he could not tolerate: 'Just this/Or that in you disgusts me' and was therefore forced to execute.

The Duke began the presentation by stating both his ownership of the painting, '[My] Last Duchess', the possessive pronoun indicating that ownership, and of the wife, and while he is thereafter eager to reiterate his ownership of the painting, he is unable to claim ownership of the woman. The curtain which only he is allowed to draw, once drawn, relinquishes his control over the painted Duchess. The fabulous 'spot of joy' with which the Duchess displayed her heart 'too soon made glad' is beyond the Duke's control, although

his projected fantasy is such that he uses it to convey exactly what he expects from his next wife, whom the emissary represents. This battle of wills is indicative of the struggle between word and image within the context of this poem. The reader is forced to make a decision between what they visualize and what they are told. However conscious the Duke is of his disappointment in his former wife he will no sooner relinquish his ownership of the painting of her than he would allow the 'spot of joy' to undermine his authority in marriage. Thus questions are raised concerning the external relationships between the image and he who controls it. Control in this context implies the ability to manipulate the physical appearance and therefore the reception of the painting.

Browning however gives his Duke the emissary as an auditor, who although he is never given speech in the poem is nevertheless a key figure in the monologue. The emissary gives the Duke's words time to travel and be heard. He gives the option of response to the audience. The Duke's overbearing presentation gives way to pre-emptive assumptions regarding what the emissary is thinking, exposing his (the Duke's) doubts and nagging insecurities over the painting. Browning's Duke relinquishes power over the image through the silent emissary who acts as a vessel between the painting and the reader. By pre-empting the emissary's questions, by supposing what it is that has caught the eye of the spectator; 'not the first/Are you to turn and ask thus', the Duke concedes to the painting a voice seemingly independent of his own, revealing an unconscious alternative narrative which is closer to the imagined voice of the Duchess than his own. Consequently a notion of femininity or female independence is forced through the Duke's own words to the emissary – the surrogate reader. The result is the altering of the reader's perception of the

Duchess and through her that of the Duke's implied control. Possession or the issue of ownership is crucial in determining the ability of the visual representation to speak out, to represent itself.

The Duchess undermines the Duke's presumed ownership of her image and body by drawing the viewer's glance and prompting the pre-emptive questioning. An interesting analogy to this poem is the enigmatic smile of *La Gioconda* which recalls to me the 'spot of joy' that so undermines Browning's Duke. Scholars and laymen have for centuries pondered over that smile, asking the same questions which the Duke of Ferrara supposes the emissary wishes to ask. Herein lies a central element of the struggle between word and image and I posit the question, does she actually smile? Does the painting of the erstwhile Duchess of Ferrara actually reveal that 'spot of joy', or is the Duke unable to differentiate between the fantasy to which he has subjugated the Duchess, his own deluded reality, and the physical reality of her painted portrait? Bryson comments on the 'flickering, ungovernable mobility of the Glance' which 'strikes at the very roots of rationalism'[15] and in this poetic construction of a visual fiction, the spot of joy represents the ungovernable glance. Is it possible that the glance only exists within the mind of the Duke himself? Perhaps had the emissary been left alone to consider the portrait the 'spot of joy' would not have caught his eye.

What must be considered in this context is the possibility that the female glance – represented in this instance by the 'spot of joy', may not actually appear in the visual portrait, it may instead be a visual illusion appended to the

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15. Bryson, *Vision and Painting*, p. 121. James Heffernan makes the distinction between 'Gaze and Glance' the focus of his insightful though limited discussion of this poem. See Heffernan, *The Museum of Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 141-45.

painting during the Duke's verbal presentation of the visual object. It is during this conversion from visual to verbal that the ekphrasis is able to deceive the narrator, the male who has assumed ownership of the image. It is obvious the Duke finds the painting disturbing because he keeps it covered. Once the painting is revealed his projected fantasy is distorted by the reality of the portrait. This distortion forces him to bring to the attention of the spectator elements they may not have noticed otherwise, thereby relinquishing any power he did have over the Duchess while she was alive.

This means that the Duke himself supplies the context for the painting to act independently. In his attempt to display or exercise his power over the female body that was his wife, he informs the reader's portrait of her by unwittingly revealing that which bothered him most about the living Duchess. The Duke's possession of this painting leads to the reverse of what he may have expected. He qualifies the painting just as a museum or gallery director does, not only by controlling the physical environment surrounding the painting, but by pre-supposing the spectator's interest in the painting and attempting to control their perception of it. In attempting this he fails, but his possession of the physical painting which leads him to suppose he can control its image is indicative of the powerful suppositions which ownership can create.

The Duke loses a portion of his assumed control over the image when he acknowledges its creator, implicating the role of the artist in his implied reality. This occurs with the realisation that the image is not one over which he has the complete control he imagined. His delusion is shattered by his own monologue and the presence of the emissary. The similarities to the Philomela story inform

the nature of male domination through possession of the image, the determination of a projected reality.

Philomela, as she exists at the beginning of the story, is a product and member of the society defined by her father and his court. Once Tereus desires her, he acts to remove her from that society and force her to become the image of his desire. Thus the object of desire, Philomela, is forced to become what Tereus desires - a helpless sexual object confined by him, violated by him and subsequently manufactured by him, presented to the outer world as lost, presumed dead. Philomela though is not solely the product of Tereus' fantasy. Tereus' restless attempts to transform her in this sense fail because of the danger inherent in control; through whichever chosen medium the transaction takes place, there remains some innate consciousness that cannot be diluted or disciplined. However helpless Philomela may seem, however smothered her voice, her power over Tereus, transferred to her in the very act of the rape, enables her to gain her release and subsequent revenge.[16] Ultimately she is freed not because she is the product of masculine desire, but the victim of it. It is irresponsible therefore to regard the female image as a fixed entity that exists entirely within the psychology of male misogyny or narcissism. Rather, I propose that male attempts to create and define a female subject in art are approximations that seek to contain the female form in order to subjugate it within a fantasy world of male domination. The result of such attempts to control the female are dangerous in that they could possibly provoke male fantasies of violation and murder.

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16. This is a recurrence of the transfer of power I discussed in chapter one in relation to Mary Virgin and the Cumaen Sybil.

This concept is dramatically amplified in the relationship between the prostitute Nancy and Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist*, a novel that polarizes distinctions between good and evil, light and dark, life and death.[17] I commented previously on the crucial distinction between desire and the mirror image of desire and the failure of the male protagonist to make such a distinction. Thus it is in *Oliver Twist*, as the Nancy that Bill Sikes believes he controls is not the same as the Nancy he eventually murders. The reader learns from Nancy herself that male control over her began not with Sikes however but with Fagin: "'the cold, wet, dirty streets are my home; and you're the wretch that drove me to them long ago; and that'll keep there, day and night, day and night, till I die!'" (*Twist* 134). This type of oppression is manifest in an institutional and social narrative and yet it is as crucial to this discussion as actual physical violation. Nancy reveals as much during her conversation with Rose Maylie, as she attempts to rationalize her own existence: "'Oh, lady, lady! . . . if there was more like you, there would be fewer like me'" (*Twist* 343). In chapter two I discussed the ramifications of the female portrait in the context of prostitution and Nancy's declaration reiterates what can only be described as a necessary exploitation if not justification of the divide between the virtuous women of which Rose Maylie is an example, and the unfortunate Nancy. It is worth repeating Lecky's lament for the unfortunate prostitute in this context:

> Herself the supreme type of vice, she is ultimately the most efficient guardian of virtue. But for her the unchallenged purity of countless homes would be polluted . . . On that one degraded and ignoble form

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17. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* introd. Peter Ackroyd (London: Reed, 1991). Subsequent quotations will be indicated by page number in parentheses and the abbreviation *Twist*.

> are concentrated the passions that might have filled the world with shame.[18]

Nancy's fate however is bound up ultimately not with Fagin but with Sikes, whose power over her depends as much on her 'terrible infatuation' (*Twist* 347) with him, resulting in a failure to realize the true evil of his character, as his obvious physical mastery over her. The real danger in him lies in his latent evil, which Nancy is unaware of until it causes her death. Whereas Fagin is fully aware of the murderous capabilities of his crony, Nancy is taken unaware, as are Philomela, Europa, Leda and others. The frenzied narrative relating Sikes' descent into murder and eventually his own death is indicative of the restless search by the male for control over the female. The furious intensity of the character of Sikes throughout the novel reveals the primitive aspect of the search for control by the male; his uncontrollable temper, his dog beating and the way he abuses Nancy in order to control Oliver: '"every word from you is a blow for me"' (*Twist* 169). For Nancy freedom comes with her death, the handkerchief clasped in her hand suggesting the station to which she aspired and to which her redemption would no doubt carry her.[19] The knowledge with which she betrayed Sikes and which led to her death is a corollary of his inability to manipulate her entirely, and of her realization of his dissembling manufacture of her environment. The transaction, the transference of power from the male possessor to the female victim empowers the female because the threat once executed becomes less potent, simultaneously female knowledge becomes a threat to male autonomy.

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[18] See chapter two, p. 113.

[19] The handkerchief had been given to her previously by Rose Maylie as a sign of her confidence.

The liberatory aestheticism[20] outlined in the introduction to this thesis purports to engage the opposition of male and female gender discourse and yet fails ultimately to involve itself in the process of sexual transaction. Consequently it limply implies desire without consequence and opposition without conflict – action without reaction. This sterile depiction of male-female discourse fails to implicate the act of exchange, possibly conceived in physical abuse, as having important consequences in the representation of representation. The male artist appropriates the female form in an attempt to approximate the act of violation, to envisage his possession of the female by resurrecting her as the desired object. This resurrection implies an attempt to revisit and correct an original failure to possess the desired female.

Rossetti's 'The Portrait'(*Works* 169: Appendix 3) was published in 1870 but may have been begun as early as 1849. Thus it occupies an exclusive position in Rossetti's poetry, spanning a great part of his creative career and encapsulating the dilemma at the heart of his work. As my analysis will demonstrate, this particular poem is riddled with contradictions, and as such it provides an excellent framework for my discussion of *The House of Life*, the sprawling, at times frustrating, and ultimately circuitous collection at the very heart of Rossetti's imagination. 'The Portrait' establishes Rossetti's determination to integrate word and image in his work, and the result is an uneasy narrative, an edgy, forbidding glimpse into the possessive world of the painter/poet and his attempts to reconcile the dangers of obsession with the

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20. See page 4.

devotion of religious worship. As a consequence the poem anticipates and informs *The House of Life* collection, where Rossetti interrogates these issues relentlessly, revisiting repeatedly the sites of worship, devotion, possession and obsession within the shadow world of his imagination, an alternate reality not far removed from the one he found himself in as a painter of the beautiful women he writes about.

In 'The Portrait' issues of possession and ownership are prevalent, concerning both the owner of the image and of the painting. This occurs because the narrator is also the artist of the portrait discussed. Initially the poem seems similar, and indeed is similar to the verbal *presentation* of the painted image from Browning's monologue. However as the poem progresses Rossetti contrives to imply the painted image through the technique employed creating that image, in the language of the painter. 'The Portrait' conforms to the tradition of male desire by presenting an image of female imprisonment within the illusory fantasy of the male possessor. This metaphor acts as a reference to the narrative tradition of female suppression that permeates the mythologies of Philomela and Lucretia and others. The poem also directs the reader to visualise the image of female imprisonment by figuratively *drawing* a picture using devices that are analogous to those used in painting. I will return to the particulars of this technique shortly.

This dual role of the language in the poem is indicative of the ability of language to flow from one discursive form to another, which will become evident during this discussion. Rossetti uses the images of containment and imprisonment in their familiar metonymical form, in addition to their elementary, primary status as pictorial signifiers. He uses them to create the

prison within which he may possess the object of his desire. He is able to do this due to the narrator's role as the artist of the painting discussed in 'The Portrait'. This self-identification brings to the poem the narcissistic element that was missing from 'My Last Duchess'.

This narcissism is a consideration of a reflection, an identification and alignment of the artist with the portrait he creates. Not only is this element implied within the poem, but Rossetti also creates images alluding to the Ovidian myth. The artist/narrator sees his own reflection in the painting as if it exists there and will remain when he himself has gone. The figure of Narcissus is enveloped within this image, being unable to grasp that which lies within his reach because although it mimics his own movements he cannot understand why it continues to elude him. This is the visual trap which has ensnared Rossetti's narrator who imagines himself within the painting before recalling that the object of his desire has passed away. The poem reinforces this idea by evoking images of an unknown, occult other-world. That the portrait can exist as a living, speaking image, 'and yet the earth is over her' is an idea which draws the narrator towards a macabre twilight vision of meeting a spirit of the dead; that which is 'secret and unknown/below the earth, above the skies'. The poet's use of words here is deliberate and provocative. Critics who would dismiss Rossetti's interest in the fantastic and occult must surely have overlooked the introspective self that came to dominate his later art.

This 'self' is evident in the dark beginning to 'The Portrait' where it is at its most powerful. Rossetti conveys a brooding sinister melancholy within this poem, beginning with the Narcissus myth and developing it further. These comments on the ability of the portrait to delude the viewer, of the artist to

delude himself and of the lover to follow that delusion to its fulfilment in death are utterly compelling. Browning's Duchess of Ferrara had looked 'as if she were alive', she was 'a piece of wonder'. In contrast the dead lover of Rossetti's portrait attempts to communicate from the grave, a grave well known to the narrator, who had 'shrin'd her face', in a 'covert place'.

The artist of Rossetti's poem is reminiscent of the artist encountered in *The Oval Portrait*, Edgar Allan Poe's short story of 1842.[21] In this story the narrator is startled by the 'life-likeness' of a girl in a painted portrait. He learns that to create such an appearance of life, the artist, who was the girl's husband, drained the very life of his subject, the result being that on completion of the portrait he discovered that his wife had been withered by the light of his studio, and was in fact dead. Rossetti's fascination with Poe's work began very early in his career. Three drawings dated from 1846-48 illustrate the poem 'The Raven' and its supernatural theme of lovers parted by death. Rossetti also made drawings after Poe's 'The Sleeper', a poem that confuses distinctions between sleep and death; and 'Ulalume', in which a poet and his visible 'soul' search for the poet's lost love. These are themes that Rossetti developed throughout his career as he frequently interrogated thresholds of life, death and art, melding them together to form an eerie unreality.[22]

Of particular interest is the first illustration Rossetti made for 'The Raven' [Plate 29], depicting a host of supernatural beings eddying around the narrator of the poem. The illustration diverges from the poem dramatically as the architectural frame of the room itself all but disappears, and ghostly shapes

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21. Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Oval Portrait' *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984). Subsequently referred works can be found in this volume.

22. See chapter one for my explication of Rossetti's *St. Agnes of Intercession*.

Plate 29. *The Raven.*
1846 brown ink on paper, 33.8 x 23cm
Private collection.

and skull-like faces haunt the central figure of the narrator, who appears to be protected by a winged angel.[23] Around the bottom part of the picture, swirling in the void that would have been the floor of the room are naked female forms, writhing erotically with long hair flowing loosely. For an early drawing this is an extremely prophetic piece for Rossetti. Reality and fantasy are merged in a grotesque conflation of desire, sex, fear, and death. At first glance the image seems little more than a crowded sketch, but as details of the picture show Rossetti has constructed intricate layers of bodies on bodies and faces on faces,[24] thus heightening a sense of alternate realities, of moments of interaction between this reality and those others, reiterating his interest in the liminal thresholds between life and death I discussed in chapter one, of 'Life touching lips with Immortality'.[25]

In 'The Portrait' Rossetti's narrative confirms this fascination, seeking to draw the narrator into the alternate reality of the painting, as with his illustration to 'The Raven', so as to coexist with the subject within the artwork itself. The painting that is created in 'The Portrait' seeks to lure its creator into the sinister landscape of its environment, a place where 'you might think to find a din/of doubtful talk, and a live flame/wandering, and old dew,/and your own footsteps meeting you'. The narrator is increasingly unable to divorce reality from reflection. The reader witnesses the artist/narrator invent and follow the delusional narrative to a final meeting in a fantasy world reminiscent of

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23. The other two illustrations Rossetti made retain a far more structured shape, depicting the narrator sitting in a chair while ghostly apparitions file past him.

24. To the right of the vertical pillar, enveloped in the shadow are a sinister couple observing proceedings; and above the angel's head another ghostly, disembodied face appears amidst the Dürer-esque skulls that surround the top part of the image.

25. 'For a Venetian Pastoral', *Works*, 188.

Rossetti's Orchard-Pit. The complex nature of the narrative this poem follows concerns the creation of a different type of male possessor from those examined previously in this chapter. Not only does the narrator voice the lament of a lover for that which he has lost; this poem is equally concerned with the ability of the artist to sustain his own art and therefore his own life through the reception of his art. Close reading of the poem allows for the distinctive voice of the artist to reveal itself.

The opening stanza sees Rossetti allude not only to the reflection in the mirror that is the glass over his beloved's portrait, but the concern that the painting will see his own legacy survive, his 'image in the glass'. The ambitious concept behind this poem is to convey the control the artist attempted and still attempts to exert over his subject. The idea of 'mine image in the glass' is reinforced by the rights of absolute ownership which the narrator asserts both as an artist, the creator of the physical portrait, and as the lover through whose selective memory the reader is permitted to experience the subject. Rossetti informs the reader that 'only this . . . [R]emains . . . save what is secret and unknown'. In doing so he restricts our vision of his beloved. The reader is drawn into the 'prison' implied in the opening stanzas. The poet comments on his sole ownership of the image and the continuation of that ownership in reality. This ownership contrasts with that of the Duke of Ferrara in that the entire creation is under the narrator's control.

The narrator offers the portrait life: 'she seems to stir . . . the still movement of her hands' before qualifying his life-giving with 'and yet the earth is over her' and 'less than her shadow in the grass'. Here the reader can begin to discern the dichotomy of language within this poem that I mentioned earlier.

The narrator has created a prison of control around the subject, implying its physicality through solitude. The poet carefully creates the image of a shrine built to contain the subject, achieved through the restriction of light both in the implied painting and the language of the poem. This prison is reinforced throughout the monologue by reiterating the physical act of the creation of the painting and the artist's role in that process. The poem is punctuated by these double references to both verbal and visual images.

The narrator is eager to comment on his own work here, creating the image of a portrait by employing elements of pictorial technique to establish and compound the image already created verbally by the language used. The 'thin-drawn ray' of line 10, while contributing to the image of solitude and imprisonment created by the surrounding language, is linked to line 20, 'where light falls in/Hardly at all,' and through this to line 31 'the pure line's gracious flow'. These are techniques of the artist, the drawing and the restriction of light, the pure line, all elements of painterly practice flowing from the verbal representation to the visual, enhancing the narrator's ability to immure his subject, to make 'the prison-depths more rude'. He informs his reader that only his creation remains of the subject of this portrait, that his is the sole memory of his beloved. Rossetti's narrator creates a prison in the mind, enveloping the reader and forcing them to read his portrait through him.

The subtle references of Rossetti's narrator work to control the view his reader has of this portrait. The narrator openly claims his ownership of this painting and all that implies, simultaneously developing the prison of his context, 'In painting her I shrin'd her face'. Once again the artist implies that he has restricted light from this painting, the shrine is 'a covert place'. The

narrator is manipulating the boundaries between the image and reality, creating a liminal environment within which the reader is solely reliant on his guidance. Rossetti's ekphrasis moves to deceive the reader by implicating the role of the artist within a deception that ultimately offers no clue as to the physical appearance of the portrait despite its opening declaration: 'This is her picture as she was'.

This poem is a declaration of the ability of the portraitist to offer immortality to both the subject and the artist, to create a monument that will outlive both. This reiterates a legacy offering preservation to the subject, while offering another form of immortality to the artist. The power of the artist lies in his ability to determine the reception of the subject through his role as presenter, reminiscent of the modern gallery curator. In this role Rossetti explores the differences between seeming and being, life and death, fantasy and reality. His considered use of words and the construction of images contrast the mysterious theme which dominates the poem with the material achievement of the artist. It is in this role that the voice of the artist gives an insight into the narcissistic heart of the image this text creates. It is an image bound in the selfhood of creation and was obviously engendered by the Narcissus story.

The story of Narcissus is woven into the narrative fabric of this poem, as is the notion of the artist who manipulates his own imagery into a prison to trap the object of his desire. Narcissus was a youth entranced by an image of his own making, his sole creation, himself. Rossetti comments on the creation of the artist within this context, the image of the beloved obscured by the image of the self reflected in the glass: the artist is prevalent in every image, unable to divorce himself from his creation, the object of his desire; he will always

inevitably contemplate his own reflection. This is because it is he who seeks to dominate the female voice, the desire to possess becomes the desire for power and control.

The seminal document of Rossetti's early writing reveals the artist's desire to control the female voice, the image of the female, and the desire for continuing ownership of that image: nowhere is this concept more dominant than in *Hand and Soul* (1849). Chiaro dell' Erma does not realize the true purpose of his painting until he begins to paint the dream vision that is his own soul. Within the historical context of the thirteenth century the dilemma of the painter is defined in terms of the religious commitments of art and a humanist solution which transforms favourably (for Rossetti) into the contemporary nineteenth century. To remain 'faithful' in the contemporary sense would translate to Pre-Raphaelite 'truth to Nature' and consequently define a useful social function for art. Chiaro's soul is represented by the image of a beautiful woman, indicative of the struggle in Rossetti to marry the secular and religious aspects which in Dante captured his imagination and yet seemed so irreconcilable. This compromise sits uneasily in the poetry of *The House of Life* and is polarised in 'The Portrait', particularly in the final stanzas wherein the narrator evokes a mystical, religious denouement due to his inability to control the female image he desires.

I have noted above that with every image Rossetti inevitably contemplates his own reflection, each a bastardised version of the Soul in *Hand and Soul*. The inference is not that with every painting Rossetti recreates an image of the ideal woman he seeks in himself; the self-referential capacity of the artist is a much more subtle phenomenon than *Hand and Soul* suggests. It is

a phenomenon that prevails throughout the dream vision poetry that forms a central theme of the Rossetti canon, manifest in the Willowwood sonnets of *The House of Life* and it is the dominant concept in 'The Blessed Damozel', which I will examine shortly. Its origins for Rossetti lie ultimately with the dream visions of Dante and can also be seen in the early Italian poets Rossetti translated including 'A Trance of Love' (*Works* 384) and 'How He Dreams of his Lady' (*Works* 455). The central psychology though is unchanging; it observes a search for possession, domination and ultimately imprisonment of the object of desire.

When read in this context the closeting of the female image within a fantasy world of the artist's creation becomes a relevant form of possession and control. The self-deluded artist, by seeking to trap the female form behind the glass in a contrived setting that cannot be sustained without him, is no less guilty of attempted possession and violation than his prototype Tereus. In this instance Rossetti designs a world not far removed from the forest where Tereus imprisons Philomela for his pleasure; imprisoning the object of his desire and denying access to any who seek it. It is within this otherworld that Rossetti's artist retreats to act out his fantasies in clandestine concealment with the object of his desire. The portrait is not visualized and yet a visual image is created. A visual prison 'Mid mystic trees', in 'A deep dim wood' is the environment within which Rossetti imprisons the female form to await his pleasure. The illusion that is this contrived setting does however enable the female image to subvert the would-be possessor. The artist is drawn into the portrait and trapped in the narcissistic echo of his own creation, where he will forever wander through the other worldly landscape searching for the image of his beloved.

This is a theme which is reiterated throughout the Rossetti canon and culminates in the enigmatic portrait *How They Met Themselves* [Plate 30].

'The Portrait' serves as a precursor to that drawing in that it establishes the context for the meeting in the woods and its implications. The narrator is trapped in the eternal circle of his own creation, unable to divorce his painted image from reality he is forced into the same trap he created for the object of his desire, and will ultimately join her, 'my soul another echo there'. The displaced female image forces the projected male desire to contemplate itself in a moment of self-recognition. This is the ultimate self-delusion; the male image has become lost in the wood of its own creation and is forced to recognise itself as the violator of the imprisoned female that it seeks to possess eternally. Rossetti wrote another poem entitled 'The Portrait' (*Works* 78) which appeared among the 'Youth and Change' sonnets in *The House of Life*. The sonnet reiterates the sentiments of its namesake and is indicative of the power Rossetti believes is concomitant to the portrait artist; 'Her face is made a shrine. Let all men note/That in all years . . . They that would look on her must come to me'.

'The Portrait' (Youth and Change) displaces the female image entirely in favour of a contrived painted reality. It undertakes to appropriate the female through her image, taking all aspects of the female and possessing them: 'Till I must make them all my own and paint this picture'. This concept is given bizarre form through the enigmatic picture *How They Met Themselves*. This simultaneous depiction of self–recognition and self-display is an image which acts as synecdoche for the entire tradition of desire and possession discussed above, and to extend the metaphor even further, in the way it instructs its own viewer in ways of looking. In this context this is where word and image meet

Plate 30. *How They Met Themselves.*
1860 ink and wash on paper, 27.3 x 21.6cm
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

and interact, where they both come from the same creative base and yet are conveyed though different media. This is a picture that is static while it moves, is at once silent as it screams and is as familiar as it is alien.

The doppelganger image of a couple who come across doubles of themselves in a darkened wood immediately refers the reader to 'The Portrait' and the consequences of the self-delusional male narrative. The inclusion of the female figure is as inevitable as it is necessary, for it is an integral part of the male delusion that the female remains in his possession. In 'The Portrait' Rossetti's artist works to eclipse all knowledge of his beloved apart from that which is acquired through him, thus denying her any possibility of an independent existence. His regression into narcissism and the loss of the ability to separate fantasy from reality culminates in his loss of self into the mirror of his own illusion, the meeting in the woods and his attempts at Dantesque divine worship. The analysis of the poetry above has illustrated a confrontation between the fantasy of the male possessor and the reality of the female voice. The internal problem represented by this image reiterates this claim.

The doppelganger couple, while being the natural, fixed object of this image, are only defined by the reaction of the real couple, the drawn sword and the fainting woman inform the nature of the doppelganger. The sinister couple are passive, silent and are under observation, subject to reaction, they themselves do not react, they simply await representation. Rossetti's creative oeuvre is littered with examples of this contradictory dilemma. He is an artist who repeatedly represented fantasy as a reflection of reality, not far removed from it or divorced from it, but distinguished only by degrees, by shades of difference, not by worlds. Rossetti's fantasy is created out of reality, existing

almost in parallel with it, recognisable through its repetition of artificial forms, of medieval costume, by the mutilation of nature; it is merely a vision of reality askew, and therein lies its danger.

This phenomenon is a narrative of lies, a dissembling, in effect, an illusion in itself. The perceived illusion forces the spectator to contemplate its own representation of reality, to create tension between the projected reality of, in these cases, the male violator and the predominantly silent reality of the female voice. It is this voice that Rossetti exposed in his writing, and as I come to an exposition of his poetry in *The House of Life*, this image is extremely relevant. *How They Met Themselves* visualises the dilemma Rossetti suffered in his representations of women. The desire to possess is constantly countered by the desire to worship, the corollary of which is the frustrating complexity that informs *The House of Life*.

As I argued in chapter one, Rossetti's images of women are dominated by the dialectical opposition between the Virgin Mary and the mythical Proserpine. Throughout his career Rossetti painted the same women time and again in a variety of mystical and pseudo-historical environments. His five separate portraits of Elizabeth Siddal as *Beata Beatrix* testify to this. Rossetti's vision of Siddal is dominated by Dante's vision from the *Vita Nuova*. In the multiple incarnations of Jane Morris Rossetti strove to possess the woman who married his friend. This constant revisiting to the same woman can be viewed as an obsessional desire to control the painted image and through that image, the woman herself. Rossetti did possess many of his models in some fashion or other and yet he forever seeks the perfection of spiritual possession implied by Dante. This is a longing which in fact speaks of being possessed not with the

type of desire we have seen in Tereus or Ferrara but one which is reflected in the end of 'The Portrait', that of spiritual fulfilment and worship.

'The Portrait' is the consequence of this obsession, it is the verbal representation of Rossetti's desire to displace the female image and project his reality of the painted portrait over that image. Only when lost in the landscape of his own creation does the artist return to that divine worship which offers spiritual redemption, in addition to echoing that of Dante and Beatrice. It is characteristic of Rossetti's verbal and visual portraits that they convey the desire to possess in addition to the desire for divine worship and this poem is no exception. Rossetti's constant struggle with and confusion of the aims of Dante in his search for Beatrice and his own more worldly desires are manifest throughout *The House of Life* and originate from *Hand and Soul* as noted above.

The creative contradictions represented by the Virgin Mary and the sensual goddess Proserpine are prevalent throughout *The House of Life* and originate in the contrast between the early Italian poets Rossetti translated and his major inspiration in Dante. This is not simply a relationship defined by opposition but by a complex contrasting of gender representations mediated through what is seen and shown in addition to what can not be seen and is hidden. The differences between these two influences on Rossetti's art are indicative of a power struggle between religious faith and secular love that dominates his work. While previous critics have identified this extreme dichotomy in Rossetti's work, they have yet to explain how it happens and the creative processes that lead the artist from one extreme to the other. Charles Singleton identified the irreconcilable 'antagonism' Rossetti discovered between Dante and his contemporaries; 'within troubadour ideology there is no

place for an object of love higher than the lady; whereas in the Christian, not only can there be no object of love higher than God but all other loves must show subordination to love of Him'.[26] It is evident that Rossetti inherited an essentially antithetical creative ideology that jarred with Victorian intellectual aesthetics. Joan Rees places the contextual problems of the Victorian Rossetti inheriting Dante's legacy:

> the polar opposites of Rossetti's experience, siren and pure love, mystic vision and sensual appetite, ecstasy and sense of sin, can be traced to the impact of Dante and Dante's world upon his imagination. But though his imagination was coloured and moulded by that powerful influence, Rossetti in his time and country could not begin to accept the intellectual premises on which Dante's poetic structures are founded.[27]

Rossetti's 'time and country' represent the differences between Dante's great achievement in *The Divine Comedy* and Rossetti's own examination of the anatomy of faith and love in *The House of Life*. The Victorian culture of intellectual scepticism and scientific evolutionism which reconfigured poetic understanding and religious 'truth' may have provided inspiration to reassess Dante's divine plan. Rossetti though, rather than bringing the man to a settled understanding of God's rationale, as Dante had, attempted to bring God to the understanding of the man. Rather than a journey of progressive enlightenment he attempted through a series of epiphanic aesthetic 'moments' to realize a vision of Dante and Beatrice for his own time. This chapter concludes with a re-reading of *The House of Life* that involves Rossetti's examination of

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26. Charles S. Singleton, *An Essay on the 'Vita Nuova'*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 63.

27. Joan Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self Expression* (Cambridge, CUP, 1981), p. 139.

predestination, the sensual beloved and the possibility of their existence beyond the reach of religion.

The fundamental difference between Dante's vision and Rossetti's is thus that, while for Dante man is completely subordinate to woman, and both to their faith in God, Rossetti disrupts this philosophy by asserting male power through the manipulation of religious and sexual models to create an image of women that is independent of God and faith. In order to effect the metamorphosis from the divine image to the desired woman, Rossetti undertakes a creative journey of his own from death to love, through death to life. *The House of Life* contains the quintessential elements of Rossetti's creative ideology and it is there that he outlines his warring philosophy of love and faith. That philosophy can be observed in 'Passion and Worship' (*Works* 77), a sonnet which arrests the flow of sensual love poetry that opens the collection, bringing the narrator and the reader to a critical juncture and hence a critical decision:

> One flame-winged brought a white-winged harp-player
> Even where my lady and I lay all alone;
> Saying: 'Behold, this minstrel is unknown;
> Bid him depart, for I am minstrel here:
> Only my strains are to Love's dear ones dear.'
> Then said I: 'Through thine hautboy's rapturous tone
> Unto my lady still this harp makes moan,
> And still she deems the cadence deep and clear.'
>
> Then said my lady: 'Thou art Passion of Love,
> And this Love's Worship: both he plights to me.
> Thy mastering music walks the sunlit sea:
> But where wan water trembles in the grove
> And the wan moon is all the light thereof,
> This harp still makes my name its voluntary.'

In this sonnet the narrator embodies 'Passion' attempting to banish 'Worship' as the vanquished shadow of Love. Worship is forced to retreat into the twilight and exert its influence from secretive, shadowy groves reminiscent of 'The Portrait', where 'light enters in/Hardly at all'. While Love's Worship remains secluded the Passion of man is able to act unfettered, freeing the desires of possession and erotic imagining to be manipulated into instruments of assault and the legitimation of male power over desired female entities. How this mastery of Passion over Worship occurs is key to understanding the processes outlined above, how Rossetti's art simultaneously represents the male subjugation of and subordination to women.

The process that sees sensual love subordinate spiritual faith involves the displacement of the divine image in favour of corporeal tactile realities which are subsequently assimilated within contemporary mores. By forcing mortal substance on the divine vision the artist gains access through it to a tangible reality of social relevance, situating it within a narrative tradition enabling art to function as discourse. The displacement of the divine image affords Rossetti the language to engage the female voice and manipulate the image it conveys. The ekphrasis, the verbal representation of the image, is implicated through this discourse as a deceptive conduit seeking to control the image it represents. At the most rudimentary level of Rossetti's artistic philosophy these intense aesthetic moments of the divine interacting with the secular chart a narrative journey through life to death and thereafter to resurrection. Through the manipulation of the divine vision Rossetti contemplates a female object of desire that is still attainable after death, thus situating her within the realm of Dante's Beatrice. Whereas Dante was led on

a search for divine truth, Rossetti embarked on a journey of resurrection in order to continue his possession of the desired female object.

Throughout *The House of Life* Rossetti creates various personifications of 'Love', 'Faith' and 'Death' and yet very few of the sonnets engage directly with the Christian God. This constant re-evaluation of death and life after death brings about a metamorphosis that resurrects Dante's Beatrice, the dead beloved, as the ultimate objective of male desire and obsession. Nicolette Gray argues that Rossetti's understanding of the concept of medieval love was flawed and attributes his 'mis-translation' of the *Vita Nuova* to this deficiency.[28] Gray believes that Rossetti could not distinguish 'love from God' due to his inadequate understanding of medieval philosophy. This deficiency perhaps accounts for the distinctly marginalised figure of God in *The House of Life.* I propose however that such a deficiency may be due less to Rossetti's inability to distinguish love from God as to his willingness to do so. This is apparent when the personification of Love in sonnets such as 'Love's Lovers' (*Works* 77) and 'Passion and Worship' engenders a dispute between divine worship and mortal salacity without engaging directly the figure of God or Christian dogma. *The Divine Comedy* undertakes a quest for enlightenment through a vision of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, whereas *The House of Life* journeys through the psychology of male deliberation on love, sex, faith and death in a variety of supernatural, medieval and dream-world environments which lie ostensibly outside the jurisdiction of conventional Christianity.

Walter Pater commented of William Morris' Arthurian poetry, 'These Arthurian legends, pre-Christian in their origin, yield all their sweetness only in

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28. Nicolette Gray, *Rossetti, Dante, and Ourselves* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), p. 39.

a Christian atmosphere. What is characteristic in them is the strange suggestion of a deliberate choice between Christ and a rival lover'.[29] This observation is extremely applicable to Rossetti's philosophy throughout this collection. The 'Christian atmosphere' of *The House of Life* provides a hazy framework of divine authority while forcing the reader to consider the deliberate rejection of that authority in order to contemplate the pleasures of earthly love.

Rossetti's defence against the allegations leveled by Robert Buchanan[30] in the 'Fleshly School' controversy asserted the need to contextualize the so-called 'Fleshly' sonnets within the entire body of the collection. He argued that in *The House of Life* 'the passionate and just delights of the body' were 'to be as naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times'.[31] Rossetti cited the three sonnets entitled 'The Choice' (*Works* 98) in his defence, claiming they 'sum up the general view', engaging the 'responsibilities and higher mysteries of life'. These are among the few sonnets that treat the idea of a 'biblical God', as Robert Zweig[32] has observed. However a selection of lines from among them serve to illustrate that while *The House of Life* may feign to imitate a Dantean quest for spiritual fulfilment, a conclusion that certainly characterises some of Rossetti's longer poetry, the whole is undermined by its consistent manifesto of sensual longing and overt sexuality; 'Now kiss, and

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29. *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts (The Renaissance, Appreciations and Imaginary Portraits)*, ed. William E. Buckler (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p. 521.

30. Robert Buchanan, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry; Mr. D. G. Rossetti', *Contemporary Review* (1871), 334-50. See also, Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry and other Phenomena of the Day* (1872), reprinted in *The Victorian Muse: Selected Criticism and Parody of the Period*, ed. William E. Fredeman, Ira B. Nadel, and John F. Stasny (New York: Garland, 1986).

31. Rossetti's response, entitled 'The Stealthy School of Criticism' first appeared in the *Athenaeum* (Part II) in 1871, and was included in the 1911 volume *Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* , the electronic version of which is used throughout this paper, pp. 617-622.

32. Robert Zweig, "'Death-In-Love': Rossetti and the Victorian Journey Back to Dante", *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature* ed. Regina Barecca (London: Macmillan, 1990). pp. 178-193.

think that there are really those/My own high-bosomed beauty, who increase/Vain gold, vain lore, and yet might choose our way' ('The Choice' I).

The distinct absence of deference to a supreme divine authority in *The House of Life* is counterbalanced by the atmosphere of Christianity that pervades the whole, recalling Pater's observation that the sharp sweetness of this sensual poetry is only fully realized within the contradictory Christian atmosphere of Dante's allegory, extracting simultaneously from its narrator, its characters, its author and its reader, 'a deliberate choice between Christ and a rival lover'. Accordingly the influence of this collection of poetry, too often dismissed as symptomatic of the internal dilemmas of Rossetti's personal psyche, as a vain search for the self, exceeds the enclosure of the mind of the poet and takes on greater significance within the cultural context of its conception, and beyond that within the narrative tradition of male representation of female subjugation.

The conflicting passions of Dante and his contemporaries combine in Rossetti's own creative dilemma, each presenting conflicting conceptions regarding the nature of love, sex and faith which through Rossetti are forced on his audience at a time of tumultuous cultural and religious ferment. Zweig[33] comments on the 'resurrection of passion' characteristic of the troubadour poets Rossetti translated and I have adapted the term because it epitomizes the problematic dichotomy of divine worship and earthly desire. The resurrection of passion represented by Rossetti's images of women culminates in the displacement of the divine image so that the male desire for ultimate power over the female can be exerted through spiritual as well as physical means. While I

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33. ibid, p. 179.

advise against drawing too much of an analogy with Rossetti's personal life, the 'burning compensations in art and memory' (*Works* 620) he attributes to Dante could be applied to Rossetti himself.

Jerome McGann's commentary on *The House of Life* points out the 'implicit narrative' of this collection:

> 'The story, involves a young man, an artist, and two(at least two) idealized women. The young man's love for one of the women succeeds to his love of the second. The first woman dies-it is not clear whether her death occurs before or after his second love-and the events radically intensify the man's erotic yearnings for perfect love. This new desire is haunted by feelings of guilt and remorse, and dominated by ambiguous images of death and otherworlds'.[34]

While I am willing to accept this description I believe it intimates as much analogy with Rossetti's personal life as is necessary or profitable when reading *The House of Life*. I suggest however that rather than the minimum of two idealized women McGann recognizes, there is only one female entity walking the hallways of Rossetti's house. The female here is merely a representation, more akin to the reflected oscillations from Christina's mirror than a finite number of definable women, idealized or not. The female voice permeates the sonnet-sequence leaving traces here and there, saturating at times and frustratingly absent at others; the female is pursued by Rossetti's narrator, who is sustained by the heady concoction of love, sex, possession and longing with which the rooms of this house are redolent. The female essence of Rossetti's art can loosely be defined as the 'subject' of these works and yet she is undeniably more than this. She is only one and yet she is many, the 'same face' from

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34. Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), p. 39.

Christina's poem is a fleeting apparition moving through *The House of Life* in search of a way out, fleeing from power while gaining it. The male who pursues her willingly subjects himself to her partial authority while desperately seeking to possess her and ultimately kill her. The death of the female is the ultimate measure of possession within male fantasy; after the transference of power from male to female is completed in the sexual transaction, male power must be regained, and this is ultimately achieved through murder. Bal has argued convincingly through several visual images that the ultimate consequence of 'rape is (like) self-murder because it leads to self-murder'[35] and Rossetti's art confirms this ultimate end to possession through male fantasy.

Rossetti, in his life and his art, frequently extended himself to the extreme limits of the subject, pushing beyond what may be perceived as 'normal' when depicting relationships between men and women. These extremes seem more attainable within the otherworldly realms of some of his poetry, in 'The Orchard-Pit' works for example, or in the 'moments' captured in the repetitive portraits of *Beata Beatrix* or *Proserpine*. The *Beata Beatrix* portraits of Elizabeth Siddal depict the moment of ascension, the moment of transition from life to death and back to life again. Accordingly they address the moment of suffering and doubt prior to the rapture of revelation, not in death but in the resurrection. Walter Pater wrote in *The Renaissance* that the central 'motive' of Michelangelo's art is resurrection, 'the creation of life'[36] and Vernon Lee selected Signorelli's fresco of *The Resurrection* at Orvieto as a

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35. Bal, p. 70.

36. Pater, p. 120.

symbol of 'the joy of the renascent world'.[37] While Rossetti's abiding interest in the resurrection is not identical to these,[38] it is evident that he manipulates the concept of life after death that is central and recurring in art historical and contemporary terms and works through it to create, control and recreate the female image as he desires.

The central component of 'non-death' that captured Rossetti's imagination was the moment of transformation. It is the crucial moment open to manipulation and is embedded in the narrative tradition of female violation from the *Metamorphoses* and the Virgin Mary through Arachne to *Found*. Whether situated within a mythical or religious context works depicting the transformation between life and death consistently reveal a moment of extreme emotional intensity coupled with a heightened consciousness. In religious works this is the moment of divine revelation during the ascension; however the consistency of ecstasy in death remains in some mythical and secular depictions. The tradition of depictions of rapturous ecstasy in death could include Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*[39] and Bernini's *Saint Teresa*[40] in sculpture, Ovid's 'Apotheosis of Hercules'[41] in literature, and Rubens'[42] painting of the

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37. Vernon Lee [Violet Paget], *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique Mediaevel in the Renaissance*, vol 1 (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1885), p. 198-9.

38. Hilary Fraser makes the connection that for Vernon Lee, Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds, 'the keynote of the Renaissance was resurrection'. For these 'metahistorians' resurrection signified a 'reawakening of humanity' and 'human beauty' that had serious implications for Victorian art. My reading of Rossetti's attempts at resurrection argues that while 'beauty' has its place, this is a particular construction of beauty within a designated environment that does not necessarily conform to that proposed through the Renaisssance. See Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

39. Michelangelo, *The dying slave*, c. 1513. Marble, Louvre: Paris.

40. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The ecstasy of St Teresa*, 1645-52. Marble, Cornaro Chapel, church of Sta Maria della Vittoria: Rome.

41. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IX, ll. 134-272.

same. Indeed Rossetti selected the moment of ascension to illustrate in the life of Saint Cecilia in the Moxon edition of Tennyson's poetry.[43] Each artist attempts to capture the moment of transformation from life to death and in that moment the subject is consistently depicted experiencing a heightened consciousness in which beauty, pain, relief and rapture are combined. As noted above however in the narrative tradition of female subjugation and violation, the death of the female returns the power lost during the sexual transaction to the male aggressor, who subsequently attempts to resurrect her. The moment of metamorphosis is the most highly charged and erotic component of the tradition of violation. It is simultaneously the moment of realisation, of violation, of possession and consequence, one that Rossetti revisited many times and represented in several forms.

An examination of Rossetti's ideas on resurrection must begin with Dante and his vision of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*, which Rossetti translated.[44] The desire to cling to the fragments of earthly passion in the afterlife is an extremely non-Christian concept. Dante's post-mortem contemplation of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* and his explanatory note reveals the vast difference in the physical mechanics of Dante's medieval love and Rossetti's own passion, though both are based on a vision of the female countenance:

> In the first, I tell what is understood of her in heaven. In the second, I tell what is understood of her on earth: here, "My lady is desired." This second part is divided into two; for, in the first, I speak of her as regards the nobleness of her soul, relating some of her virtues

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42. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Apotheosis of Hercules*, 1636. Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.

43. Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Poems* (London: Moxon. 1857).

44. *Works*, 311-47.

> proceeding from her soul; in the second, I speak of her as regards the nobleness of her body, narrating some of her beauties: here, "Love saith concerning her." This second part is divided into two, for, in the first, I speak of certain beauties which belong to the whole person; in the second, I speak of certain beauties which belong to a distinct part of the person: here, "Whatever her sweet eyes." This second part is divided into two; for, in the one, I speak of the eyes, which are the beginning of love; in the second, I speak of the mouth, which is the end of love. And that every vicious thought may be discarded herefrom, let the reader remember that it is above written that the greeting of this lady, which was an act of her mouth, was the goal of my desires, while I could receive it'. (*Works* 325)

Dante is explicit in his attempts to avoid misleading his reader, the mouth may be the ultimate object of his desire, but his desire is far removed from the goals of some of his contemporaries, the troubadour poets whom Rossetti also translated. Fazio degli Uberti's[45] poem to the 'Lady Angiola Verona', painted by Rossetti as *Fazio's Mistress*, is a sensuous portrait of physical beauty and explicit desire. Dante's 'nobleness' of soul and body give way to the 'white easy neck' and lithe, long arms of Fazio's mistress. Dante stresses that the mouth is the ultimate object of his desire as only there can he gain the salutation that he craves. For Fazio the mouth is 'amorous' and 'beautiful' and its chief function is to utter an assent to his wishes; 'I would give anything that I possess,/Only to hear her mouth say frankly, "Yes"'. Fazio's solicitation of his lady's beauty, the expression of his desire and his frustration, is 92 lines long; not until the penultimate line does he engage her soul, the entire purpose of Dante's corresponding piece: 'Because in her are both/Loveliness and the soul's true excellence'. Rossetti's short biography of Fazio published with the poem reveals that this particular canzone had at one time been attributed to Dante.

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45. See chapter two for an explication of this poem and Rossetti's painting. The poem is included in the Appendix.

Rossetti extols the virtue of Fazio's description of beauty and denies that it is bettered elsewhere, indicating that perhaps he did indeed 'misread' Dante's intention, confusing the distinction between Dante's spiritual Paradise and Fazio's physical paradise.

Fazio's vision contrasts immensely with Dante's vision of Beatrice, who in her purest form is imagined as a God-bearing image. Her function in *The Divine Comedy* as 'Revelation' ultimately supersedes Virgil's 'Reason' once the journey through the provenance of man's self-knowledge is complete. Once Dante has progressed as far as Reason can take him, what remains is the Revelation of Paradise and hence salvation. Dante's desire for salutation leads ultimately to salvation and it is worth noting that the Italian word for 'salute' means both of these. Rossetti is aware of this fact as evidenced by his recognition and use of the vehicle of salutation in Dante, the mouth, as a means to gain the resurrection of passion he so desires, even at the expense of salvation. For Rossetti salvation lies in the arms of the beloved, a state naturally enhanced if the union is sanctioned before God, expressed as the ultimate ambition of 'The Blessed Damozel'. If divine approbation is unobtainable however then the sweetness of a Christian atmosphere will suffice. The ideological collision, between Dante's desire for the salutation of Beatrice and Fazio's search for the hidden 'Paradise' implied by the 'visible heaven' of his mistress, results in the resurrection of passion that dominates Rossetti's art. In taking Dante's object of salutation, an 'act of the mouth', Rossetti entered the house of his life and found the mouth to be the vehicle for both the murmuring assent which Fazio craved and the paradise implied therein.

The House of Life continually evokes images of the mouth as the object of sensual desire that Dante would no doubt refer to as 'vicious'. In 'Love-Sweetness' (*Works* 81) the mouth becomes the focus of intense physical yearning, the point at which all lovemaking begins and eventually returns: 'Her mouth's culled sweetness by thy kisses shed/On cheeks and neck and eyelids, and so led/Back to her mouth which answers there for all' in stark contrast to Dante's quest for salutation. Constantly Rossetti's narrator possesses the female image and dissects it, bringing images of the disembodied female face to the eye of the reader, explicit in the lips that rise to the surface of the bubbling water or the tongue-less shades of the former lovers in the Willowwood sonnets. If, as McGann's synopsis implies, 'the . . . woman dies' and the narrator's erotic yearning is 'radically' intensified, the narrator subsequently embarks on the quest to resurrect the female, returning once again to the mouth. 'Sleepless Dreams' (*Works* 87) and 'Secret Parting' (*Works* 89) observe a metamorphosis from life to resurrection or the *non-death* I will discuss in relation to 'The Blessed Damozel': 'And as she kissed, her mouth became her soul'. In 'Parted Love' (*Works* 90) she is eventually gone: 'Memory's art/Parades the Past before thy face, and lures/Thy spirit to her passionate portraitures'. This sonnet presages the male desire for control over the deceased lover emphasized in 'The Portrait' wherein the painted image of the beloved acts to restrict access except through the narrator/artist: 'Her face is made a shrine. Let all men note/That in all years . . . They that would look on her must come to me'. The final words of 'Parted Love' provide a glimpse of the symbiotic nature of Rossetti's passion and love, 'thy heart rends thee, and thy body endures', indicative once again of the unification of opposites informing the dialectical nature of much of his art.

The sonnet 'Love and Hope' expresses the concerns of the poet for a love that will succeed life and remain conscious even after death:

> Cling heart to heart; nor of this hour demand
> Whether in very truth, when we are dead,
> Our hearts shall wake to know Love's golden head
> Sole sunshine of the imperishable land;
> Or but discern, through night's unfeatured scope,
> Scorn-fired at length the illusive eyes of Hope. (*Works* 89)

The narrator recognizes in 'Cloud and Wind' (*Works* 89) that the metamorphosis between life and life after death includes an irreversible alteration in the nature of matter and subsequently realizes that to pursue the dead beloved goes against the laws of nature and God; 'Love, should I fear death most for you or me?/Yet if you die, can I not follow you,/Forcing the straits of change?' The anticipated appearance of the divine is replaced by a mythical figure that synonymously combines the personas of both Death and Love in 'Death-in-Love' (*Works* 90), confronting the narrator to pronounce "'Behold, there is no breath:/I and this Love are one, and I am Death'". Thus undermined, the absence of divine authority which could prevent this narrator from acting contrary to natural law provokes the visualization of pursuing the dead beloved beyond the grave. 'The Kiss' (*Works* 76) reflects the poet's anger at the ultimate change to love which death brings, the 'malign vicissitude' that 'Can rob this body of honour', and contemplates the deification of the lover himself when absorbed in the physical relationship.

The journey from death to life is undertaken within a world of dreams and half-sleep as Rossetti's narrator is absorbed into the search for the beloved. This search leads the narrator through the final stages of *The House of Life*

attempting to overcome the natural divisions of life and death and coming to the realization that in order to achieve the paradisal love he seeks, in immortality, he must first of course, die. His natural reluctance to do so results in the four fantasy sonnets of 'Willowwood' (*Works* 91) wherein the desired beloved is conjured up in the fantasy well of love's desire. Beyond this state the narrator laments the loss of love and experiences the full gamut of emotions of loss, loneliness and pain suggested by the corresponding titles 'Without Her', 'Stillborn Love' and 'Love's Fatality' (*Works* 92-3). As *The House of Life* draws to a close the narrator is more inclined to introspection and self-appraisal than continuing the quest for the beloved. The second woman that McGann believes wanders in the house is more an apparition of the first, a 'Might-have-been' as the sonnet 'A Superscription' (*Works* 107) suggests. Rossetti however does not abandon the concept of non-death and it permeates his work, predominantly through his image of Dante's Beatrice, herself a manifestation of the guidance of the Virgin Mary.

While the crossing of boundaries between life and death, heaven and earth are common themes for Dante and Rossetti, their respective journeys of enlightenment do not exist to serve the same end. Rossetti's interpretation of the love/faith experience is to search for Beatrice in order to rescue her from heaven, not to follow her to enlightenment, but to bring her back from it. In order to do this he replaces the divine image of the Virgin Mary with her mortal representative in Dante, Beatrice. By displacing the Virgin with Beatrice, Rossetti replaces divine worship with passionate love, rendering the heavenly object of desire an earthly one. Nowhere is this remodelling of Dante's Beatrice into a tangible interactive object of desire more apparent in the Rossetti

canon than 'The Blessed Damozel', the fair maiden who 'leaned out from the gold bar of Heaven' to contemplate the passion of a worldly love.

Rossetti began composition of 'The Blessed Damozel' (Appendix 4) as early as 1847 and it first appeared *The Germ* in 1850 although it was constantly revised until as late as 1870. The illustrative paintings which also occupied much of Rossetti's working life were begun in 1871 and continued until 1881.

The importance of Rossetti's vision of the emparadised woman lies in its relationship to Dante, reflecting simultaneously Rossetti's debt to his namesake and the point of his departure from the vision of Beatrice outlined in the *Vita Nuova*. 'The Blessed Damozel' is a poem concerned with the fate of two lovers separated by death, thus diverging from Dante's story in that he and Beatrice were not lovers at any stage of their acquaintance. The poem has three narrative voices, the damozel in heaven, the dreaming lover, and the conscious memory of the lover, signalled by text in parentheses.[46] This combination does make for rather awkward reading and betrays the immature origins not only of Rossetti's poetic style but his ideal amalgamation of love and faith. Paul Lauter's explication of this poem situates it in the context of the confusion of fantasy and reality I discussed in relation to 'The Portrait': '"The Blessed Damozel" carries Poe's examination of the deluded lover to the point at which the delusion – the Damozel in heaven – is presented as the reality, and the reality – the grieving lover – as a passing, shadowy parenthesis'.[47]

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46. Paul Lauter argues that the entire poem is actually spoken by the bereaved narrator and the damozel has no independent voice, instead her speech is a projection of the narrator's dream of what she would say were she able, reiterating the idea of male control over the female voice. 'The Narrator of the Blessed Damozel', *MLN*, 73 (1958), pp. 344-48.

47. ibid, p. 347.

The poem begins with the damozel of the title leaning 'out/From the gold bar of Heaven' to seek her lover on earth, to overcome the 'ramparts of God's house', the 'golden barriers' which deny her access to her earthly lover. The incongruity of the Beatrice figure that seeks comfort in the company of an earthly lover is immediately discernible. The poem juxtaposes the desire for a spiritual reunion 'there in God's sight' with the memory of sensual love, 'one wast thou with me/That once of old' and questions the compatibility of the two; 'But shall God lift/To endless unity/The soul whose likeness with thy soul/Was but its love for thee'. The damozel is a figure to whom access to heaven in the company of her lover is denied due to their inability to divorce love in Paradise from love on Earth. As she leans out from heaven seeking the love she knew in life she is bypassed by 'lovers, newly met' whose 'souls mounting up to God/Went by her like thin flames'. This poem proposes the idea that the bond of sensual love on earth can overcome death, once again confusing the distinction between fantasy and reality. The 'newly met' lovers who rise to take their place in the sight of God have accepted the end of their earthly desires and are content with the love offered in heaven which the damozel and her lover are not. The new-birth the damozel witnesses is one of rebirth after death, in the resurrection; 'them/Who are just born, being dead'. This early poem reiterates the theme of resurrection that dominates much of Rossetti's work, and is concerned with the metamorphosis from life to death and rebirth, or non-birth and non-death.

I included birth by design because this concept also appears in *The House of Life* in several sonnets that use the idea of birth and being born as evidence of life beyond life; for example in 'The Birth-Bond' (*Works* 79) the

narrator likens his love to the familial bond of siblings; 'though in years of sight and sound unmet/Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough!' Birth is also a figure for resurrection as it is in 'The Blessed Damozel'. Rossetti evokes an image juxtaposing birth and death in the sonnet 'Death's Songsters' (*Works* 103) when he envisages the wooden horse of Troy's doom; 'within whose populous womb/The birth was death'. In 'Stillborn Love' (*Works* 93), dated 1870, Rossetti awkwardly transposes the traumatic episode of his own child's still-birth, shortly before his wife's death, as an idea of love not realized; 'The hour which might have been yet might not be,/Which man's and woman's heart conceived and bore/Yet whereof life was barren'. The conclusion to this sonnet personifies the lately realized love problematically, 'I am your child: O parents, ye have come!' providing yet another complex layer of meaning to Rossetti's vision of death, birth and resurrection.

Due to Rossetti's secular approach within the Christian atmosphere of *The House of Life* the conceptualized death and resurrection of the female is controlled by the narrator in his attempts to continue his physical domination of the beloved after her death. The resurrection is in effect a means through which to recreate the image of the beloved as a malleable Galatea figure in service of the male possessor. The dialectic operating here is described succinctly by Andrea Dworkin: 'The dualism of good and evil, virgin and whore, lily and rose, spirit and nature is inherent in Christianity, and finds its logical expression in the rituals of sado-masochism'.[48] It is in the Christian doctrine of resurrection that this dialectic is at once realized and perpetuated. As I have indicated the male artist attempts to control his representation of the female by

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48. Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), p. 73.

reducing her from her divine status, rendering her mortal and killing her, thus enabling him to resurrect her in an image which he believes he can manipulate. What is arresting here is the female voice that threatens the disintegration of male dominance by refusing silently to be subjugated in this manner. In the examples of liberatory aesthetics outlined by Kathy Psomiades in the introduction to this thesis, the female other is implicated as a corollary of male desire rather than exerting a dialectical contrast, existing in relief as it were to male dominance. If one imagines the representation of the female in male art as the negative imprint of a photograph perhaps, unseen and acting, mutually dependent, vital to the whole due to its opposition and as such inseparable, then this symbiotic relationship becomes clearer.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOUND IN THE CITY

> Bede's Inn has this peculiarity, that it faces, receives from, and discharges into a bustling thoroughfare speaking only of wealth and respectability, whilst its postern abuts on as crowded and poverty-stricken a network of alleys as are to be found anywhere in the metropolis. The moral consequences are, first, that those who occupy chambers in the Inn may see a great deal of shirtless humanity's habits and enjoyments without doing more than look down from a back window; and second, they may hear wholesome though unpleasant social reminders through the medium of a harsh voice, an unequal footstep, the echo of a blow or a fall, which originates in the person of some drunkard or wife-beater, as he crosses and interferes with the quiet of the square. Characters of this kind frequently pass through the Inn from a little foxhole of an alley at the back, but they never loiter there.
>
> It is hardly necessary to state that all the sights and movements proper to the Inn are most orderly.[1]

Thus the respectable chambers of Henry Knight in Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* which stand discriminatingly between the 'poverty-stricken' alleys and the broad, elegant thoroughfares of the metropolis. Hardy presents both an architectural perspective situating the Inn within its urban environment, and a provisional perspective alluding directly to the effect of that environment on those who inhabit it. The Inn is peculiar we are told, in that it 'faces, receives from, and discharges' into the thoroughfare. Its frontage projects an image of professional propriety, trading in the 'wealth' and gentility of those who pass its doors. However it also protects that affluent thoroughfare from the character of shirtless humanity it conceals, those secluded in the alleys to the rear. This character is of unpleasant aspect, it is lame, violent, intoxicated, and it interferes with the quiet of the square; frequently passing through, never loitering; the evidence of its passing nevertheless, does not go unnoticed.

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1. Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, ed. Roger Ebbatson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985), p. 180. Subsequent quotations will be indicated by page number in parentheses and the abbreviation *Eyes*.

The culture of Victorian sexuality has its dual aspect exposed in this profile of urban contradiction, where cultural relationships are grounded in narratives of geography and manifest in the shifting imagery of order and chaos, natural and unnatural, interior and exterior, day and night, male and female. It is important to stress that these narratives, while grounded geographically, occur in mutable social spaces, subject to temporal and spatial transience. The passage quoted above opens the short chapter that closes the novel's first volume and its importance as the threshold for the distinct change of narrative in this work has often been overlooked. An explication of metropolitan geography is constructed here through a negotiated exchange, a *transaction*. From the wider implications of cultural relationships that operate within the urban space, to the imperceptible shift in the respective positions of the characters Stephen Smith and Henry Knight, this vignette resonates throughout with subliminal antithetical exchange. Sexuality, knowledge and power collide at the particular geographical site that is Bede's Inn - the name evoking an image of monastic retreat from the shifting metropolitan undercurrents outside its doors.

Hardy directs the reader to participate in Stephen's journey through this chapter as a path through the three dimensional physical structure that is the Inn, simultaneously revealing the complex cultural and sexual relationships therein: 'we follow Stephen Smith to this place'. Before gaining entrance to the building however, the reader first assimilates the exterior, the meticulously ordered thoroughfare described previously. On this 'fine October evening' it is still light:

> a placid porter is sitting on a stool under a sycamore tree in the midst, with a little cane in his hand. We notice the thick coat of soot upon the branches, hanging underneath in flakes, as in a chimney . . . Within the railings is a flower-garden of respectable dahlias and chrysanthemums, where a man is sweeping the leaves from the grass. (*Eyes* 180)

The natural landscape here is subjugated by the encroaching order imposed by the urban cityscape. The bustling thoroughfare has shaped the natural after its own image. The 'coat of soot' assumes the role of snowflakes hanging from the tree, and the flora has become 'respectable' within the compound of its humanised existence. As we move through the Inn and emerge at its rear this image of the natural will change.

Just as Bede's Inn itself bestrides the antithetical metropolitan space of thoroughfare and alley, this chapter effectively marks the end of Stephen Smith's aspirations for the love of Elfride and the beginning of Henry Knight's aspirations after the same. What occurs imperceptibly inside is the passing of the torch between the naive young romantic that is Smith and the cerebral Victorian polymath that is Knight. The epigraph that opens the chapter resonates throughout the remainder of the novel: "*'He set in order many Proverbs'*". Here Knight not only resembles a preacher imparting knowledge, but also Elfride's own father, the immovable object standing in the way of Stephen's progression to her hand.

Stephen's approach to Knight's chambers sees him somewhat in awe of this man of learning, the letters on the door "'Mr. Henry Knight'" adequate to convey his profession: "'Barrister-at-law' being understood but not expressed". Knight is cocooned within the 'distant penetralia' of the inner office; a 'thick' wall, two doors, an ante-room and a pair of curtains separate him from the first

floor landing. The ante-room houses a 'chaotic' collection of intellectual acquisitions from prints to folios, and the discarded accoutrements of a man well-travelled: 'old coats, hats, umbrellas, and walking sticks'. Once inside we find Knight is surrounded by books, as Hardy foreshadows the intellectual reasoning that will later leave him uncompromising and unreasonable in the face of Elfride's 'secret': 'Cicero called the library the soul of the house; here the house was all soul'. One of the books Stephen notices is Elfride's own romance 'The Court of Kellyon Castle' and its significance is immeasurable. Stephen's failure to acknowledge the author's identity for fear of Knight's criticism leads indirectly to Knight's close acquaintance with Elfride and her subsequent love for him.

When Stephen enters Knight's office proper, '[O]ne stream only of sunlight came into the room', illuminating the aquarium that stands in the window:

> a dull parallelipipedon enough for living creatures at most hours of the day; but for a few minutes in the evening, as now, an errant, kindly ray lighted up and warmed the little world therein, when the many-coloured zoophytes opened and put forth their arms . . . and the timid community expressed gladness more plainly than in words. (*Eyes* 182)

Once again nature is confined for the pleasure and purpose of man, as with the garden at the Inn's front. Andrew Radford describes the aquarium as 'a symbol of Knight's unhealthy detachment, which will be eroded by his subjective love for Elfride.'[2] This detachment is also that which will ultimately prevent him

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2. Andrew Radford, *Thomas Hardy and the Survivals of Time* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003), p. 46.

maintaining that love. Radford implicates Knight's 'literary and scientific research' as a practice that maintains his role as an 'aloof spectator', 'he is a figure who does not immerse himself in that life but merely watches from a position of unobserved seclusion'.[3] Knight's observations lend him the air of a civilized man yet his inability to understand the complexities of human relationships is ruthlessly exposed by the end of the novel. His obsession with discovering the 'secrets' of Elfride's past compromise his ideal image of her and he rejects her, to his own discredit. Thus Knight serves to perpetuate the virgin-whore dichotomy the Victorian male uses to separate aspects of his sexual private and personal affairs as I examined in chapter two. However Knight, whose eyes 'permeated rather than penetrated', observes diligently, assimilates adequately, yet fails ultimately to understand fully.

As the daylight fades, the sun having 'edged away, and vanished', Knight invites his guest to observe the alley to the rear of his quarters:

> Beneath them was an alley running up to the wall, and thence turning sideways and passing under an arch, so that Knight's back window was immediately over the angle, and commanded a view of the alley lengthwise. Crowds – mostly women – were surging, bustling, and pacing up and down. Gaslights glared from the butcher's stalls, illuminating the lumps of flesh to splotches of orange and vermilion, like the wild colouring of Turner's later pictures, whilst the purl and babble of tongues of every pitch and mood was to this human wildwood what the ripple of a brook is to the natural forest. (*Eyes* 186-7)

The colonization of nature in both the garden at the Inn's front and in the aquarium in Knight's office is reversed as the alley erupts into a 'human wildwood'. The distilled aspect of character assigned to the postern alley now

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3. ibid.

takes on the particulars of its inhabitants. The scions of humanity on show are 'mostly women', and as the gaslights create an unnatural glow over the market stalls of flesh intermingling like pigments on canvas, the atmosphere is suffused with the taint and colour of spoiling meat. Containment in the alley exists contrary to that of the order imposed by the railed garden and the glass aquarium. This surge of carnality, crowded together in the maze of alleyways abutting Bede's Inn, is the antithesis of the orderly thoroughfare on the Inn's opposite aspect. The zoophytes behind the glass in Knight's aquarium are creatures classified as halfway between plants and animals, the 'purl and babble' from the alley through the glass window suggests a similar relationship between plants and humans; a nocturnal urban evolutionary phenomenon to replace the wilder landscape diminished by an industrialised urban cityscape. The unwholesome sight of splotched flesh and the jungle of humanity 'surging, bustling, and pacing' in the alley comes alive in the evening just after the zoophytes have 'put forth their arms' to embrace the last rays of the sun.

Comfortably separated from the confined chaos of what he calls 'my Humanity Show', Knight exemplifies the metaphorical expanse that exists between the interior of his office and by implication, his life, and those on the exterior. The women gathered in the congested alley immediately below the window, whether in the act of buying or selling, take their place upon a stage as far removed from Knight as they could possibly imagine, just as the evening sun fades and the gas lamps glare their artificial light on the world. Once again the suggestion of a transaction informs this narrative. The women gathered in the alley become confused with the images of splotched flesh, melded together as Hardy invokes the comparison to Turner's painting, thus evasively

aestheticizing the captured moment. This commodification of the body in the 'flesh-market' confirms the suggestion of selling flesh in addition to buying it.

The ritual gratification Knight receives from the 'Humanity Show' provides another complex layer of meaning to the geographical narrative of Bede's Inn and the discourse of sexuality it creates and controls. The frenetic energy provided by the flare of gaslights and the throng of sexual humanity in the alley provides a palpable contrast to the languid mood evoked by the hazy evening and respectable flora as Stephen approaches the Inn's frontage. Just as the Inn 'receives from, and discharges into' the thoroughfare at its front, so the flesh-market of the alley's twilight receives and discharges into the congested profusion of the poverty-stricken slum at its rear. Among the discharged of the Inn are those few of dubious character that pass through the foxhole alley, disseminating their unwholesome seed into the city beyond. Significantly these characters are men, and they become the currency of exchange between the women who may be soliciting at the Inn's rear, and the respectable thoroughfare of the city at its front.

The controlled exchange between front and rear is manifest in this novel in two ways. In the wider cultural context of contaminated space and the inability of women to escape that space, control implies the containment and futile struggle of 'fallen' women to somehow regain control over their lives. Integral to the narrative of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, is the fact that Knight only ever watches the sleazy scenes through his window; he maintains a comfortable distance afforded by the walls of his professional chambers. The women too are confined to their designated space. Denied the freedom of movement granted their male counterparts, they do not traverse the quiet square between

the front and back of the Inn, they are immured in the slum where they ply their trade. Elfride herself is metaphorically trapped in Knight's manufactured Humanity Show. His inability to reconcile what he knows and loves about Elfride with her past leads him to reject her. Elfride is in this way unable to escape from the 'alley' of her past relationships, her sullied femininity inhibits her ability to cross thresholds like the one represented by Bede's Inn.

Significantly it is at Bede's Inn that Knight finally rejects Elfride in a symbolic passing of her back to her father, the only other time in the novel that the Inn is visited. Elfride, it appears, is as far removed from Knight's manufactured ideal of womanhood as the women of questionable virtue who stir in the gas-lit alley, and thus he too becomes a unit of currency between the women in the Humanity Show and world beyond the respectable frontage of the Inn.

The 'peculiarity' Hardy claims is unique to Bede's Inn is in fact a recurrent architectural phenomenon of antithetical attraction within the Victorian narrative of the city. This sense of contaminated urban geographies and the liminal thresholds that operate in and around them is essential to any examination of the imagery of Victorian sexuality.

In Chapter 16 of *Bleak House*[4] Lady Dedlock engages the street-sweeper Jo as a guide through the locations frequented by her former lover, and arrives finally at the pauper's burial ground to seek out his grave. Eager to avoid discovery, she is disguised in the attire of an upper servant. But the indelible mental and physical disparity between her and the places she visits marks her as one who doesn't belong and eventually leads to the betrayal of her secret. A disparity is suggestively revealed through the relationship between the Lady and

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4. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). Subsequent quotations will be indicated by page number and the abbreviation *BH*.

the purlieus of wretchedness and depravity she encounters. Once at the burial ground, she cowers under the stone entrance to the graveyard, 'into a corner of that hideous archway, with its deadly stains contaminating her dress' (*BH* 278). The touch of contagion she is forced to endure suggests the physically unwholesome atmosphere of the gravesite, the stifling congestion of disease inherent with such a place. Further, it is representative of the threat of moral contamination that can occur when boundaries of moral geographical maps are compromised, and in the case of Lady Dedlock, this compromise is twofold due to her own past.

Lady Dedlock's 'contamination' occurs when she attempts to transgress the boundaries of her class and status by revisiting a site connected to her past. Her appearance in a space to which she no longer belongs is disruptive, the result being that she feels marked; and she is noticed as someone who does not belong. Geographical narratives manipulate the elaborate hierarchy of urban space and the contamination of that space in determining the fate of the outcast. Architectural form is employed to direct and prohibit the movement of the female 'other', both figuratively and literally. The female is consistently represented wandering a designated path, at a designated time, through a designated landscape, be it within one building or through an entire city; that has become familiar to Victorian social realism in both painting and the novel. In this sense the walls and doors of the buildings, the streets and alleys of Victorian cities, work to reveal the relationships between their inhabitants and their place in society, which are grounded in narratives of geography.

According to commentators such as Deborah Epstein Nord[5] and Judith Walkowitz[6], the historical Victorian city may be utilised as a backdrop for a discussion on the plight of the urban poor or as a geographical symbol of class segregation. Nord makes a strong case in *Walking the Victorian Streets*, for examining the female body as a depository for 'marks of urban contagion', making specific reference to Esther Summerson in this context. However the urban schematic provides more than a symbol of segregated class by acting as a site or threshold wherein a narrative is both constructed and developed.

It is more compelling to view the geographical narrative constructed through a site such as Bede's Inn as an opportunity to investigate not only the wider implications inherent in the antithesis created between front and rear, but also the effect this has on the character of Henry Knight whose voyeuristic tendencies it has cultivated. Outwardly Knight has the characteristics of the façade of the building itself – he is 'as he should be'. However this site is infiltrated by the unwholesome aspect implicit in the flesh-market at its rear, and at particular times it becomes other than what it seems. Knight himself cannot remain unmoved by the spectacle he indulges in and this is revealed later in the novel by his serious overreaction to and misjudgement of Elfride.

Similarly *Bleak House* can be read as a novel structured around the anatomy of place, and of the movement of humanity through contaminated space. The ability of architectural form to effectively determine the behaviour or fate of the characters is evident throughout this novel. The 'fog' of London

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5. Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 238.

6. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 8-9.

has always been recognised as less a meteorological phenomenon than a metaphor for the labyrinthine confusion surrounding the maze of legal impossibility represented by Jarndyce and Jarndyce, manifest physically in the area that surrounds Chancery Lane itself: 'The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar' (*BH* 50).

G. K. Chesterton's lucid commentary on *Bleak House* acknowledges the human effect of this influential architectural abomination with which Dickens has imbued a sense of inescapable desperation:

> Miss Flite is a funny character, like Miss La Creevy; but Miss La Creevy means only Miss La Creevy; Miss Flite means Chancery . . . Rick Carstone is a kind and tragic figure, like Sidney Carton; but Sidney Carton means only the tragedy of human nature; Rick Carstone means the tragedy of Chancery. Little Jo dies pathetically like Little Paul; but for the death of Little Paul we can only blame Dickens; for the death of Little Jo we blame Chancery.[7]

The structural bones of architectural geography are cornerstones around which a society evolves and flourishes; here the people are inhibited, shaped and prohibited, concealed and revealed, live and die.

When Dickens ventured into the notorious Seven Dials area in *Sketches by Boz*, his observations there set a precedent for the infiltration of malevolent architectural construction into the lives of the characters of *Bleak House*:

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7. G. K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, Part 2, Chapter XV.

> The stranger who finds himself in 'The Dials' for the first time . . . will see enough around him to keep his curiosity and attention awake for no inconsiderable time. From the irregular square into which he has plunged, the streets and courts dart in all directions, until they are lost in the unwholesome vapour which hangs over the house-tops, and renders the dirty perspective uncertain and confined; and lounging at every corner, as if they came there to take a few gasps of such fresh air as has found its way so far, but is too much exhausted already, to be enabled to force itself into the narrow alleys around, are groups of people, whose appearance and dwellings would fill any mind but a regular Londoner's with astonishment.[8]

In this vignette of social squalor and deprivation the character of environment takes on the character of humanity until the two become virtually interchangeable. The unsettling conclusion observes 'an unexpected court composed of buildings as ill-proportioned and deformed as the half-naked children that wallow in the kennels'. Just as in the case of Lady Dedlock's journey to the pauper's graveyard, where the arch she cowers under contaminates her dress; so visitors to Seven Dials find themselves plunged into the unwholesome vapour, the confined perspective where they are forced to gasp for fresh air, in a place where the air itself is 'exhausted already'.

Several days after the removal of Temple Bar at the east end of The Strand began, in 1878, *The Times* reported:

> for no reason whatever, in the pure wantonness of prescription and power, [Temple Bar] bestrid the crowded thoroughfare, and proclaimed to the people that, they must creep, crowd, and feel their way under it.[9]

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8. Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* ed. and intro Dennis Walder (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 'Scenes', V.

9. The Times, 7th January, 1878. p. 9. See Nead, p. 209, for a full account.

The oppressiveness of Temple Bar and the way it forces people to 'creep' and 'feel' their way under it is again reminiscent of Lady Dedlock's experience in the graveyard. As if the stone and mortar recognises her need to conceal herself, it thus marks her, forcing her into the position from which she is ultimately discovered. From this first moment of contamination Lady Dedlock's secret is gradually revealed around this particular site. The street-sweeper Jo relates the story of his journey with her twice. Initially in chapter XIX, and more revealingly in chapter XXII, where he identifies her subterfuge by recognising the dress belonging to her maid, and distinguishing the hands of the maid from that of the lady: "'Hands was a deal whiter, a deal delicater, and a deal smaller'" (*BH* 369). It is this moment that signifies how Lady Dedlock is thrust from under the collective umbrella of safety afforded her by her class status into a no-man's land where she is vulnerable. She cannot be considered as sharing the collective safety of the Victorian other, either, and is therefore utterly outcast. It is Jo who finally brings the search for Lady Dedlock back to the burial ground and to the discovery of her body.

Prior to this the search had lead to the riverside area of the city, as Mr. Bucket eliminated the possibility that a body found there could be the missing lady. Here Esther is alarmed at the sight of a poster for an unidentified missing woman: 'there was a bill, on which I could discern the words, "Found Drowned"' (*BH* 827). While foreshadowing a frequent phenomenon Dickens later examined in *Our Mutual Friend*, this incident points up the dangers for the female who strays outside the safety afforded through geographical narrative and her given place in the anatomy of society.

The social realist paintings of the 1850's reveal the fate of the woman who finds herself on the outside of the institutionalised discourse of the 'other'. Images such as Watts' famous *Found Drowned*[10] and the final scene from Augustus Egg's *Past and Present*[11] series establish a convention for representing the excluded female who belonged to neither the formalised recognisable discourse of the other, or that of the privileged household. The pre-textual narrative which informs these paintings is evident throughout the school of social realism instigated by Richard Redgrave with works such as *Going to Service* (1843), *The Sempstress* (1844), *The Poor Teacher* (1843), and *The Outcast* (1851).

A proliferation of non-fictional magazine illustrations of women committing suicide contributed to the classification of architectural structure as a framing device for the unfortunate female. The extremely gendered narrative of Victorian suicide has been studied extensively from a variety of theoretical viewpoints. Brian Maidment's[12] provocative chapter 'Did she jump or was she pushed?' provides an excellent overview of existing scholarly research in addition to analysing several suicide narratives in an attempt to determine their intended message. However the analysis fails to acknowledge a geographical narrative acting as the site for a transaction rather than purely as a framing device for illustrations such as George Cruikshank's final plate for 'The Drunkard Father' sequence, or Gustave Dore's 'The Bridge of Sighs--One more Unfortunate', from Thomas Hood's *Poems*.

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10. George Frederick Watts, *Found Drowned*, Watts Museum Gallery, Compton, c.1848-50.

11. Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present No.3*, Tate Gallery, 1858.

12. B. E. Maidment, *Reading Popular Prints, 1790-1870*, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996), Chapter 5.

Maidment's primary concern is the interpenetration of literary and visual discourses that seek to construct social commentaries on suicide that could range as widely as perhaps naturalistic, reformist texts; deterministic, essentially consolatory texts; or prurient spectacles. An interesting corollary of this research is the emergence of a consistent and recognisable 'site' for the narrative determined through specific graphic references. In my analysis of Rossetti's 'Blue Bower' portraits in chapter two I concentrated on the artist's ritual reconstruction of the 'site' of the portrait and his consistent reiteration of key aspects which frame and define the designated place of the female. In the suicide narratives that proliferated throughout popular print magazines such as *The Penny Magazine* and *The Saturday Magazine* the woodcut illustration became just such a site.

The role of the woodcut or wood engraved illustration in cheap fiction is concisely summarised by Maidment: on the one hand, they provided 'non-literate or barely literate readers access to the narrative'; on the other, they 'offered the reader tropes, fantasised shorthand clichés for narrative truisms, a simplified visual vocabulary'.[13] I suggest that while reader recognition of this narrative rests on several key elements as Maidment lists them: such as darkness and the gloomy city skyline; the bridge arch and balustrade; a tomb-like slab -- among others; the existence of an iconographic code for identifying the narrative does not fully examine the significance of moral geographical maps and their resonance throughout the very act of female suicide, both in the act itself and the events prior.

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13. ibid. p. 146.

The complexities of designated space and the literary or visual construction of the female within that space propose that there is more to the suicide narrative than is apparent from Maidment's evaluation. Furthermore, as with my analysis of the 'Blue Bower' portraits, I propose that an ideological reading of the suicide narrative will confirm that the manifestation of physical interior or exterior space is a defining factor in visual and literary constructs of female incarceration. Mieke Bal examines the importance of the violation of space in her explication of Rembrandt's *Lucretia* portraits, employing the narrative pretext of the Lucretia story described by Livy to enhance her argument. Lucretia's narrative can be described in terms of antithetical movement: from the private bedroom where the rape itself takes place, heretofore Lucretia's space; to the public hall where she commits suicide, formerly the space belonging to her father, brother, and attacker. The violation of gendered space lends an extremely polarised aspect to this particular narrative. As I have discussed throughout the previous chapters however, this polarisation is exactly what the act of rape effects in terms of what can and cannot be seen or visualised, what can and cannot be heard, and how that leads to the rape being repeated by the victim in the act of suicide.

As this discussion continues the increasing importance of gendered space and ownership will become evident. After returning to the works by Watts and Egg mentioned above, I will examine several images that suggest how and why these expressions of self-murder permeate throughout the Victorian narrative of the city, and how the suicide vignettes examined by Maidment are merely an iconographic endgame; the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

What we see in Watts' *Found Drowned* [Plate 31] is the unfortunate conclusion for the downcast women depicted in the earlier works of Redgrave. This nocturnal scene depicts the body of a woman pulled out or washed ashore under one of the arches of Waterloo Bridge. One bright star shines over an otherwise murky Thames, and the woman clutches an item in her hand, probably offering some clue as to her former life and identity. These are stock elements repeated throughout literature and art during this period and as with the woodcut illustrations, identification of this scene is given over to the architectural configuration that Watts has perpetuated.

In Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* [Plate 32] we find a type of Victorian *Rake's Progress* as the narrative develops over the series. As in *Found Drowned* though, the key elements that characterise the narrative of exclusion at work here are evident. This time the woman is huddled, still alive, under one of the Adelphi arches on the river. This is again a night scene with the solitary moon casting a dim light over the river and the woman clutching her illegitimate child. The caption for this painting reads:

> August the 4th – have just heard that B – has been dead for a fortnight, so now his poor children have lost both parents. I hear she was seen on Friday last near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head. What a fall hers has been.

This painting and the series it concludes is full of the kind of symbolism Holman Hunt employed in *The Awakening Conscience* [Plate 16] in 1853. The clutched object in *Found Drowned*, the paintings and posters adorning the walls throughout the *Past and Present* series all serve to identify the 'fall' from a place of comfort to one of ignominy and despair. These images work uneasily

Plate 31. George Frederick Watts, *Found Drowned.*
1848-50 oil on canvas, 144.8 x 213.3cm
Watts Museum Gallery, Compton.

Plate 32. Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present No. 3.*
1858 oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.2cm
Tate Gallery, London.

however due to the overt judgement they place on the role the Victorian female plays in her own downfall. While they perpetuate the code of visual signs identified by Maidment that are integral to this discussion, they fail to engage those signs actively and determine why and how they came to be there, and what part they may have taken in bringing the narrative to this desperate endgame.

The painting *Found* [Plates 33, 34] by Dante Gabriel Rossetti serves as an illustration of the complexities of designated space and of the isolated female and her struggle to exploit or escape that space. The dynamic at work in this painting reveals a dialectical relationship between what may be its intended message, which is similar to those discussed above, and the narrative ambiguities amplified through the artist's utilization of images of the cityscape.

The provenance of this unfinished painting and the symbolism that dominates the image has been competently discussed by several critics and need not overly concern my explication.[14] It was begun as early as 1854 and left unfinished at the artist's death in 1882. Rossetti himself described the painting adequately in a letter to Holman Hunt in 1855:

> The picture represents a London street at dawn, with the lamps still lighted along a bridge which forms the distant background. A drover has left his cart standing in the middle of the road (in which, i.e. the cart, stands baa-ing a calf tied on its way to market), and has run a little way after a girl who has passed him, wandering in the streets. He had just come up with her and she, recognising him, has sunk under her shame upon her knees, against the wall of a raised churchyard in the foreground, while he stands

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[14] In particular see A. I. Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Found* (Norwich: Real World Publications, 1976).

> holding her hands as he seized them, half in bewilderment
> and half guarding her from doing herself a hurt.[15]

This contemporary image, a rare attempt for Rossetti, illustrates his poem of the same name. As one might expect, the description is entirely accurate. The symbolism of the fettered calf, the church-yard, and the promise of a new dawn all point towards Rossetti's intended moral message. An examination of the structure of this picture reveals a familiar pattern of withdrawal and movement between male and female, yet also the antithetical positioning of objects and space that will become crucial in the following analysis.

As Rossetti did not complete this work it is necessary to rely on several detailed preparatory studies he completed over twenty years, with the assumption that had he been able the artist would have included some important features that are missing from the oil version. These significant features include the detail of stonework distinguishing the street from the pavement, the railing on the wall and gravestone in the churchyard, and the steps leading down from the bridge to the river. The sketch also depicts a sleeping vagrant and a policeman on the bridge, in addition to a symbolic rose cast into the gutter, and two birds gathering material to build a nest.

The narrative action reveals that this painting is one about choice, and the intended message is rendered ambiguous largely because of the manipulation of space in the background of this image and the placement of objects within it. The ekphrastic sonnet 'Found' extends the possibilities of reading Rossetti's image in terms that amplify the contrast between male and female, between freedom and confinement, while simultaneously heightening

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15. Surtees, I, p. 28.

Plate 33. *Found.*
1854-55 / 1859-81 oil on canvas, 91.4 x 80cm
Delaware Art Museum.

Plate 34. Study for *Found*.
1853 black and brown ink and wash with white heightening on paper, 20.5 x 18.2cm
The British Museum, London.

the sense of unreality about this image, which Rossetti described as reading 'like a tale of pre-existence'.[16] The sonnet reveals this 'pre-existence' in contrasts of light and dark, of hope and despair:

> 'There is a budding morrow in midnight:'—
> So sang our Keats, our English nightingale.
> And here, as lamps across the bridge turn pale
> In London's smokeless resurrection-light,
> Dark breaks to dawn. But o'er the deadly blight
> Of Love deflowered and sorrow of none avail,
> Which makes this man gasp and this woman quail,
> Can day from darkness ever again take flight?
>
> Ah! gave not these two hearts their mutual pledge,
> Under one mantle sheltered 'neath the hedge
> In gloaming courtship? And, O God! to-day
> He only knows he holds her;—but what part
> Can life now take? She cries in her locked heart,—
> "Leave me—I do not know you—go away!" (*Works* 233)

In the pervading atmosphere of pre-dawn haziness that fills the background of this painting, Rossetti skillfully manufactures an image of loss and despair that offers little possibility of either redemption or resurrection to the fallen woman and her lover. Keats's hopeful midnight is washed away, faded out in the pale light of Rossetti's London dawn. The rendering of pale early morning and the revealed scene of bitter rejection and frustration are afforded a stark clarity through the poet's use of language; the smokeless 'resurrection'[17] dawn provides a poor respite to the woman to whom love is a blighted memory. Rossetti offers no hope for the remembered courtship, the

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16. Surtees, I, p. 27. While Rossetti's own 'pre-existence' in terms of his artistic development has been suggested as the implication here, written as this comment was in 1881; it is my contention that the artist is pointing strongly towards the primordial elements in the image.

17. I have commented previously on Rossetti's ideas on resurrection and the theme recurs here, perhaps implying a further complicity on the viewer's part in the treatment of these women.

woman reserving the courage only to reject her former lover outright, erasing the memory of him from her life and existence beyond his knowledge. The octave of this sonnet powerfully enhances the visual image offered by *Found*.

In a similar process to that which manipulates the reader to designate a particular moral function or identity to Henry Knight and the women of dubious virtue in the alley in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the viewer of *Found* is pre-programmed to assume the 'honesty' of the drover in this image, as opposed to the 'fallen' woman he assails. As I have suggested these are transient narratives, thus any assumptions made by the reader are founded on certain criteria such as time, place and appearance, prior to being implicated in the consequent collision of sexuality that occurs. Lynda Nead attributes an 'ocular economy' to the city, suggesting a complex transaction between the prostitute and the client based on a visual vocabulary of 'scopic promiscuity' and consequent assumptions regarding the male-female relationship.[18] Consequently the viewer invariably comes to an image such as *Found* with a preconceived notion about what the picture may or may not mean.

In *Found* the drover is dressed in country smock and boots; his appearance gives the impression that he is poor, and forced into selling his calf in the city market. His integrity is assumed and his motive given little consideration – thus he resembles Henry Knight. A male viewer of this painting is inclined to naturally ally himself with the drover, thus assuming his honest appearance, his moral superiority, and perhaps most importantly his ownership of the female, the key contentious issue in this work. Bal comments

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18. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000), p. 65. Nead reports that nineteenth-century accounts of prostitution assigned to it a 'temporal' and 'spatial' geography, suggesting that even the walking speed of a female pedestrian could lead to assumptions regarding her position.

on the insistent movement of some paintings that write the spectator into the image, forcing from them a decision regarding the antithesis represented therein. Ownership is represented here both literally and metaphorically, in the ownership of the calf being taken to market, suitably restrained; and of the woman found on the pavement. The male viewer, once associated with the drover, even if solely by gender, becomes an implicit accomplice in his attempts to resume his 'ownership' over the woman he once knew. Thus the isolation of the woman is heightened, emphasized as she turns her head, breaking eye contact with the drover and consequently the spectator. She chooses isolation over objectification both in the microcosmic scene depicted here and in the larger perspective of semiotic readings of the suicide narrative. The macrocosmic perspective returns once again to issues of ownership and designated space.

Just as the viewer of this image assumes the drover to be an honest hardworking man, it is their assumption that the woman is a streetwalker, perhaps innocent once, but fallen into bad ways and forced then into prostitution.[19] These assumptions are made through her appearance in this given place at this given time, much as those from the flesh-market in the alley behind Bede's Inn. As this particular narrative suggests however, we are aware that the drover is attempting to reclaim his ownership of the woman he has found, evidenced by the sure sign of the fettered calf in his cart. His attempt to command or appropriate (illegally) the woman here is an act of usurpation, but, who, or what is being usurped? Reclamation of this woman, legal or otherwise,

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19. Literary precedents for such assumptions exist in both the Victorian novel and the periodical press. The drover could be associated with a character like Ham Pegotty, and the gradual decline of womanhood is skilfully described by Dickens in *The Pawnbroker's Shop* from *Sketches*.

is what is at stake in this narrative. The drover, in his capacity as the woman's sweetheart, would traditionally take the place of her father, but this is clearly not the case here. The woman is assumed to be a prostitute, and could therefore be argued as belonging to different men at different times, and to whom thereafter? She is certainly not the woman the drover believes she still is, having removed herself from his control and journeyed to the city. Perhaps then it is to the city itself we must turn for the answer. This woman, driven as she has been from her rural upbringing, has come to know the city, to use the city as her home, her hearth, her livelihood, and perhaps here where the city itself becomes a synecdoche for the faceless men who engage her nocturnal activities, we find her true owner.

Gone are the fantasized inconsistencies which so characterized and plagued Rossetti's *House of Life*: his imagery here is carefully constructed, and it is based on the environment and architecture of the painted cityscape rather than the promise of love once held by the two protagonists: 'as lamps across the bridge turn pale/In London's smokeless resurrection-light,/Dark breaks to dawn'. As with the crossing of thresholds that occur in the Bede's Inn passage, here the transaction occurs at a liminal time of the day, in the hazy twilight between dawn and daylight proper. Looking at this image the dynamic use of space and the rigidity of form it exploits becomes apparent; the woman falls to her knees and is blocked by the wall; she can't escape *again* from this man whom she has already left once - as we learn from the sonnet. Trapped by the forced attentions of a man she rejected, by the churchyard wall and its unyielding promise of redemption, defined by the symbolism of the fettered calf and of the coming dawn, there is only one possible avenue of escape for the

woman in this painting, and it lies down the steps from the bridge to the river. This image is a fault line where the collision of shifting narrative geographical plates is made visible.

A crucial part of the Lucretia narrative I discussed above was the crossing of the designated threshold that delineates gendered space. In *Found* the gendered space is demarcated by the different surfaces of street and pavement, clearly separated by the obtrusive bollard and the step of the gutter. In the immediate narrative pretext to this image – the pavement *belongs* to the woman. The drover is forced to leave his cart and step from the street to the pavement, he enters the domain of the pedestrian streetwalker, consequently intruding on the gendered female space, and the struggle ensues. Accordingly, her escape must take her from the pavement – onto the street and thus to the bridge. This clear violation of space also has implications in the wider cultural geographical narrative of urban and rural space. The drover has crossed the threshold of rural, male dominated, socially acceptable space and into the tumultuous cityscape where his particular culturally based domination is no longer enforceable, thus empowering the woman in her rejection of his claim on her; prior to his discovering her, one could argue that the entire city belonged to the woman. The netted calf provides the evidence to support this claim. The calf represents the woman and her previous existence in the rural space controlled by the drover. Her decision to abscond to the city is an ironic one in the face of the purpose of the calf – just as the beast is being brought to market to be sold – so the woman brought herself to the city and ended up selling her body. Thus her forceful act of self-determination is consistently undermined by the fact that it transfers her autonomy to other men.

The drover has entered the city and he has violated the gendered space of the pavement, which is why the steps to the river become so important to this image as the only remaining space the female can retreat to. Why are they there? - the bridge and steps so visible in the space between retreating woman and pursuant man? Are they the meaningless detail offered by Barthes' theory as a signification of reality? Or are they a reminder of the Pre-Raphaelite tenet of being faithful to nature in every detail? Rather, I suggest they are symbolic of on the one hand a literal escape from the immediate attentions of this grasping man, and on the other as the figurative steps which could lead to Watts' girl found drowned. Here is the designated path so recognizable, so easily followed, so difficult to return from.

It is curious that here where Rossetti found it so difficult to realize his images in painting, his words are at their most powerful. If the ekphrastic sonnet 'Found' stimulated and enhanced the image Rossetti painted, it was in his long poem 'Jenny' [Appendix 5] that he meditated more rigorously on the state of the fallen woman in the city:[20]

> Jenny, you know the city now.
> A child can tell the tale there, how
> Some things which are not yet enroll'd
> In market-lists are bought and sold
> Even till the early Sunday light,
> When Saturday night is market-night
> Everywhere, be it dry or wet,
> And market-night in the Haymarket.
> Our learned London children know,
> Poor Jenny, all your pride and woe;
> Have seen your lifted silken skirt
> Advertise dainties through the dirt;
> Have seen your coach-wheels splash rebuke

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20. 'Jenny', *Works*, p. 36.

On virtue; and have learned your look
When, wealth and health slipped past, you stare
Along the streets alone, and there,
Round the long park, across the bridge,
The cold lamps at the pavement's edge
Wind on together and apart,
A fiery serpent for your heart. (ll. 135-55)

Rossetti wrote 'Jenny' from what he called an '*inner* standing-point'[21] so that he presented the reader with a less judgmental viewpoint. In a letter to Allingham in 1860 he declared it 'the most serious thing I have ever written'.[22] The narrator has engaged the prostitute professionally and the monologue takes place as she sleeps with her head in his lap. This is a skilful monologue due to the moral superiority of the narrator being undermined as he implicates himself, as man and society, in the fate of the fallen woman. The fact that the poem is written as an interior monologue in which the words occur only in the head of the young man and are not actually spoken aloud lends it another aspect. The internalized discussion acts as an echo of Victorian discourses of sexuality, of their implicit silence and clandestine hierarchies, the very hierarchies with which Rossetti is concerned.

'Jenny' is written in a rhythmic tone that carries the reader through the lengthy monologue; beginning with distinctly Rossettian tropes of the beautiful women he loved to paint, Jenny is 'lazy, laughing', and 'languid'. She is a fair queen: 'Of kisses which the blush between/Could hardly make much daintier' (ll. 8-9). Jenny, whose name is repeated throughout to reinforce poetic rhythm

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21. The Athenaeum, 1871 'The Stealthy School of Criticism' article. The italics are Rossetti's own.

22. Fredeman, II, 332.

in addition to provoking the image of a particular personality, has eyes 'as blue skies' and hair of 'gold incomparable'.

However the tone of the monologue darkens when Jenny becomes the 'flower left torn', the shameful prostitute so far removed from the narrator's casual dilettante. The narrative of geographical space informs much of Rossetti's poem. The narrator speculates that Jenny came originally from the country, a time she would only remember in a distant dream:

> When she would lie in fields and look
> Along the ground through the blown grass,
> And wonder where the city was,
> Far out of sight, whose broil and bale
> They told her then for a child's tale.
>
> Jenny, you know the city now.
> A child can tell the tale . . .(ll. 130-36)

Jenny's implied 'knowledge' of the city informs the narrative of *Found* also. It is grounded in a division of cultural space, in this instance between the uncharted periphery (of the country) and the metropolitan center (of the city). More specifically in Jenny's case it is the space of her own urban dwelling opposed to that of the client in whose lap she is resting her head. The narrator finds that Jenny's personal space is empty but for the caged bird which symbolizes at once Jenny's own plight, and yet also – with the coming dawn, heralds her freedom from this particular night's work with its song. The prostitution narrative is teeming with contradiction, freedom and free choice are extremely relative terms when examined in the context of 'Found' and 'Jenny'. The contrast between the narrator's own rooms filled with books and Jenny's

empty space engenders deliberation on the concept of choice and the difference between male and female freedom within this particular relationship:

> This room of yours, my Jenny, looks
> A change from mine so full of books,
> Whose serried ranks hold fast, forsooth,
> So many captive hours of youth . . .
>
> It was a careless life I led
> When rooms like this were scarce so strange
> Not long ago. What breeds the change,—
> The many aims or the few years?
> Because to-night it all appears
> Something I do not know again. (ll. 22-25, 37-42)

The narrator places Jenny in the designated space of the prostitute, reducing her to an unchanging feature of *his* life rather than the embodiment of her own. His comments indicate the capacity for change available to the male but denied the female. His ability to move between his rarefied, exclusive and respectable existence represented by the books he reads, much as Henry Knight, to the prostitute's garret for an evening of sexual gratification provides a sharp contrast to the caged bird symbolizing Jenny's spatial immobility.

This immobility is undermined thereafter however by Rossetti's relentless desire to re-imagine the female portrait, a concept I have examined in relation to the 'Blue Bower' paintings. By imagining the female in a separate space, removed from the reality of male dominated urban constructions that inhibit her mobility – Rossetti somehow empowers the female. While the result is perhaps more spectacularly visible in paintings such as *Fazio's Mistress* and *Venus Verticordia*, Rossetti is able through 'Jenny' to launch a savage attack on

the role of the Victorian male in perpetuating the degradation of women through prostitution. The deliberate irony of 'Jenny' exists because a sexual exchange does not actually take place, despite her being paid at the end of the night. Rossetti reveals an insight into a profession that he undoubtedly took more than an artistic interest in:[23]

You're thankful for a little rest,—
Glad from the crush to rest within,
From the heart-sickness and the din
Where envy's voice at virtue's pitch
Mocks you because your gown is rich;
And from the pale girl's dumb rebuke,
Whose ill-clad grace and toil-worn look
Proclaim the strength that keeps her weak,
And other nights than yours bespeak;
And from the wise unchildish elf,
To schoolmate lesser than himself
Pointing you out, what thing you are:—
Yes, from the daily jeer and jar,
From shame and shame's outbraving too,
Is rest not sometimes sweet to you?—
But most from the hatefulness of man,
Who spares not to end what he began,
Whose acts are ill and his speech ill,
Who, having used you at his will,
Thrusts you aside, as when I dine
I serve the dishes and the wine. (ll. 67-88)

The indictment in this passage of a collective social reaction to prostitution that is both reprehensible and uncaring contrasts dramatically with the spectacle witnessed by Henry Knight through his window at Bede's Inn. The narrator's

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[23]. It is significant that Rossetti equated prostitution with his own chosen profession. In a letter to Ford Madox Brown from 28 May 1873 he wrote: 'I have often said that to be an artist is just the same as to be a whore, as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of individuals is concerned'. Doughty and Wahl, III, 1175.

vision of Jenny as being thankful for the rest she is granted through his employment of her originates in a similar space as the alley at the rear of Bede's Inn. To begin with Jenny is freed from the 'crush' implied by the 'human wildwood' of the 'Humanity Show'. The sympathetic young man imagines the mocking looks and the dumb faces of the poor who rebuke the prostitute – who, but for her chosen profession, would most probably live among their own ranks. Rossetti skilfully inverts the mockery with his play on 'envy's voice at virtue's pitch'. He claims that the envy of women who haven't Jenny's courage is given voice by the women who have the virtue Jenny lacks. The 'ill-clad grace' recalls the 'toil-worn look' that Jenny discarded with her virtue when she entered her profession. Jenny's strength lies in her ability to face a world that made her and would condemn her for being made: 'shame and shame's outbraving'. Eventually the narrator's thoughts turn to man and himself as culpable for Jenny's plight. Daniel Harris[24] argues the sharpest condemnation of male responsibility occurs in this stanza and is manifest in the competition implied when the child triumphs over a younger 'schoolmate, lesser than himself', by recognising in Jenny a potential purchase.

This is a remarkable passage particularly when read in the context of Henry Knight's detached voyeurism; 'This room of yours, my Jenny, looks/A change from mine so full of books' reads as a vicious barrage of criticism levelled ultimately at the privileged, educated Victorian male, represented by the 'hatefulness of man'. Male dominated society is what keeps the strong women poor while tempting the weak with an unattainable dream of prosperous

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24. Daniel Harris, "D. G. Rossetti's 'Jenny': sex, money, and the interior monologue", *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 22 (1984), pp. 197-215. Harris points to Rossetti's multiple revisions to the line 'Whose acts are ill and his speech ill' to emphasise his argument.

living; in Jenny's case her weakness is what drove her to prostitution, forced there by a society constructed around illicit transactions instituted, controlled and perpetuated by the Victorian male. Rossetti here directly attacks the male viewer of the 'Blue Bower' portraits; the 'ill-clad grace' of the poor girl whose weakness is her strength contrasts starkly with the saturated colour and poised, languid elegance of *Bocca Baciata* or *Monna Vanna*. The brazen, challenging exhibitionism of the *Venus Verticordia* and the clinical murderous detachment of the marred countenance of *Helen of Troy* exert a controlled power which reverses the effect of the male gaze – 'shame and shame's outbraving'. What is also evident in this passage and is reiterated through the poem is the *transaction*, the very consumption of the woman by the male who uses her: 'As when I dine/I serve the dishes and the wine'. This, Harris recognises, 'In a culture where the premium placed on virginity inverts the economic advantages of selling one's sexuality'.[25]

Perhaps Rossetti's most notable achievement with 'Jenny' however, is the moral dilemma he envisages when his narrator compares the prostitute to a virtuous woman, his cousin Nell:

> My cousin Nell is fond of fun,
> And fond of dress, and change, and praise,
> So mere a woman in her ways:
> And if her sweet eyes rich in youth
> Are like her lips that tell the truth,
> My cousin Nell is fond of love.
> And she's the girl I'm proudest of.
> Who does not prize her, guard her well?
> The love of change, in cousin Nell,
> Shall find the best and hold it dear:
> The unconquered mirth turn quieter
> Not through her own, through others' woe:

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25. Harris, p. 208.

The conscious pride of beauty glow
Beside another's pride in her,
One little part of all they share.
For Love himself shall ripen these
In a kind soil to just increase
Through years of fertilizing peace.

Of the same lump (as it is said)
For honour and dishonour made,
Two sister vessels. Here is one.
It makes a goblin of the sun. (ll. 185-206)

This skilful comparison challenges preconceived notions regarding the position of the prostitute as opposed to women of unquestionable virtue, like the narrator's cousin and possibly his prospective wife, Nell. Jenny can almost be imagined sleeping 'Just as another woman sleeps!' (l. 177), leading to the comparison with Nell who distinctly resembles the Jenny of the opening stanza: 'Fair Jenny mine, the thoughtless queen/Of kisses . . . Whose eyes are as blue skies, whose hair/Is countless gold incomparable' (ll. 7-8, 10-11). The semblance the narrator builds between the two women is 'Enough to throw one's thoughts in heaps/Of doubt and horror' (ll. 179-80), in addition to evoking the image of the broken face of Rossetti's *Helen of Troy*, two halves of the whole. This is the dilemma facing Henry Knight in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* - one he failed to resolve. The possibility that the whore could be cut from the same cloth as the angel in the house threatened the hierarchy of sexual power upheld by the Victorian male. Rossetti frames the Jenny-Nell comparison within the poem as 'Two sister vessels' crafted from the same lump of clay, and the final exquisite play on words in this sequence claims: 'It makes a goblin of the sun', the 'goblin' being Victorian street slang for a twenty shilling gold coin.

The narrator, though horrified at his comparison of two women he thought so far removed from one another, remains unable to resist contemplating Jenny as she sleeps on, oblivious to his ruminations. He takes the position of the artist, imagining the 'pure' curve of the face before him in the hand of a 'Raffael' or a 'Leonardo' as a testament to 'what God can do' (l. 241). This leads to the question of his and man's involvement in 'creating' the likes of Jenny: 'What has man done here? How atone,/Great God, for this which man has done?/And for the body and soul which by/ Man's pitiless doom must now comply/With lifelong hell' (ll. 241-45). Thus the poem winds to a conclusion, and the figure of Jenny is dissolved into the commodity the narrator purchased at the beginning of the evening, a symbol of man's continuing abuse of the female form:

> Yet, Jenny, looking long at you,
> The woman almost fades from view.
> A cipher of man's changeless sum
> Of lust, past, present, and to come. (ll. 276-79)

In the final stanza the narrator is reconciled to taking only a kiss as Jenny's service for the night spent with her, his final recollections however suggest that while his own attitudes may change, his reflections concern his own life more than that of Jenny and her plight. However it is perhaps Rossetti's use of the interior monologue in the poetic form itself that would provide Jenny with a voice of her own in the future. Bristow notes that the shift Rossetti initiated with 'Jenny' from 'public speech to private thought', would 'pave the way for women poets such as Augusta Webster and Amy Levy

to dramatize the prostitute's own words in print'.[26] Thus while Jenny herself is not given voice in this poem, in works such as Webster's 'A Castaway', her legacy and indeed some of Rossetti's own artistic imagery is keenly felt:

> Aye, let me feed upon my beauty thus,
> Be glad in it like painters when they see
> At last the face they dreamed but could not find
> Look from their canvas on them, triumph in it,
> The dearest thing I have. Why 'tis my all,
> Let me make much of it: is it not this,
> This beauty, my own curse and my own tool
> To snare men's souls. . .
>
> Oh! Those shrill carping virtues, safely housed
> From reach of even a smile that should put red
> On a decorous cheek, who rail at us
> With such a spiteful scorn and rancorousness,
> (Which maybe is half envy of the heart)
> And boast themselves so measurelessly good
>
> And us so measurelessly unlike them. (ll. 34-41, 113-119)[27]

Jerome McGann credits Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' with having inspired Rossetti's theme:

> . . . Ah, turn thine eyes
> Where the poor houseless shivering female lies.
> She once, perhaps, in village plenty bless'd,
> Has wept at tales of innocence distress'd;
> Her modest looks the cottage might adorn,
> Sweet as the primrose peeps beneath the thorn;
> Now lost to all; her friends, her virtue fled,
> Near her betrayer's door she lays her head,

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[26]. Joseph Bristow, "'What If to Her All This Was Said?' Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Silencing of 'Jenny'", *Essays and Studies* Vol. 46 (1993), pp. 96-117.

[27]. *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, ed. Isabel Armstrong (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 602-17.

> And, pinch'd with cold, and shrinking from the shower,
> With heavy heart deplores that luckless hour,
> When idly first, ambitious of the town,
> She left her wheel and robes of country brown.[28]

The significant difference between Goldsmith's poem and Rossetti's ekphrastic construction in 'Found' and 'Jenny' is the role of the man whose betrayal has led to such a pass for his former lover. Rossetti does not directly lay any blame at the feet of the country-drover in 'Found', nor does his narrator assume any sort of individual responsibility in 'Jenny'. Rather, Rossetti offers the female protagonist an autonomous decision by omitting any particular reason for her journey to the city. Once integrated into the urban environment the male dominated construction of gendered space becomes vital in the control and confinement of the female body. For Jenny, the cold indifferent city forms a barrier against comfort and warmth of the type exhibited in Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*, the kind of life that perhaps the mistress or kept woman aspired to.

In marked contrast to Hunt's painting, both *Found*/'Found' and 'Jenny' exhibit a bleak, unforgiving picture of life for the 'other' woman. While Hunt intimates the sinister implications of the caged bird and the false veneer, Rossetti's vision is altogether darker, revealing a portrait of the unfortunate woman more akin to those presented by Victorian novelists. The muddy streets rebuke the forlorn Jenny, and they offer little comfort to the woman found by her former sweetheart. In what is a final repudiation of her life and environment, the woman falling against the wall of a churchyard that appears to promise redemption and enlightenment, is actually excluded by the wrought

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28. *The Complete Poetical Works Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Austin Dobson (London: Henry Frowde, 1911), pp. 21-37.

iron railing that surrounds it. Rossetti's smeared, gritty drawing, yielded more potently perhaps in pen and ink than in painted oil, encapsulates the grim drama of Nancy and Sikes: of the necessary façade created at High-Place Hall by Lucetta Templeman in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and of the desperate plight of the prostitute Martha in *David Copperfield*:[29]

> she still repeated the same words, continually exclaiming, 'Oh, the river!' over and over again. 'I know it's like me!' she exclaimed. 'I know that I belong to it. I know that it's the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it – and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable – and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled – and I feel that I must go with it!' (*DC* 749)

Martha's desire to immerse herself in the river originates in a discourse that sees women subsumed by their environment, defined by it and their relationship to it. Her journey through the city takes her from the crowded thoroughfares of Temple Bar and the Strand where band music is playing and into a neighborhood, 'as oppressive, sad, and solitary . . . as any about London' (*DC* 747). Her nocturnal journey through the city, pursued by David and Pegotty conjures increasing images of decay and rot as the girl nears her destination:

> Coarse grass and rank weeds straggled over all the marshy land . . . in one part, carcases of rotting houses, inauspiciously begun and never finished, rotted away. In another, the ground was cumbered with rusty iron monsters of steam-boilers, wheels, cranks . . . and I know not what strange objects, . . . groveling in the dust, underneath which—having sunk into the soil of their own weight . . . they had the appearance of vainly trying to hide themselves . . . As if she were

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29. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Trevor Blount (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). Subsequent quotations will be indicated by page number in parentheses and the abbreviation *DC*.

> a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay,
> the girl we followed strayed down to the river's brink. (*DC* 747-48)

It is significant that while the river is the object of Martha's nocturnal wandering, it is also the barrier to her progression. Her affiliation with the river, the instinct which drove her to its banks in search of an ending, leads to the recognition that the river itself is shaped by the dismal streets just as she is, where nameless objects and nameless people vainly attempt to vanish into the earth, and can therefore offer her no escape. In what is essentially an attempt to wash away the sins of her past, she finds only that the water is already dirty. Once she gets to the river she can go no further, because while the city forces her to it as a means of escape, she realizes that it too is a part of the city and her with it. When the narrator of 'Jenny' seeks to look into her mind and describe the depravity he imagines there; he likens the contamination to the river of forgetfulness in the mythological underworld. He proposes that to counsel Jenny would be redundant:

> So might the pages of her brain
> Be parted at such words, and thence
> Close back upon the dusty sense.
> For is there hue or shape defin'd
> In Jenny's desecrated mind,
> Where all contagious currents meet,
> A Lethe of the middle street?
> Nay, it reflects not any face,
> Nor sound is in its sluggish pace,
> But as they coil those eddies clot,
> And night and day remember not. (ll. 160-70)

Rossetti's image of Jenny's mind takes on the concept of the river and the disease and death thus associated. Desecration and contagion have ravaged

Jenny's mind as well as her body; they whirl together in a river of forgetfulness and propose that death constitutes Jenny's only possibility of release. This drastic endgame is suggested in Goldsmith's 'When lovely woman stoops to folly' from 'The Vicar of Wakefield': 'the only art her guilt to cover,/To hide her shame from every eye,/To give repentance to her lover,/And wring his bosom, is—to die'.[30] Rossetti's close friend and correspondent William Bell Scott brought his long poem 'Rosabell' to a close with an image that returns this discussion inexorably to the images of death depicted in the paintings of Watts and Egg discussed earlier:

> And every lamp on every street
> Shall light their wet feet down to death.

The Adelphi arches portrayed in Egg's painting were described by the *Art Journal* as 'the lowest of all the profound deeps of human abandonment in this metropolis'. We know from the caption of the painting that the unfortunate 'she' depicted was last seen 'near the Strand', a short distance from the Adelphi steps and incidentally, from Temple Bar. The force of urban space and the power of containment with which it controls the outcast female inevitably becomes stifling. The journey from betrayal and discovery to solitude and despair, from the safe discourse of the household to the outcast on the street is mapped by the physical journey from the Strand to the Adelphi steps, not far from Waterloo Bridge, and into the 'profound deeps of human abandonment'.[31] The environment of the city, dictated by architectural form and the space it creates, is vital in understanding the confinement of the female body and the

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30. Goldsmith, p. 67.

31. Quoted in Christopher Wood, *Victorian Painting* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999), p. 52.

narrative this creates. This area of London during the mid-Victorian period surrounds and informs the narrative of the outcast; at its heart, running parallel to the Strand and the river, was the notorious London ghetto of Holywell Street. In a chapter on 'Streets and Obscenity', Lynda Nead comments on Holywell Street as a self-contained economic, social and cultural environment, suggesting also some of the symptoms of contagion and infection which force the outcast from life, to death:

> This is space that arrests movement, holds onto its inhabitants, and is airless, stagnant and claustrophobic . . . It obeys the logic of the labyrinth; it is illegible and multifarious, as opposed to homogenous and purposeful. In these areas there is congestion, rather than circulation, and terrible physical proximity. People and houses are crowded together, too close for comfort and physical health; in this tangled knot, disease and sedition spread and threaten the well-being of the entire metropolitan body.[32]

As is evident from Dickens' description of the Seven Dials in *Sketches by Boz*, these areas inevitably result in a congested accretion of narrow lanes, buildings, foul air, contagion, and people; as Nead suggests, 'a spatial aneurism' in which a clot is unavoidable. The outcast female is forced out by the congested mass, denying her the collective safety it offers, and into the dark abyss of the city beyond.

In *Oliver Twist* when Nancy keeps her assignation with Rose Maylie, she journeys through the darkened city and eventually down the steps that lead to the river to keep her appointment secret. The city offers her up as a sacrifice to the unwholesome night and the cruel savagery of Fagin's betrayal. Once again the familiar features that characterize the nocturnal existence of the

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32. Nead, p. 163.

wandering female are extant: the river, the darkness, the need for haste and secrecy, and the probability of pursuit. Nancy is due to meet Rose Maylie:

> when the heavy bell of Saint Paul's tolled for the death of another day. Midnight had come upon the crowded city. The palace, the night-cellar, the jail, the madhouse: the chambers of birth and death, of health and sickness, the rigid face of the corpse and the calm sleep of the child: midnight was upon them all. (*Twist* 349)

Rossetti's struggling, trapped prostitute is embedded within this narrative. She is a forgotten entity, a subversive phenomenon that requires concealment, to be defined and confined, to exist only in the small hours and in the dark places on the threshold of the natural and the manmade between the subliminal lines that delineate gendered space and mobility.

It is this meeting on the steps of the bridge which betrays Nancy finally and ultimately to her death. Having crossed the invisible boundaries that separate her from Rose Maylie, she becomes vulnerable to her own environment, she is no longer protected by its internal self-regulation, its 'other' justice, or from the brutality of her lover. Had Sikes retained his wits when committing her murder it is quite possible and indeed likely that Nancy's body would have ended up in the river, washed ashore, and, as in Watts' painting, *Found Drowned*. The knowledge with which she betrayed Sikes and which lead to her death is a corollary of his inability to manipulate her entirely, and of her realization of his dissembling manufacture of her environment. It is because she is compelled to step beyond the boundaries which specify her as 'other' that her deception is eventually discovered.

This form of communal punishment exposes the aspect of the social architecture that specifies and conceals the 'other'. The sense of collective

unity enforced through exclusion brings recognition from the 'other' of its need to be marginalized, and at times, hidden. At the same time as it is shunned, the 'other' purports to welcome that shunning and develops the idea that its exclusion is not only necessary but indeed profitable. If we consider Nancy's attitude towards Miss Maylie during their initial meeting, the reasoning behind this contrived exclusion becomes clearer:

> struggling with these better feelings was pride, - the vice of the lowest and most debased creatures no less than of the high and self-assured. The miserable companion of thieves and ruffians, the fallen outcast of low haunts, the associate of the scourings of the jails and hulks, living within the shadow of the gallows itself, - even this degraded being felt too proud to betray a feeble gleam of the womanly feeling which she thought a weakness, but which alone connected her with that humanity, of which her wasting life had obliterated so many, many traces when a very child. (*Twist* 342)

Nancy's struggle with her conscience betrays the sense of collective unity that envelops the excluded society among whom she has lived all her life. During their final meeting on the steps of London Bridge, the steadfast fealty among the outcasts and denizens of the city that comprise this society becomes apparent:

> 'bad life as he has led, I have led a bad life too; there are many of us who have kept the same courses together, and I'll not turn upon them, who might—any of them—have turned upon me, but didn't, bad as they are'. (*Twist* 399)

Rose Maylie's complete ignorance as to how she might subsequently contact Nancy indicates the gulf between their social positions - a gulf created and structured around geographical, architectural borders; "'But where can I find

you again . . . I do not seek to know where these dreadful people live'". (*Twist* 346)

Both Nancy and Fagin describe their own domicile in terms that relate it collectively to an enclosure of safety; significantly Fagin in terms of its vulnerability – 'where one might be easily taken', and Nancy in terms of possible abandonment to the gutter or the street. It is precisely this sense of collective unity that is manipulated by Fagin when he skilfully manoeuvres Sikes into the position from which he commits Nancy's murder. Fagin builds Sikes' fear and anger at possible betrayal to such a point where the outcome is inevitable; this deservedly famous scene is remarkable for the slow revelation of the Jew's dread purpose and fearsomely anticipated denouement: "'Bill, Bill! . . . A word. Only a word . . .You won't be—too—violent, Bill?'" (*Twist* 408)

While *Oliver Twist* is a novel of extreme contrasts, its representations of good and evil, light and dark are clearly delineated. The subtleties of mutable geographical space and the possible restrictions this places on the female 'other' in particular, can also be seen to dominate narratives in a more complex manner.

The Mayor of Casterbridge[33] opens with one of the most compelling scenes in Victorian literature, as Michael Henchard auctions his wife at Weydon-Priors Fair. By its very nature the Fair occupies a temporary site, its annual appearance in late summer bringing the traders of livestock to Weydon. Little 'real business' remains when the Henchard family arrive in the late afternoon; however the crowd is denser than that of the morning, swelled by the

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33. Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), Chapter 1. Subsequent quotations will be indicated by page number in parentheses and the abbreviation *Mayor*.

'frivolous contingent' that take an interest in the novelty acts and freak shows, 'nick-nack vendors, and readers of Fate' who occupy the evening trade of the fair. It is into this 'congenial field' that Michael Henchard leads his wife and baby, and in the 'ochreous haze of expiring sunlight' (*Mayor* 72) it is Susan Henchard who elects to enter the furmity tent in which she and her daughter will be sold at auction. Thus the concept of transaction lying at the heart of this discussion is once again prevalent. As in the baleful glare of the gaslights in the alley behind Bede's Inn where the distinction between animal meat and womanly flesh becomes blurred, the Weydon-Priors Fair is metamorphosed, and subsequently entertains a vendor of a different commodity; as the narrator of 'Jenny' observes, 'Some things which are not yet enroll'd/In market lists are bought and sold' (ll. 137-38). Suffering under the influence of too much rum in his furmity and the belief that his wife and child impede his social progress in the world, Michael Henchard begins the appeal for any who wish to buy his family from him.

That this auction takes place at this equivocal time of day, in a pre-fabricated, temporary architectural space; that the man who sells his wife is a disillusioned listless drunkard; that the man who materializes at the last minute to purchase Susan and Elizabeth-Jane does so without giving even a name; all conspire to create the narrative structure around which this novel is based. The 'perverse character' of Henchard and the 'instinct' with which he discerns the smuggled alcoholic secret of the furmity witch, begins a sequence of illicit exchange and negotiation that permeates through the fabric of this novel. As Susan's protest reveals, the sale of his wife for profit is something Michael Henchard had considered previously: "'you have talked about this nonsense in

public places before'" (*Mayor* 76). The sudden appearance of the sailor and his production of the necessary funds transforms the hitherto lighthearted manner in which the sale had been regarded. Newson – although his name is not revealed until much later - presents an immediate antithesis to Henchard: both in his solvency and in his sudden appearance and departure from the fair. In this he anticipates Henchard's great rival in the novel, Farfrae, whose serendipitous appearance coincides with the return of Susan and Elizabeth-Jane to Henchard's life. As evening draws in on the Fair-field, Hardy reflects on the catastrophic events just passed: 'The difference between the peacefulness of interior nature and the wilful hostilities of mankind was very apparent at this place' (*Mayor* 79).

Thus the association of place and action is given specific resonance to this plot. The wife auction at Weydon-Priors establishes a precedent concerning the ownership of women that underlies the tangible issues of economic competition in the novel. This subtext is revealed in and around significant geographical sites that act, as the Fair does, to facilitate, in addition to providing visual representation, the complex relationships enacted therein. While critical orthodoxy identifies the primary struggle in the novel as one between Farfrae and Henchard, between young and old, 'Northern insight matched against Southron doggedness' (*Mayor* 186), a failure persists in marginalizing the female role in this process. If the struggle here is indeed one concerning the gradual decline of Henchard and his loss of potency and

strength, the loss of his fertility,[34] then what more potent way of expressing it than through the ownership of the female body?

Henchard's indifferent disposal of his wife at Weydon-Priors Fair is driven purely by a commercial motive, and his mercantile success and prosperity thereafter can be traced back to this first transaction. Susan Henchard's arrival in Casterbridge some twenty years later coincides with a formal mayoral dinner overseen by the man who had sold her. Henchard is observed by his former wife presiding over a splendid banquet that seemingly affirms his role as leading citizen and commercial operator of the area. Subsequently however the reader learns he is under considerable pressure due to his inability to provide decent enough grain to make bread. Thus the beginning of the end of Henchard's economic prosperity is marked by the return of the woman he so callously discarded for profit.

Accordingly, while the pivotal battle in the war between the two male protagonists may be visible primarily in their economic and public status, it is fought essentially over the ground and the occupant of the key geographical site that is High- Place Hall. High-Place Hall is the chosen residence of Lucetta Templeman, the spurned lover who settles in Casterbridge, assuming her new identity while attempting to resume her relationship with the city's mayor. High-Place Hall is significant in that it participates in a variety of relationships: between the edifice itself and other locations in the town; between the edifice and its occupant; and between the occupant and her desire to re-invent herself. It is described for the first time under the gaze of Elizabeth-Jane:

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34. Andrew Radford suggests that Henchard represents the 'Unmanned Fertility Figure' in this novel, pp. 121-36.

> The Hall, with its grey *façade* and parapet, was the only residence of its sort so near the center of town . . . It was Palladian, and like most architecture erected since the Gothic age was a compilation rather than a design. But its reasonableness made it impressive. It was not rich, but rich enough. (*Mayor* 210-11)

Lucetta is 'screened' behind the façade of this post-Gothic 'compilation', a screen that allows her to observe the market place from her window and remain concealed: 'It was the node of all orbits' (*Mayor* 237). Further, the façade provides a visual identity created through assumption that obscures the truth regarding her past. She is acutely aware of the advantage the position of the Hall gives over the market-place and indeed, the town itself. What is telling about Hardy's description of High-Place Hall is that within the space of a single paragraph, the reader is lead from the august frontage to an alleyway that allows furtive access to the house through a side entrance. The 'unseen' entrance Elizabeth-Jane discovers contrasts starkly with the grand façade of the Hall, revealing symbolically the very fragile secret of its new owner, the rotting interior of the heart protected for the time being by the rigidly designed outward structure:

> The door was studded and the keystone of the arch was a mask. Originally the mask had exhibited a comic leer, as could still be discerned; but generations of Casterbridge boys had thrown stones at the mask, aiming at the open mouth; and the blows had chipped off the lips and jaws as if they had been eaten away by disease. The appearance was so ghastly by the weakly lamp-glimmer that she could not bear to look at it . . . the leering mask suggested one thing above all others as appertaining to the mansion's past history – intrigue. By the alley it had been possible to come unseen from all sorts of quarters in the town – the old play-house, the old bull-stake,

> the old cock-pit, the pool wherein nameless infants had been used to disappear. (*Mayor* 212)

This door marks the inmate of the house it guards as other than she appears. Hardy reveals the underlying fear of exposure for this woman whose secret will eventually mean her death. It proposes that no matter how she attempts to evade the past, the door symbolizing the threat of discovery still exists, a door of disease and darkness, signifying a façade subject to syphilitic putrefaction and eventual disintegration. When Lucetta's deception is made public, she, like Nancy, becomes subject to the 'other' justice from under whose umbrella of protection she stepped when she tried to alter her fate.

The complex relationships constructed around High-Place Hall are primarily visual, and manifest both through the interior and exterior. Inside the Hall, the most telling episode concerns Lucetta as she awaits Henchard's first visit. She is agitated, uncertain how to appear, and thus she engages in a ritual arrangement of her body in anticipation of receiving her former lover:

> with a sigh she arranged herself picturesquely in the chair; first this way, then that; next so that the light fell over her head. Next she flung herself on the couch in the cyma-recta curve which so became her, and with her arm over her brow looked towards the door. This, she decided, was the best position after all; and thus she remained until a man's step was heard on the stairs. Whereupon Lucetta, forgetting her curve(for Nature was too strong for Art as yet), jumped up and ran and hid herself behind one of the window-curtains in a freak of timidity. (*Mayor* 227-28)

Thus Lucetta, the woman shielded by the architectural façade of High-Place Hall, struggles to adopt the pose best suited to the role she has in its interior.

Having failed – she elects once again to shield herself, more immediately and physically this time, using the curtain as a barrier. Lucetta's actions betray her anxiety over the decision she has made to pursue Michael Henchard. She is independently wealthy and yet she decides to attempt to renew her life with him in Casterbridge. Her awkwardness is compounded when she flings back the curtain to reveal not Henchard but his rival, and their meeting in such an informal and surprising manner undoubtedly leads each casually into the other's favour. That Lucetta is aware of the potency of obstructive barriers is evident when she resolves to ensure Elizabeth-Jane acts as safeguard against Henchard's advances: 'Elizabeth as a watch-dog to keep her father off – what a new idea' (*Mayor* 236).

The unexpected meeting between Lucetta and Farfrae moves the narrative to the exterior of the Hall and to the market place Lucetta frequently observes from her secluded window. The market on the particular day that Lucetta and Farfrae witness it is once again one where people form the commodity on sale. As opposed to that at Weydon-Priors where Henchard sold his wife, it is the 'chief hiring fair' for labourers, carters and shepherds. Here in the people-market Farfrae proves once again the antithesis of Henchard when, moved by a story of young lovers threatened by parting, he resolves the matter by employing them together. Thus the 'commercial and romantic' strands of Farfrae's life, which are described previously as 'very distinct at times' (*Mayor* 232), quite suddenly run together, counter to Henchard's dismantling of his own family for profit years earlier.

The Hall is significant then as an ocular vehicle that facilitates much of the narrative action of the novel:

> in addition to Lucetta's house being a home, that raking view over the market-place which it afforded had . . . much attraction. The carrefour was like the regulation Open Place in spectacular dramas, where the incidents that occur always happen to bear on the lives of the adjoining residents. (*Mayor* 237)

The windows of the hall are utilized as a metaphor during Lucetta's attempts to avoid Henchard's proposals. When Henchard suspects her intimacy with Farfrae she is able to deflect his probing by claiming that the position of the house places her in a reciprocal relationship with the inhabitants of the town when in reality that relationship is controlled and regulated by her: "'O yes, she knew him she declared; she could not help knowing almost everybody in Casterbridge, living in such a gazebo over the centre and arena of the town'" (*Mayor* 253).

Through her windows Lucetta interacts emotionally with the world outside. When venturing beyond the windows, she seems to embody the properties inherent in the duality of the structure and the incongruity between appearance and reality, manifest architecturally between front and rear. For Lucetta the problem of appearance and reality is manifest visually in her dilemma over what dress to wear before she and Elizabeth-Jane walk out to the market-place:

> 'settling upon new clothes is so trying,' said Lucetta. 'You are that person'(pointing to one of the arrangements), 'or you are that totally different person . . . and one of the two, you don't know which, may turn out to be very objectionable' (*Mayor* 237).

Coincidentally the cherry-coloured dress she selects here is parodied in the grotesque effigy of the skimmity-ride later in the novel. Lucetta's concern with

her outward appearance is manifest also in sexual terms of maintaining desirability when she asks Elizabeth-Jane to bring a mirror:

> 'How do I appear to people?' she said languidly. 'Well – a little worn,' answered Elizabeth-Jane, eyeing her as a critic eyes a doubtful painting . . . 'How many years more do you think shall I last before I get hopelessly plain?' (*Mayor* 244)

Lucetta's projection of respectability to the outside world is indivisible from her fate. The effigy created for the skimmity-ride leads ultimately to her death, prior to this though the inherent dissembling she brings to Casterbridge is suggested by the back of the house as it is observed by Elizabeth-Jane and quoted above. Like the skimmity-ride, the cankerous rear of the Hall ties her inextricably to Michael Henchard. For Henchard the Hall already exhibits a distasteful aspect, like a malevolent spirit it thwarts his endeavours to win Lucetta's favour:

> He could feel it in the air around Lucetta, see it in the turn of her pen. There was an antagonistic force in exercise, so that when he tried to hang near her he seemed standing in a refluent current. That it was not innate caprice he was more and more certain. Her windows gleamed as if they did not want him; her curtains seemed to hang slily, as if they screened an ousting presence. (*Mayor* 253)

Significantly when Henchard visits the Hall for the first time, he gains access through the door at the rear, and not through the respectable frontage. The symbolism of the secret door and its blighted appearance is crystallized through Hardy's presentation of the recognizable form of 'otherness' resident in Casterbridge. The façade and secret entrance to High-Place Hall are neatly

juxtaposed with the description of Mixen Lane in the poor quarter of the town.[35] Interestingly Hardy calls this area the '*pis aller*', a place of 'last resource', and contrastingly the 'Adullam', the biblical place of refuge, a collection point for the most unfortunate lowlifes from the surrounding area: 'Much that was sad, much that was low, some things that were baneful, could be seen in Mixen Lane' (*Mayor* 328). However they too attempt to disguise the reality of their identity through the malleability of geographical space. The social hub of the area is the tavern called Peter's Finger, 'the church of Mixen Lane'. The architectural similarities between it and High-Place Hall are apparent:

> At first sight the inn was so respectable as to be puzzling. The front door was kept shut. And the step so clean that evidently but few persons entered over its sanded surface. But at the corner of the public-house was an alley, a mere slit, dividing it from the next building. Half-way up the alley was a narrow door shiny and paintless from the rub of infinite hands and shoulders. This was the actual entrance to the inn. (*Mayor* 330)

The respectable appearance of the inn disguises the unlawful activity and illicit assignations that occur in the sleazy tavern itself. The geographical narrative invoked by the comparative architectural similarities between the structures document the duplicity of façade and the designated form of the 'other'. At High-Place Hall the Palladian symmetry seems 'reasonable' and implies an austere formality macabrely counter-pointed by the rear of the house whose distorted mask stares at a little-known alley. Betraying the ornamental semblance, the rear of the building exhibits the blighted fecundity implicit

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35. Seymour-Smith identifies the position of Mixen Lane as "Mill Lane, on the edge of 'Durnover Moor' (Fordington Field), just over the river Frome. It is at the back of Lucetta's house"(*Mayor* 431 notes).

within Peter's Finger in Mixen Lane where the prostitutes wear stainless white aprons to express 'industry and cleanliness' amidst a company scorned and defined by disease and criminality. The proximity between High Place Hall and Mixen Lane, both in the duality of their appearance and in their geographical situation, is indicative of the Janus face of 'otherness' when it appears within the urban cityscape, 'Like a rotten core beneath the bloom of ripe fruit . . . like anything and everything that is evil and bad, yet clings to the semblance of decency and goodness'.[36] It is in Peter's Finger that Lucetta's deception is revealed, where underworld justice determines she be subjected to the punishment of the skimmity-ride, the effect of which eventually leads to her death.

The skimmity-ride itself is an extraordinary phenomenon, both in the simplicity of its conception and execution, and in the devastating consequence of symbolic representation it engenders. The decision taken by the low-folk of Peter's Finger is made specifically in order to humiliate Lucetta, and not Henchard. It is Lucetta who is seen to have tarnished the respectability of womanhood, as Nance Mockridge expounds: "'Mrs Farfrae wrote that! . . .'Tis a humbling thing for us, as respectable women, that one of the same sex could do it'" (*Mayor* 332). Hardy layers the scene in the sleazy tavern, building a complex picture of representation, a critique of semblance. Leading the reader from the 'puzzling' yet 'respectable' frontage of the Inn and through the secret entrance described above, he constructs a theatrical façade maintained by the 'respectable' folk of Mixen Lane. As Jopp exults over the prospect of revealing Lucetta's secret letters to the assembled company the nature of deceit is

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36. Charles Manby Smith, 'Lagmansbury', *The Little World of London* (1857), Rick Allen, ed. *The Moving Pageant: A Literary Sourcebook on London Street-Life, 1700-1914* (London: Routledge, 1998).

interrogated: "'I'd like to shame her! Upon my life, 'twould be as good as a play to read her letters, the proud piece of silk and wax-work!'" (*Mayor* 332). The possibility of a revelation here is analogous to a play, a show, part of the same unreality embodied by Henry Knight's Humanity Show, where semblance is confused with fact, and the women in the alley take on the characteristics of the butcher's meat for sale on the stalls. The artistic potential of revelation and exhibition are extended when viewed in the context of the prostitute 'Jenny'. Under the gaze of her 'scholar-john' Jenny's visage is altered, and reminiscent of the schizophrenic face of Rossetti's *Helen of Troy*, she becomes 'the gilded aureole/In which our highest painters place/Some living woman's simple face' (ll. 231-33). At the end of the same stanza however the simple woman is 'the body and soul which by/Man's pitiless doom must now comply/With lifelong hell' (ll. 243-245). So the woman's body, whether appropriated to act as a repository for male desecration, disease and decay; or aestheticized as an object of female deification and erotic desire, remains under the manipulative power that originates in the sexual hierarchies that inform Victorian culture.

The manufacture of Lucetta's image duplicates the schizophrenic nature of this narrative. The 'body' is eventually discovered in the river, and while Lucetta's actual life ebbs away, struck and weakened inevitably to death by the revelation of her fallen past, the body found drowned by Henchard is what gives this narrative its physical evidence as truth. To the people of Peter's Finger Lucetta is indistinguishable from a grand entertainment, she becomes a wax-work, prefiguring the effigy that will be constructed for the skimmity-ride. The letters Jopp reads thereafter are not explicit however, but his auditors are confident enough in their interpretation of the allusions therein. Thus the

constructed layers of assumption are converted nonchalantly into fact. Just as the play within a play of *Hamlet* confirms suspicions of reality within reality; the fabrication of truth in the skimmity-ride, the binding of the effigies of Lucetta and Henchard, delivers that harsh reality upon Lucetta, which the body found verifies.

Misrepresentation is an integral component of the illicit exchanges that have been examined throughout this chapter. By literally binding Lucetta to Henchard through the catastrophic skimmity-ride, Hardy reiterates the theme of fallen women being unable to extricate themselves from their dilemma. Henry Knight's inability to distinguish Elfride from the women of dubious virtue in the alley behind his office because of her past indiscretions confirms this assumption. The appearance of the drover in *Found* informs our assumptions about the legitimacy of his claim on the female body because we are unable to imagine her being capable of autonomy. The 'thoughtful young man of the world' who is the narrator of 'Jenny' is able to presume and voice her thoughts given that we share his assumptions in our reading of her position. The grotesque effigy of Lucetta acts as a synecdoche for many of the women I have discussed throughout this thesis – they each in their own way are marked by their position and manipulated through misrepresentation to appear other than what they may actually be.

Rossetti's work interrogates Victorian images of women within a fluctuating dialectic at once convinced of male superiority and the right to ownership of a certain femininity, while championing the strength and aggression of another femininity, one that disrupts convention and the hierarchies of Victorian sexual

relations. In chapter's one and three I interrogated Rossetti's visions of femininity in both word and image and what startled me wasn't merely his consistency in his treatment of these themes, but the almost symbiotic nature of his representations. The recurring themes of religion and death, so vital to Victorian intellectual discourse, dominate his creative processes, and permeating the whole is the clandestine, coded, subjugated discourse of the female voice, one that Rossetti liberates yet perpetuates, and in this he is unique. To finish this analysis I will examine one final painting of Rossetti's, the culminating portrait in his 'goddess' series, and the most revealing in his deliberate engagement with the narrative of the schizophrenic face forced onto Victorian womanhood.

The *Astarte Syriaca* [Plate 35] is an extraordinary painting, one of the last Rossetti completed before his death. It has been described variously as Rossetti's tribute to 'the eternal female principle'[36], and 'an extreme of abstraction'.[37] In the gallery this painting, nearly two metres high, dominates the spectator: the life-size figure reinforces the vision of supreme goddess. The artist himself is reported to have held this above all his work: 'I think my brother was always wont to regard this as his most exalted performance'.[38] The painting is described as 'uncanny in its perfect symmetry'[39], and while this is a quite acceptable appraisal of this painting's artistic dimension and appearance, I propose that the symbiosis this painting represents offers a connection between

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36. Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987), p. 128.

37. Julian Treuherz, Elizabeth Prettejohn, and Edwin Becker, eds., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Amsterdam and Liverpool: Waanders Publishers, Zwolle Van Gogh Museum, and the Walker Gallery, 2003), p. 214.

38. ibid.

39. ibid.

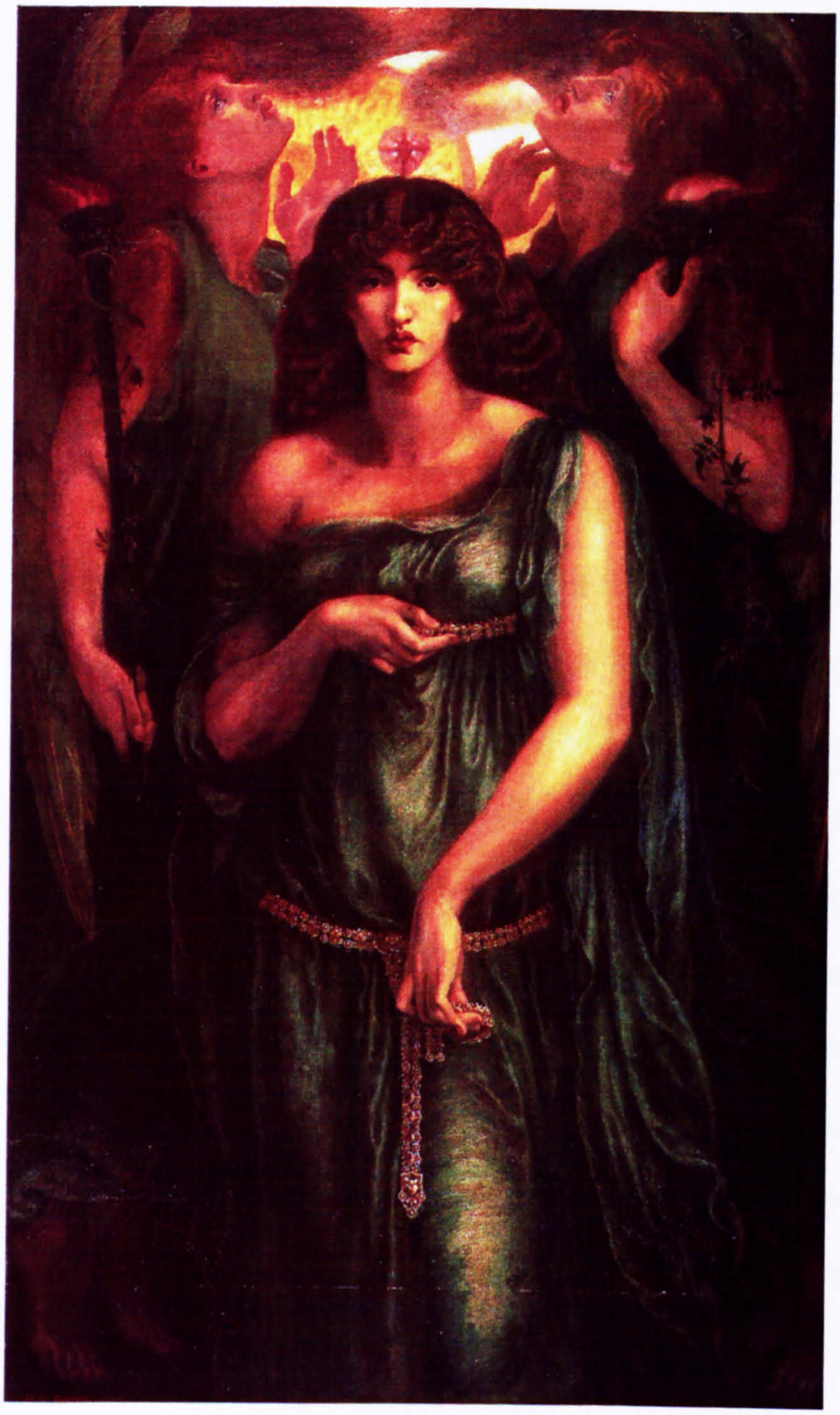

Plate 35. *Astarte Syriaca.*
1877 oil on canvas, 182.9 x 106.7cm
Manchester City Galleries.

Rossetti's engagement with the discourse of Victorian sexuality, and the resulting creative reaction to that discourse.

The pre-textual narrative of this painting is obscure even for Rossetti. The portrait of an ancient Syrian goddess of love, Astarte, is an elemental painting of the deity flanked by two attendants and backed by the twin symbols of sun and moon. Critical appraisal of this work points to its resemblance to Michelangelo or the Mannerist painters in the 'long, powerful limbs', and the 'extreme elongation of the fingers and the bending of the joints'; yet '[T]he face is instantly recognizable as that of Jane Morris'.[41] The result is by no means a beautiful portrait, the model doesn't provoke the erotic overtones of the sumptuous *Lady Lilith* in her bower of decadence; nor does this portrait offer the cruel beauty of Annie Miller as *Helen of Troy* only to undermine her through her damaged face. The flanking attendants frame a confused background half obscured by the dirty smoke of the dull flaming torches they bear, and the head of the goddess is capped by a curiously crude symbol in front of a flaming sun that resembles a large slice of citrus fruit. What is fascinating and revealing about this painting is Rossetti's deliberate focus on the intensity of the face, both in the portrait and in the accompanying sonnet:

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

Torch-bearing, her sweet ministers compel

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41. ibid.

> All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea
> The witnesses of Beauty's face to be:
> That face, of Love's all-penetrative spell
> Amulet, talisman, and oracle,—
> Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery. (*Works* 226)

Whereas in the other sonnets for pictures I have examined Rossetti has provided a narrative to assist the spectator with their reading of the image, in this sonnet the emphasis lies firmly in directing the reader to assimilate the portrait in physical terms. Thus the sonnet can be read in similar terms as those I discussed with relation to Dante's vision of Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* which, as I argued in chapter three, Rossetti misinterpreted. Here the reader is directed first to the 'twofold girdle' clasping the 'infinite boon' of breasts, hips and waist, and the promise of a 'bliss' reminiscent of Fazio's 'Paradise', before moving from the neck to the lips and eyes.

It is the face that captivates the viewer of this goddess, and it is recognisably the face of Jane Morris, the woman whose features Rossetti knew so intimately that he often painted her from his own sketches, particularly when her sitting for him became awkward due to his estrangement from her husband. Her face is so arresting, however, not because it is so familiar to us, but because it has been so emphatically defamiliarised, exaggerated into Jane's disturbing doppelganger, at once her and something disturbingly other than her. The image oscillates between the face of the woman goddess, woman as symbol, and the face of Jane, thus perpetuating a cycle of representation and misrepresentation, appropriation and misappropriation, constantly confusing the distinction between what we see and what we know, so vital to the process of reading, or misreading Rossetti's art. Surtees lists no fewer than 10 studies for this

particular painting, and it is through these studies and numerous sketches that Rossetti reveals once again the duality in representation of the Victorian woman I have identified.[1] This effect is different from the Blue Bower portraits of Fanny Cornforth as *Bocca Baciata, Fazio's Mistress*, or *Lady Lilith*. In those portraits Rossetti may have 'dressed' the prostitute as I have argued, and he may have interrogated issues of framing and confinement of the female body, but nowhere during that period did he alter the physical appearance of the model's face the way he does in *Astarte Syriaca*, whose accentuated features take her beyond the realm of erotic voyeurism, while the obscure reference to an ancient deity also removes any narrative power it might have held over the Victorian spectator of the painting.

Plates 36 and 37 indicate that Rossetti was extremely capable of drawing this face, indeed his sketches of this type are perhaps among the finest work he accomplished. The deliberate creation of two countenances from one woman's face becomes a vital component of Rossetti's work when viewed in the context of the schizophrenic face I have observed in *Helen of Troy* or the prostitute 'Jenny', or of the mysterious appearance of Lady Dedlock in another woman's clothing, and is embodied by the effigy of Lucetta Farfrae created for the skimmity-ride in Hardy's novel. In 'Jenny' the young narrator was horrified by the realisation that the sleeping prostitute so resembled his own cousin Nell, and his subsequent acknowledgement that they share common feminine kindred: 'honour and dishonour made,/Two sister vessels. Here is one./It makes a goblin of the sun' (ll. 204-06).

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1. Surtees, I, 146-148. These include studies for the attendants and the model's hands.

Plate 36. Study for *The Day Dream*.
1878 pastel and black chalk, 104.8 x 76.9cm
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Plate 37. Detail from *Mrs William Morris*.
1865 black chalk, 41.4 x 31.9cm
Private Collection.

Rossetti's deliberate manufacture of a doppelganger face for the familiar Jane Morris provides further evidence of his engagement with the coded sexual discourse between men and women. One could argue that there are in fact four portraits of Jane Morris in this painting, the two faces evident in the Astarte herself, and the two attendants who closely resemble the deity. The detailed images reproduced in Plates 38 and 39 confirm the subtle alterations to the face Rossetti makes between goddess and woman. This construction of a goddess is created within a physical template of the Mrs. Morris that has become so familiar to spectators of Victorian painting. When removed from the surrounding visual and verbal excess, the accompaniments provided in the painting by the flanking attendants, the sun and moon, flaming torches and their smoke, and even by the powerful arms and strange robe the goddess wears, this portrait is unequivocally *about* the face, her face. The effect is the same in the sonnet. When the confusing excess regarding the 'Mystery' of 'Astarte', Venus', and 'Aphrodite' are removed; once we disregard the 'Amulate, Talisman and Oracle' that clutter this portrait, what remains is designed to concentrate the spectator on the face, and it is part of the essential process when viewing Rossetti's work that we see not one face, but two. In the word-image construction that is *Astarte Syriaca* the conflicting concepts of goddess, wife, sweetheart and whore collide in a climactic moment, and when one strips away the superfluity offered by Rossetti in both word and image, this discourse points inevitably to the confusion between reality and fantasy that while dominating his work, also situates it at the heart of the Victorian discourse of sexuality. This monumental portrait of an ancient goddess may indeed be perfectly symmetrical in its artistic shape, but the symbiosis it suggests between

Rossetti's contradictory notions of femininity confirms my appraisal of his work as negotiating with more complex Victorian intellectual issues than have previously been argued.

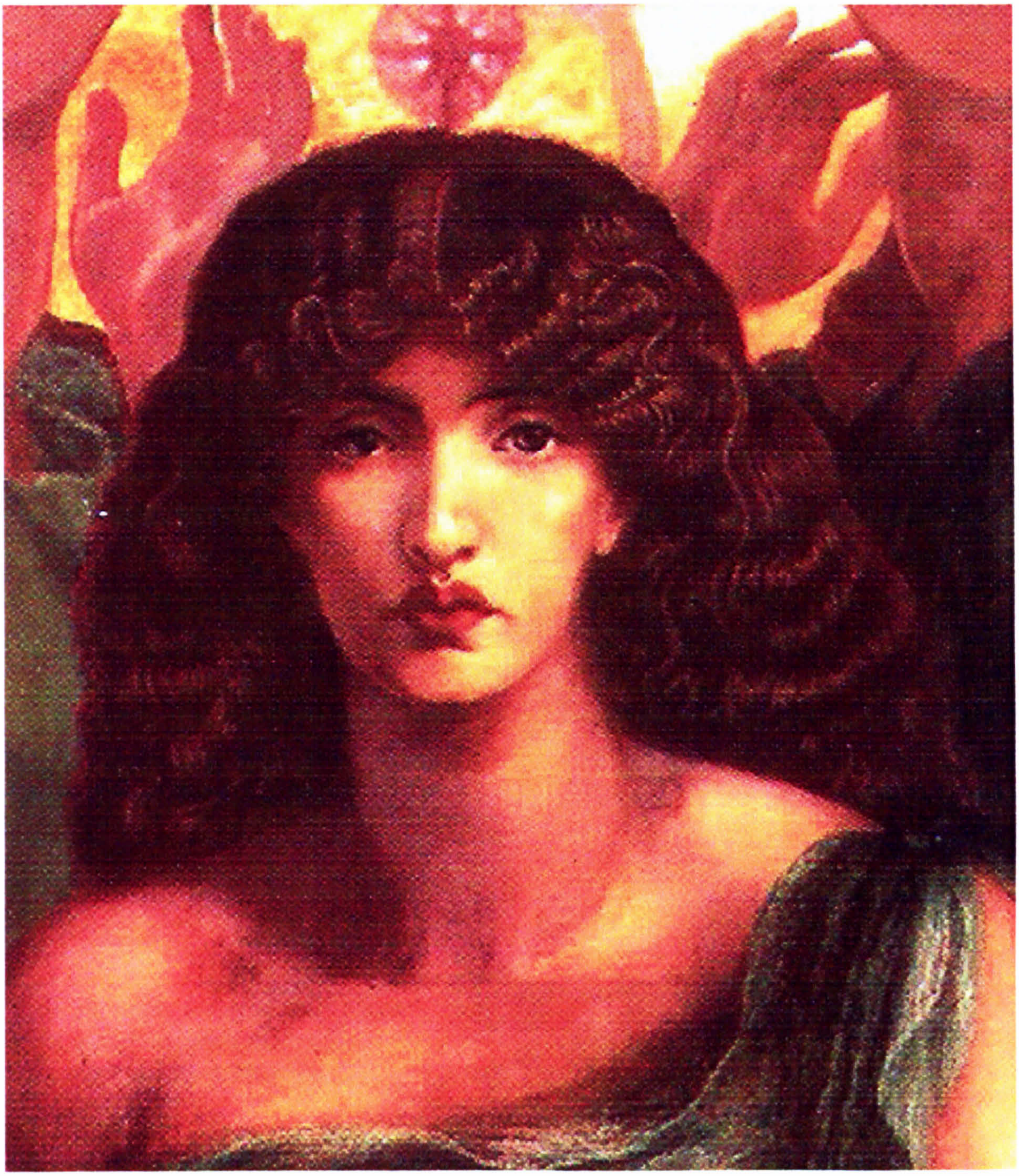

Plate 38. Detail from *Astarte Syriaca*.

Plate 39. Study for *Astarte Syriaca*.
1875 pastel on pale-green paper, 54.6 x 45cm
Victoria and Albert Museum.

APPENDICES

1.
Fazio Degli Uberti (trans. Dante Gabriel Rossetti).

Canzone
His Portrait of his Lady, Angiola of Verona

I look at the crisp golden-threaded hair
Whereof, to thrall my heart, Love twists a net:
Using at times a string of pearls for bait,
And sometimes with a single rose therein.
I look into her eyes which unaware
Through mine own eyes to my heart penetrate;
Their splendour, that is excellently great,
To the sun's radiance seeming near akin,
Yet from herself a sweeter light to win.
So that I, gazing on that lovely one,
Discourse in this wise with my secret thought:—
"Woe's me! why am I not,
Even as my wish, alone with her alone,—
That hair of hers, so heavily uplaid,
To shed down braid by braid,
And make myself two mirrors of her eyes
Within whose light all other glory dies?"

I look at the amorous beautiful mouth,
The spacious forehead which her locks enclose,
The small white teeth, the straight and shapely nose,
And the clear brows of a sweet pencilling.
And then the thought within me gains full growth,
Saying, "Be careful that thy glance now goes
Between her lips, red as an open rose,
Quite full of every dear and precious thing;
And listen to her gracious answering,
Born of the gentle mind that in her dwells,
Which from all things can glean the nobler half.
Look thou when she doth laugh
How much her laugh is sweeter than aught else."
Thus evermore my spirit makes avow
Touching her mouth; till now
I would give anything that I possess,
Only to hear her mouth say frankly, "Yes."

I look at her white easy neck, so well
From shoulders and from bosom lifted out;
And at her round cleft chin, which beyond doubt

No fancy in the world could have design'd.
And then, with longing grown more voluble,
"Were it not pleasant now," pursues my thought,
"To have that neck within thy two arms caught
And kiss it till the mark were left behind?"
Then, urgently: "The eyelids of thy mind
Open thou: 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 there beyond is Paradise.
Thus, if thou fix thine eyes,
Of a truth certainly thou must infer
That every earthly joy abides in her."

I look at the large arms, so lithe and round,—
At the hands, which are white and rosy too,—
At the long fingers, clasped and woven through,
Bright with the ring which one of them doth wear.
Then my thought whispers: "Were thy body wound
Within those arms, as loving women's do,
In all thy veins were born a life made new
Which thou couldst find no language to declare.
Behold if any picture can compare
With her just limbs, each fit in shape and size,
Or match her angel's colour like a pearl.
She is a gentle girl
To see; yet when it needs, her scorn can rise,
Meek, bashful, and in all things temperate,
Her virtue holds its state;
In whose least act there is that gift express'd
Which of all reverence makes her worthiest."

Soft as a peacock steps she, or as a stork
Straight on herself, taller and statelier:
'Tis a good sight how every limb doth stir
For ever in a womanly sweet way.
"Open thy soul to see God's perfect work,"
(My thought begins afresh), "and look at her
When with some lady-friend exceeding fair
She bends and mingles arms and locks in play.
Even as all lesser lights vanish away,
When the sun moves, before his dazzling face,
So is this lady brighter than all these.
How should she fail to please,—
Love's self being no more than her loveliness?
In all her ways some beauty springs to view;
All that she loves to do
Tends alway to her honour's single scope;
And only from good deeds she draws her hope."

Song, thou canst surely say, without pretence,
That since the first fair woman ever made,
Not one can have display'd
More power upon all hearts than this one doth;
Because in her are both
Loveliness and the soul's true excellence:—
And yet (woe's me!) is pity absent thence?

2.
Robert Browning, 'My Last Duchess'.

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said
'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, 'Her mantle laps
'Over my Lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
'Must never hope to reproduce the faint
'Half-flush that dies along her throat:' such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 't was all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, —good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
'Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

'Or there exceed the mark'—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your Master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, Sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me

3.
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'The Portrait'.

This is her picture as she was:
It seems a thing to wonder on,
As though mine image in the glass
Should tarry when myself am gone.
I gaze until she seems to stir,—
Until mine eyes almost aver
That now, even now, the sweet lips part
To breathe the words of the sweet heart:—
And yet the earth is over her.
Alas! even such the thin-drawn ray
That makes the prison-depths more rude,—
The drip of water night and day
Giving a tongue to solitude.
Yet only this, of love's whole prize,
Remains; save what in mournful guise
Takes counsel with my soul alone,—
Save what is secret and unknown,
Below the earth, above the skies.
In painting her I shrined her face
'Mid mystic trees, where light falls in
Hardly at all; a covert place
Where you might think to find a din
Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
Wandering, and many a shape whose name
Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
And your own footsteps meeting you,
And all things going as they came.

A deep dim wood; and there she stands
As in that wood that day: for so
Was the still movement of her hands
And such the pure line's gracious flow.
And passing fair the type must seem,
Unknown the presence and the dream.
'Tis she: though of herself, alas!
Less than her shadow on the grass
Or than her image in the stream.
That day we met there, I and she
One with the other all alone;
And we were blithe; yet memory
Saddens those hours, as when the moon
Looks upon daylight. And with her
I stopped to drink the spring-water,
Athirst where other waters sprang:
And where the echo is, she sang,—
My soul another echo there.
But when that hour my soul won strength
For words whose silence wastes and kills,
Dull raindrops smote us, and at length
Thundered the heat within the hills.
That eve I spoke those words again
Beside the pelted window-pane;
And there she hearkened what I said,
With under-glances that surveyed
The empty pastures blind with rain.

Next day the memories of these things,
Like leaves through which a bird has flown,
Still vibrated with Love's warm wings;
Till I must make them all my own
And paint this picture. So, 'twixt ease
Of talk and sweet long silences,
She stood among the plants in bloom
At windows of a summer room,
To feign the shadow of the trees.
And as I wrought, while all above
And all around was fragrant air,
In the sick burthen of my love
It seemed each sun-thrilled blossom there
Beat like a heart among the leaves.
O heart that never beats nor heaves,
In that one darkness lying still,
What now to thee my love's great will
Or the fine web the sunshine weaves?
For now doth daylight disavow
Those days—nought left to see or hear.
Only in solemn whispers now
At night-time these things reach mine ear;

When the leaf-shadows at a breath
Shrink in the road, and all the heath,
Forest and water, far and wide,
In limpid starlight glorified,
Lie like the mystery of death.
Last night at last I could have slept,
And yet delayed my sleep till dawn,
Still wandering. Then it was I wept:
For unawares I came upon
Those glades where once she walked with me:
And as I stood there suddenly,
All wan with traversing the night,
Upon the desolate verge of light
Yearned loud the iron-bosomed sea.
Even so, where Heaven holds breath and hears
The beating heart of Love's own breast,—
Where round the secret of all spheres
All angels lay their wings to rest,—
How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,
When, by the new birth borne abroad
Throughout the music of the suns,
It enters in her soul at once
And knows the silence there for God!
Here with her face doth memory sit
Meanwhile, and wait the day's decline,
Till other eyes shall look from it,
Eyes of the spirit's Palestine,
Even than the old gaze tenderer:
While hopes and aims long lost with her
Stand round her image side by side,
Like tombs of pilgrims that have died
About the Holy Sepulchre.

4.
The Blessed Damozel.
The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.
Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn.
Herseemed she scarce had been a day
One of God's choristers;

The wonder was not yet quite gone
From that still look of hers;
Albeit, to them she left, her day
Had counted as ten years.
(To one, it is ten years of years.
. . . Yet now, and in this place,
Surely she leaned o'er me—her hair
Fell all about my face. . .
Nothing: the autumn-fall of leaves.
The whole year sets apace.)
It was the rampart of God's house
That she was standing on;
By God built over the sheer depth
The which is Space begun;
So high, that looking downward thence
She scarce could see the sun.
It lies in Heaven, across the flood
Of ether, as a bridge.
Beneath, the tides of day and night
With flame and darkness ridge
The void, as low as where this earth
Spins like a fretful midge.

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

And still she bowed herself and stooped
Out of the circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she leaned on warm,
And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.
From the fixed place of Heaven she saw
Time like a pulse shake fierce
Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove
Within the gulf to pierce
Its path; and now she spoke as when
The stars sang in their spheres.
The sun was gone now; the curled moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
She spoke through the still weather.
Her voice was like the voice of the stars
Had when they sang together.
(Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song,
Strove not her accents there,

Fain to be hearkened? When those bells
Possessed the mid-day air,
Strove not her steps to reach my side
Down all the echoing stair?)
'I wish that he were come to me,
For he will come,' she said.
'Have I not prayed in Heaven?—on earth,
Lord, Lord, has he not pray'd?
Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
And shall I feel afraid?
'When round his head the aureole clings,
And he is clothed in white,
I'll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light;
As unto a stream we will step down,
And bathe there in God's sight.
'We two will stand beside that shrine,
Occult, withheld, untrod,
Whose lamps are stirred continually
With prayer sent up to God;
And see our old prayers, granted, melt
Each like a little cloud.

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

'And I myself will teach to him,
I myself, lying so,
The songs I sing here; which his voice
Shall pause in, hushed and slow,
And find some knowledge at each pause,
Or some new thing to know.'
(Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st!
Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
Was but its love for thee?)
'We two,' she said, 'will seek the groves
Where the lady Mary is,
With her five handmaidens, whose names
Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
Margaret and Rosalys.
'Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
And foreheads garlanded;

Into the fine cloth white like flame
Weaving the golden thread,
To fashion the birth-robes for them
Who are just born, being dead.
'He shall fear, haply, and be dumb:
Then will I lay my cheek
To his, and tell about our love,
Not once abashed or weak:
And the dear Mother will approve
My pride, and let me speak.
'Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
To Him round whom all souls
Kneel, the clear-ranged unnumbered heads
Bowed with their aureoles:
And angels meeting us shall sing
To their citherns and citoles.
'There will I ask of Christ the Lord
Thus much for him and me:—
Only to live as once on earth
With Love,—only to be,
As then awhile, for ever now
Together, I and he.'
She gazed and listened and then said,
Less sad of speech than mild,—
'All this is when he comes.' She ceased.
The light thrilled towards her, fill'd
With angels in strong level flight.
Her eyes prayed, and she smil'd.
(I saw her smile.) But soon their path
Was vague in distant spheres:
And then she cast her arms along
The golden barriers,
And laid her face between her hands,
And wept. (I heard her tears.)

5.
Jenny
Vengeance of Jenny's case! Fie on her! Never name her, child!—
(Mrs. Quickly.)

Lazy laughing languid Jenny,
Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea,
Whose head upon my knee to-night
Rests for a while, as if grown light
With all our dances and the sound
To which the wild tunes spun you round:

Fair Jenny mine, the thoughtless queen
Of kisses which the blush between
Could hardly make much daintier;
Whose eyes are as blue skies, whose hair
Is countless gold incomparable:
Fresh flower, scarce touched with signs that tell
Of Love's exuberant hotbed:—Nay,
Poor flower left torn since yesterday
Until to-morrow leave you bare;
Poor handful of bright spring-water
Flung in the whirlpool's shrieking face;
Poor shameful Jenny, full of grace
Thus with your head upon my knee;—
Whose person or whose purse may be
The lodestar of your reverie?

This room of yours, my Jenny, looks
A change from mine so full of books,
Whose serried ranks hold fast, forsooth,
So many captive hours of youth,—
The hours they thieve from day and night
To make one's cherished work come right,
And leave it wrong for all their theft,
Even as to-night my work was left:
Until I vowed that since my brain
And eyes of dancing seemed so fain,
My feet should have some dancing too:—
And thus it was I met with you.
Well, I suppose 'twas hard to part,
For here I am. And now, sweetheart,
You seem too tired to get to bed.

It was a careless life I led
When rooms like this were scarce so strange
Not long ago. What breeds the change,—
The many aims or the few years?
Because to-night it all appears
Something I do not know again.

The cloud's not danced out of my brain,—
The cloud that made it turn and swim
While hour by hour the books grew dim.
Why, Jenny, as I watch you there,—
For all your wealth of loosened hair,
Your silk ungirdled and unlac'd
And warm sweets open to the waist,
All golden in the lamplight's gleam,—

You know not what a book you seem,
Half-read by lightning in a dream!
How should you know, my Jenny? Nay,
And I should be ashamed to say:—
Poor beauty, so well worth a kiss!
But while my thought runs on like this
With wasteful whims more than enough,
I wonder what you're thinking of.

If of myself you think at all,
What is the thought?—conjectural
On sorry matters best unsolved?—
Or inly is each grace revolved
To fit me with a lure?—or (sad
To think!) perhaps you're merely glad
That I'm not drunk or ruffianly
And let you rest upon my knee.

For sometimes, were the truth confess'd,
You're thankful for a little rest,—
Glad from the crush to rest within,
From the heart-sickness and the din
Where envy's voice at virtue's pitch
Mocks you because your gown is rich;
And from the pale girl's dumb rebuke,
Whose ill-clad grace and toil-worn look
Proclaim the strength that keeps her weak,
And other nights than yours bespeak;
And from the wise unchildish elf,
To schoolmate lesser than himself
Pointing you out, what thing you are:—
Yes, from the daily jeer and jar,
From shame and shame's outbraving too,
Is rest not sometimes sweet to you?—
But most from the hatefulness of man,
Who spares not to end what he began,
Whose acts are ill and his speech ill,
Who, having used you at his will,
Thrusts you aside, as when I dine
I serve the dishes and the wine.

Well, handsome Jenny mine, sit up:
I've filled our glasses, let us sup,
And do not let me think of you,
Lest shame of yours suffice for two.
What, still so tired? Well, well then, keep
Your head there, so you do not sleep;
But that the weariness may pass
And leave you merry, take this glass.
Ah! lazy lily hand, more bless'd

If ne'er in rings it had been dress'd
Nor ever by a glove conceal'd!

Behold the lilies of the field,
They toil not neither do they spin;
(So doth the ancient text begin,—
Not of such rest as one of these
Can share.) Another rest and ease
Along each summer-sated path
From its new lord the garden hath,
Than that whose spring in blessings ran
Which praised the bounteous husbandman,
Ere yet, in days of hankering breath,
The lilies sickened unto death.

What, Jenny, are your lilies dead?
Aye, and the snow-white leaves are spread
Like winter on the garden-bed.
But you had roses left in May,—
They were not gone too. Jenny, nay,
But must your roses die, and those
Their purfled buds that should unclose?
Even so; the leaves are curled apart,
Still red as from the broken heart,
And here's the naked stem of thorns.

Nay, nay, mere words. Here nothing warns
As yet of winter. Sickness here
Or want alone could waken fear,—
Nothing but passion wrings a tear.
Except when there may rise unsought
Haply at times a passing thought
Of the old days which seem to be
Much older than any history
That is written in any book;
When she would lie in fields and look
Along the ground through the blown grass
And wonder where the city was,
Far out of sight, whose broil and bale
They told her then for a child's tale.

Jenny, you know the city now.
A child can tell the tale there, how
Some things which are not yet enroll'd
In market-lists are bought and sold
Even till the early Sunday light,
When Saturday night is market-night
Everywhere, be it dry or wet,

And market-night in the Haymarket.
Our learned London children know,
Poor Jenny, all your pride and woe;
Have seen your lifted silken skirt
Advertise dainties through the dirt;
Have seen your coach-wheels splash rebuke
On virtue; and have learned your look
When, wealth and health slipped past, you stare
Along the streets alone, and there,
Round the long park, across the bridge,
The cold lamps at the pavement's edge
Wind on together and apart,
A fiery serpent for your heart.

Let the thoughts pass, an empty cloud!
Suppose I were to think aloud,—
What if to her all this were said?
Why, as a volume seldom read
Being opened halfway shuts again,
So might the pages of her brain
Be parted at such words, and thence
Close back upon the dusty sense.
For is there hue or shape defin'd
In Jenny's desecrated mind,
Where all contagious currents meet,
A Lethe of the middle street?
Nay, it reflects not any face,
Nor sound is in its sluggish pace,
But as they coil those eddies clot,
And night and day remember not.

Why, Jenny, you're asleep at last!—
Asleep, poor Jenny, hard and fast,—
So young and soft and tired; so fair,
With chin thus nestled in your hair,
Mouth quiet, eyelids almost blue
As if some sky of dreams shone through!

Just as another woman sleeps!
Enough to throw one's thoughts in heaps
Of doubt and horror,—what to say
Or think,—this awful secret sway,
The potter's power over the clay!
Of the same lump (it has been said)
For honour and dishonour made,
Two sister vessels. Here is one.

My cousin Nell is fond of fun,
And fond of dress, and change, and praise,

So mere a woman in her ways:
And if her sweet eyes rich in youth
Are like her lips that tell the truth,
My cousin Nell is fond of love.
And she's the girl I'm proudest of.
Who does not prize her, guard her well?
The love of change, in cousin Nell,
Shall find the best and hold it dear:
The unconquered mirth turn quieter
Not through her own, through others' woe:
The conscious pride of beauty glow
Beside another's pride in her,
One little part of all they share.
For Love himself shall ripen these
In a kind soil to just increase
Through years of fertilizing peace.

Of the same lump (as it is said)
For honour and dishonour made,
Two sister vessels. Here is one.

It makes a goblin of the sun.

So pure,—so fall'n! How dare to think
Of the first common kindred link?
Yet, Jenny, till the world shall burn
It seems that all things take their turn;
And who shall say but this fair tree
May need, in changes that may be,
Your children's children's charity?
Scorned then, no doubt, as you are scorn'd!
Shall no man hold his pride forewarn'd
Till in the end, the Day of Days,
At Judgment, one of his own race,
As frail and lost as you, shall rise,—
His daughter, with his mother's eyes?

How Jenny's clock ticks on the shelf!
Might not the dial scorn itself
That has such hours to register?
Yet as to me, even so to her
Are golden sun and silver moon,
In daily largesse of earth's boon,
Counted for life-coins to one tune.
And if, as blindfold fates are toss'd,
Through some one man this life be lost,
Shall soul not somehow pay for soul?

Fair shines the gilded aureole
In which our highest painters place

Some living woman's simple face.
And the stilled features thus descried
As Jenny's long throat droops aside,—
The shadows where the cheeks are thin,
And pure wide curve from ear to chin,—
With Raffael's, Leonardo's hand
To show them to men's souls, might stand,
Whole ages long, the whole world through,
For preachings of what God can do.
What has man done here? How atone,
Great God, for this which man has done?
And for the body and soul which by
Man's pitiless doom must now comply
With lifelong hell, what lullaby
Of sweet forgetful second birth
Remains? All dark. No sign on earth
What measure of God's rest endows
The many mansions of his house.

If but a woman's heart might see
Such erring heart unerringly
For once! But that can never be.

Like a rose shut in a book
In which pure women may not look,
For its base pages claim control
To crush the flower within the soul;
Where through each dead rose-leaf that clings,
Pale as transparent Psyche-wings,
To the vile text, are traced such things
As might make lady's cheek indeed
More than a living rose to read;
So nought save foolish foulness may
Watch with hard eyes the sure decay;
And so the life-blood of this rose,
Puddled with shameful knowledge, flows
Through leaves no chaste hand may unclose:
Yet still it keeps such faded show
Of when 'twas gathered long ago,
That the crushed petals' lovely grain,
The sweetness of the sanguine stain,
Seen of a woman's eyes, must make
Her pitiful heart, so prone to ache,
Love roses better for its sake:—
Only that this can never be:—
Even so unto her sex is she.

Yet, Jenny, looking long at you,
The woman almost fades from view.
A cipher of man's changeless sum

Of lust, past, present, and to come,
Is left. A riddle that one shrinks
To challenge from the scornful sphinx.

Like a toad within a stone
Seated while Time crumbles on;
Which sits there since the earth was curs'd
For Man's transgression at the first;
Which, living through all centuries,
Not once has seen the sun arise;
Whose life, to its cold circle charmed,
The earth's whole summers have not warmed;
Which always—whitherso the stone
Be flung—sits there, deaf, blind, alone;—
Aye, and shall not be driven out
Till that which shuts him round about
Break at the very Master's stroke,
And the dust thereof vanish as smoke,
And the seed of Man vanish as dust:—
Even so within this world is Lust.

Come, come, what use in thoughts like this?
Poor little Jenny, good to kiss,—
You'd not believe by what strange roads
Thought travels, when your beauty goads
A man to-night to think of toads!
Jenny, wake up . . . . Why, there's the dawn!

And there's an early waggon drawn
To market, and some sheep that jog
Bleating before a barking dog;
And the old streets come peering through
Another night that London knew;
And all as ghostlike as the lamps.

So on the wings of day decamps
My last night's frolic. Glooms begin
To shiver off as lights creep in
Past the gauze curtains half drawn-to,
And the lamp's doubled shade grows blue,—
Your lamp, my Jenny, kept alight,
Like a wise virgin's, all one night!
And in the alcove coolly spread
Glimmers with dawn your empty bed;
And yonder your fair face I see
Reflected lying on my knee,
Where teems with first foreshadowings
Your pier-glass scrawled with diamond rings:
And on your bosom all night worn
Yesterday's rose now droops forlorn,

But dies not yet this summer morn.

And now without, as if some word
Had called upon them that they heard,
The London sparrows far and nigh
Clamour together suddenly;
And Jenny's cage-bird grown awake
Here in their song his part must take,
Because here too the day doth break.

And somehow in myself the dawn
Among stirred clouds and veils withdrawn
Strikes greyly on her. Let her sleep.
But will it wake her if I heap
These cushions thus beneath her head
Where my knee was? No,—there's your bed,
My Jenny, while you dream. And there
I lay among your golden hair,
Perhaps the subject of your dreams,
These golden coins.

For still one deems
That Jenny's flattering sleep confers
New magic on the magic purse,—
Grim web, how clogged with shrivelled flies!
Between the threads fine fumes arise
And shape their pictures in the brain.
There roll no streets in glare and rain,
Nor flagrant man-swine whets his tusk;
But delicately sighs in musk
The homage of the dim boudoir;
Or like a palpitating star
Thrilled into song, the opera-night
Breathes faint in the quick pulse of light;
Or at the carriage-window shine
Rich wares for choice; or, free to dine,
Whirls through its hour of health (divine
For her) the concourse of the Park.
And though in the discounted dark
Her functions there and here are one,
Beneath the lamps and in the sun
There reigns at least the acknowledged belle
Apparelled beyond parallel.
Ah Jenny, yes, we know your dreams.

For even the Paphian Venus seems
A goddess o'er the realms of love,
When silver-shrined in shadowy grove:
Aye, or let offerings nicely plac'd
But hide Priapus to the waist,

And whose looks on him shall see
An eligible deity.

Why, Jenny, waking here alone
May help you to remember one,
Though all the memory's long outworn
Of many a double-pillowed morn.
I think I see you when you wake,
And rub your eyes for me, and shake
My gold, in rising, from your hair,
A Danaë for a moment there.

Jenny, my love rang true! for still
Love at first sight is vague, until
That tinkling makes him audible.

And must I mock you to the last,
Ashamed of my own shame,—aghast
Because some thoughts not born amiss
Rose at a poor fair face like this?
Well, of such thoughts so much I know:
In my life, as in hers, they show,
By a far gleam which I may near,
A dark path I can strive to clear

Only one kiss. Good-bye, my dear.

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