MUSES, SACRED AND PROFANE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMAGERY IN THE PAINTING OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

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To my parents,

James and Frances Ticchi

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Kent, Ohio — Donna Maria Herlehy

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

(All of the above illustrations may be found in Virginia Surtees' The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Volume Two. London: Oxford University Press. 1971.)

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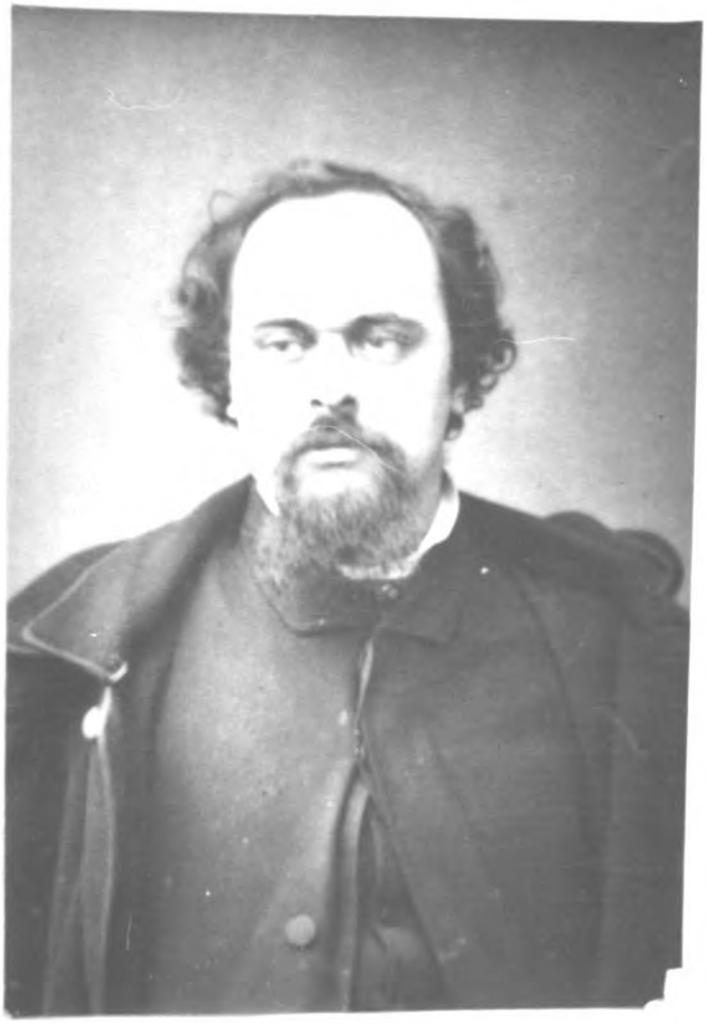

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI (1828-1882)

"Men tell me that sleep has many dreams;

but all my life I have dreamt one dream alone."

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to trace the development of this very singular dream as it manifests itself in the painting of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Victorian painter and poet (1828-1882). I have approached the problem historically by investigating the artist's idealism from his Pre-Raphaelite years to its gradual dissolution in delerious and melancholic middle age. In the course of my research, I discovered that (with the questionable exception of H. C. Marillier's biography) no critical evaluation of the imagery in Rossetti's painting ever has been made. Plenty has been written about Rossetti as both man and poet, yet very little about his painting per se.[1] This study, therefore, is an attempt to discuss thoroughly the imagery in Rossetti's painting with several in-depth analyses of individual works.

I have related both the poetical and biographical aspects for I want this to be not only a cogent study, but a well-rounded one as well. Rossetti's literary works have been indispensable for this purpose, for his poetry lays in the basic Neo-Platonic concepts that are visualized in his paintings. And, to be sure, the very nature of the poetic medium offers great insight into the evocative quality of the painted image. Moreover, it is often difficult to separate the painter, the poet, and the man, for the three are so closely intertwined, each aspect reacting

to and enhancing the other (much like the conception of the Trinity, a comparison that I am sure Rossetti himself would have liked).

A study of the imagery in the painting of Rossetti is essentially a study of his conception of woman. Rossetti worshipped the Platonic absolutes of Love and Beauty, and devoted his life to their attainment. Woman, for him, became the iconographic device with which to express these intangible ideals. And in his personal life, one learns that women were not only the symbols for, but also the actual means by which he tried to find salvation. At first, his conception of woman corresponds closely to the Medieval vision of courtly love, but gradually it develops into a hierarchical system of good and evil wherein he constructs the prototypes of the sacred and the profane. And finally, there comes the breakdown of the man and his dream which is reflected in the decadence and mysticism of his late work.

Moreover, by studying Rossetti's painting, one becomes enchanted by his early naivete, admires deeply the nobility of his futile search, and lastly despairs over the suicidal death wish that becomes the last twisted effort of a very desperate and disillusioned old man. One is amazed at the coherence of the underlying philosophy in all of Rossetti's imagery--be it painted or poetic--and how that man so tragically lived that philosophy. Perhaps this is the reason that it has been so difficult to write about his painting alone.

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[1] Virginia Surtees' two volume catalogue raisonne is an excellent record of the sum of all of Rossetti's art work. However, Surtees does not deal with the imagery within his painting. In keeping with the nature of a catalogue raisonne, her study is factual, not critical.

o. *Christina Rossetti* (Cat. no. 429)

Drawing of Christina Rossetti

"That indefinable sense of rest and wonder

which, when childhood is gone, poetry alone can recall."

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY IDEALS

In October of 1871, the critic Robert Buchanan published an article in The Contemporary Review entitled "The Fleshly School of Poetry."[1] This review sharply criticized the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti on the grounds of its base sensuality. Buchanan, writing under the pseudonum Thomas Maitland, objected to Rossetti's references to sexual encounters and his mention of parts of the female anatomy by equating sensuality with sinfulness and the fulfillment of human love with revolting lust. Herewith is a choice sampling of Buchanan's wrath:

> Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sexual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness...It is simply nasty.[2]

Buchanan, assuming the role of the self-righteous Victorian, morally sound yet sexually inhibited, naturally would condemn any artistic venture that was overtly sensual. What Buchanan probably had failed to realize, however, was that he was not so much attacking Rossetti's imagery as he was the artist's own personal philosophy of life.

For to Rossetti, the outward beauty (i.e. sensuality) of a woman was indicative of the virtue within, that virtue providing the route for salvation. Rossetti best expressed this inner ideal through explicit sensual syntax and imagery. He was not trying to titillate his public, but to share with them his own deeply felt conclusions on the human condition. That he used the iconography of lovers and beautiful women only served to cloud the issue. Literally, Buchanan could not see the forest for the trees.

In order to more fully understand how Rossetti arrived at these conclusions, it is necessary to investigate aspects of the artist's youth. Rossetti's ideals of love and the beautiful woman were nurtured by his father's interest in Dante to such an extent that he himself had been named for the poet. Gabriele Rossetti was an Italian political exile who taught his native tongue at Kings College, London, where the young Dante Gabriele later studied. To his son, he introduced the Italian poets of courtly love. The younger Rossetti translated much of this poetry, including Dante's Vita Nuova. He identified himself most strongly with his namesake, forming a lofty, idealistic view of love, and yearned that some day he too would love and be elevated by his own modern day Beatrice.

Besides the influence of his father, the young Rossetti was surrounded by a brother and two sisters of near precocity to his own. Christina Georgina (pl. 2) was later to become a well known poetess; and brother William Michael, a critic and biographer. Another sister, Maria

Francesca, also dabbled in poetry and would enter the Cloister. As children, the Rossetti's wrote and illustrated their own stories, and often acted out self-composed dramas. One account tells how Dante Gabriel became so involved with his particular role in such a play, that when his part called for his committing suicide, he actually stabbed himself, drawing blood. Such deep personal attachment to his work, indicative of later self-destruction, was to cause his mother, Frances Polidori Rossetti, to exclaim:

> ...my wish was that my husband should be distinguished for his intellect, and my children too. I have had my wish; and I now wish that there were a little less intellect in the family, so as to allow for a little more common sense.[3]

Much of the bittersweet imagery in Rossetti's mature work can be traced to his youthful interests in the Middle Ages. Rossetti, for in addition to Dante, was steeped in Sir Walter Scott's medieval romances, and wrote several of his own, including The Slave, Roderick and Rosalba, and Sir Hugh the Heron. All deal with the chivalrous boyhood theme of the fair maiden in distress who is rescued by the noble knight. In the execution of his good deed, the knight surmounts evil and becomes more pure as a result. Thus, even at an early age, Rossetti was to consider the woman in the lofty Medieval context, as the chaste being through whom the man could achieve a deeper nobility.

The concept of the heavenly lady assumed a more mature expression in the poem, The Blessed Damozel, written at the age of eighteen and later to be published in the Pre-Raphaelite organ, The Germ. The

poem deals with what is to become a typically Rossetti theme, that of the parted lovers. The idea no doubt was engendered through reading Edgar Allen Poe's The Raven, which he illustrated in 1846, and greatly admired. Rossetti's view is decidedly from Poe's, however, and is very female-oriented. Rather than deal with the grief of the man left behind as did Poe, he described the acute pain and loneliness that the departed woman experienced in heaven. Her role is more than that of a sweet and sorrowful girl, though. Rossetti conceives of her as a totally beautiful and feminine woman with the strength to elevate her lover on earth through the power of her love in heaven, that love being a major spiritual force. Rossetti's first major image coalesces here--that of the heavenly lady or blessed damozel who is capable of her lover's salvation, just as Beatrice was of Dante's.

To further enhance this courtly vision, Rossetti coated the poem with a multitude of Christian symbols, gleaned, no doubt, from his studies of the early Italian poets. In reference to the Cardinal and Theological virtues of the Church, he wrote:

> She had three lilies in her hand
> And the stars in her hair were seven. (ll. 5-6)

Whereas in Dante's day such symbols had commonly held, one-to-one associations, they had lost much of their special significance in Victorian England. Rather than serving as a source of enlightenment, these symbols acted as a shroud, weighing down the poem and baffling the reader. Rossetti was not trying to be esoteric. He was merely

attempting to coerce an image, and was doing so to the best of his abilities at this point. His images would mature with him.

Of the most importance regarding this poem, however, is the very way that it differs from Dante in the deep rooted sensuality of it all. Rossetti's vision of heaven is one in which lovers are forever reunited in each other's arms:

> Around her, lovers, newly met
> 'Mid deathless love's acclaims,
> Spoke evermore among themselves
> Their heart remembered names; (ll. 37-40)

This is in direct opposition to Dante's celestial white rose in Paradiso. Rossetti lavishly describes the physical characteristics of his blessed damozel, whereas Dante spoke only of Beatrice's uplifting graces.

> Her eyes were deeper than the depth
> Of waters stilled at even; (ll. 3-4)
> ...
> Her hair that lay along her back
> Was yellow like ripe corn. (ll. 11-12)

Thus, Rossetti's heaven is more an earthly paradise! Throughout his life he would seek heaven on earth through beatific women and, when this failed, would dream of his afterlife as one in which he would be reunited in passionate embrace with the perfect woman forever. Herein lies the key to understanding Rossetti. Heaven and earth were interchangeable to him. Heaven on earth was possible through the right woman who would elevate him through the spiritual power of her love; and heaven above became the everlasting union of the earthly passion. Salvation, therefore, be it ephemeral happiness on earth or ecstasy in paradise, was only possible through the love of a beautiful woman.

Underlying all of this surface sensuality, however, lay a higher order of thought entrenched in Neo-Platonism.[4] Rossetti's Medievalism necessarily caused him to create the prototype of the ideal woman, based on the religious symbol of the Virgin, which claimed the allegiance of the knightly soul. And just as his namesake Dante had been the spiritual knight of the idealized Beatrice, so too did Rossetti enter imaginatively the service of the soul whose symbol is idealized woman (hence, the soul's image). He was to carry this association a step further by identifying his soul-image, or ideal woman, with the detached half of the soul described by Plato in the Symposium as the original object of love. In this context, The Blessed Damozel becomes more of a manifesto, outlining Rossetti's hierarchy. Certainly the yearning of the blessed damozel is symbolic of the passionate quest for the discovery and recognition of the twin soul. The union of lovers in heaven then represents the ultimate consummation of this quest in the realm of the soul's absolutes after death.

> ...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? (ll. 97-102)

In order to express these Neo-Platonic ideals, Rossetti created the iconography of the beautiful woman, her outer sensuality indicative not only of her inner virtue, but also of the lost half of the artist's soul imprisoned within. Sexual union, therefore, would assume the moral connotations of self-completion, or the man made whole idea. Thus, the

spiritual or the ideal was expressed by Rossetti in the most basic sensual terminology. If taken at surface value, his work would seem little more than erotic.

An early prose tale by Rossetti, Hand and Soul, not only enforces this idea of Neo-Platonism but also illuminates the man's ultimate goals as an artist. In the story, the confused young painter, Chiaro dell'Erma, is confronted with the vision of a woman who tells him:

> I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee, see me and know me as I am.[5]

Rossetti bluntly establishes the relationship and just as Chiaro in the story, he would devote his life to the search for and recognition of his soul through the painting of women. Moreover, the tale is a deeply personal self-identification; its importance lies in the unreality of reflected images.

Rossetti's idealism necessarily caused him with a group of six other young artists[6] to rebel against the English academic tradition in the arts to form the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. Their aim was to emulate the honest simplicity and truthfulness to nature that they believed to exist in the early Italian painters before Raphael (hence the term, Pre-Raphael-ite). The venture lasted for two years and led to a new strain of aesthetics that was avidly supported by the famous art critic, John Ruskin.[7] Ruskin championed the group, bringing them needed recognition by imposing his own artistic theories upon Pre-Raphaelite efforts. Ruskin was a man with a cause and he desperately needed some one or some thing to embody his ideals and upon

whom he could lavish praise. The Pre-Raphaelites happened to come along at an opportune time.

Prior to the conception of the Brotherhood, Rossetti had abandoned his formal art studies[7] to take up painting with Ford Madox Brown, an isolated English painter. Ironically, Madox Brown had been influenced by the German Nazarenes, the idealistic precursors of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Led by Overbeck, the Nazarenes also decried the classical abstraction of contemporary art, and had sought a purer ideal in the work of the early Italians such as Giotto. Madox Brown's style boasted this same crude simplicity and unaffected manner that so excited Rossetti. There is a rather humorous yet revealing anecdote connected with Rossetti's apprenticeship under Madox Brown. The latter, believing that his pupil needed strengthening of his technical skills assigned Rossetti to paint an arrangement of pickle jars in traditional still life fashion. Rossetti soon tired of this task and as if motivated by a deeper reality, added the sleeping figure of a woman to the background. Although a seemingly minor incident, it is indeed indicative of the very personal nature of Rossetti's art.

Rossetti's only true Pre-Raphaelite paintings, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, 1848, (pl. 6) and Ecce Ancilla Domine, 1850, (pl. 7) well illustrate the awkward angularity that evolved from imitating the fourteenth century Italian naivete, and that has since become synonomous with the Brotherhood. Both paintings, in keeping with Rossetti's Medievalism deal with events from the life of the Virgin and, like The Blessed Damozel, are saturated with early Christian symbolism. In the tradition of

Victorian narrative painting, each work is composed of several parts which serve to tell a story. To consume the whole, one must digest all of the parts individually. This is especially true for The Girlhood of Mary Virgin: six large books bear the names of the seven Cardinal virtues;[10] a young angel attents a lily, the symbol of the virgin birth; the palm leaves and a cross of ivy (a symbol of memory) suggest the future crucifixion. The holy family was modelled after Rossetti's own.[11] The overall effect is cluttered due to the fact that each object stands out in a brilliance of colour and demands equal attention. What one sees is not an exact photographic representation but, rather, a concentrated juxtaposition of symbolic elements. It is my opinion that Pre-Raphaelitism provided Rossetti with the opportunity to thoroughtly investigate material objects and thus satisfy his craving for the sensual. The intensity of treatment these objects receive within the painting causes them to assume a greater reality (i.e. symbolism) which, I believe, is once again indicative of a higher, Neo-Platonic order.

As part of the total self-immersion into his work, Rossetti composed two sonnets to accompany The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, and the last four lines of the first sonnet point the way to his second painting.

> 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 fullness of the time had come. (ll. 11-14)

Ecce Ancilla Domine,[12] or The Annunciation as if is often called, brings us from girlhood innoncence to the onset of puberty. The brightness of

colour in The Girlhood gives way to the expressiveness of all white. The white, of course, is symbolic of purity (i.e. The Immaculate Conception) but, moreover, it creates an overall hushed effect that ends to evoke feelings rather than appeal to the intellect. The Christian symbolism is still present but has been pared down here seeming more emotive than narrative. Rossetti's Virgin cringes contumeliously at her future prospects.[12]

At the time of this painting, Rossetti was but twenty-two years of age and his work certainly bespeaks his youthful idealism still untainted by personal experience. The image of woman in these early works is but the visualization of his concept of courtly love wherein the woman was the savior of all men. These early images are crude and cluttered, yet amidst the awkwardness is an honest, almost childlike innocence, caused by a sense of precision and a purity of colour, and an imposed yearning for a higher level of being. At this point in his career, Rossetti's poetry was of a more sophisticated level than his painting. The Blessed Damozel much more clearly expresses the desire for salvation and self-fulfillment than do the paintings of the Virgin's life. It is interesting to note, however, that Rossetti's first paintings, despite the religious subject matter, deal with the maturation process and the stages of childhood innocence and sexual awareness. Perhaps they are a last reflection of a young man just recently grown up.

Drawing of Elizabeth Siddal

"If a man have any poetry in him, he should paint;

for it has all been said and sung,

but they have hardly begun to paint it."

CHAPTER TWO

MEDIEVAL-ROMANTIC PERIOD

The years 1850 to 1859 are generally considered Rossetti's Medieval-Romantic period because his work of this time dealt primarily with themes from Malory's Morte D'Arthur, Dante, and Shakespeare. His Annunciation of 1850, or "my blessed white daub,"[1] as he affectionately called it, had received such adverse criticism when exhibited that Rossetti vowed never to exhibit publicly again, an oath he was to stand by. Instead, he turned to painting small water colours illustrating stories of the Middle Ages, much as Tennyson was doing with his poetry. Also during this period, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood dissolved, each member going his own way. Christina Rossetti's poem entitled The P.R.B. best described the separation:

> The P.R.B. is in its decadence:
> For Woolner in Australia cooks his chops,
> And Hunt is yearning for the land of Cheops;
> D. G. Rossetti shuns the vulgar optic;
> While William M. Rossetti merely lops
> His B's in English disesteemed as Coptic;
> Calm Stephens in the twighlight smokes his pipe,
> But long the dawning of his public day;
> And he at last the champion great Millais,
> Attaining academic opulence,
> Winds up his signature with A.R.A.
> So rivers merge in the perpetual sea;
> So luscious fruit must fall when overripe;
> And so the consummated P.R.B.[2]

Rossetti found new friends and followers in three young Oxford students: William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. The four were to remain close friends, their lives closely interrelated through the years.

Perhaps the greatest influence on Rossetti during this period was Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, a golden-haired milliner's assistant, whom Rossetti met in 1850 and became engaged to shortly thereafter. "Lizzie" or "Guggums" was fair, soft-spoken, and consumptive and, as Rossetti's first love, naturally fulfilled the role of his heavenly lady. Rossetti was in love with the idea of Lizzie and what she represented to him, not, in fact, with the simple girl that she was. Her aloof type of beauty, apparent in Rossetti's many portraits of her (pl. 3), provided the perfect model for his Beatrices and courtly ladies. Rossetti set up living quarters at 14 Chatham Place, Blackfriars, where he and Lizzie enjoyed an idyllic existence, he teaching her to draw and to write poetry.

Timothy Hilton in The Pre-Raphaelites refers to their domestic situation as an "enclosed world of love," an "egoisme a deux,"[3] and asserts that many of the motifs of Rossetti's Medieval-Romantic period such as the embrace, the closed eyes, and the touch, are a result of this self-protective concentricity. One particular drawing entitled Miss Siddal Standing Next to an Easel of the early 1850's likened Lizzie to the Lady of Shalott, the easel she stands before acting as a mirror, and again attests to the sheltered nature of their love. For just as the Lady of Shalott whose world was one of quiet reflections,

so too were they removed from the real world outside Chatham Place. How They Met Themselves, 1851 and 1860, (pl. 8) also dealt with the mirror image by illustrating the legend of the Doppelganger: a pair of lovers encounter their own likenesses while walking through the wood at twilight. Not only was this a sure presage of death, but it was also a prophetic comment upon the relationship between Lizzie and Gabriel.

For a time, John Ruskin patronized the young couple by purchasing much of their work. Rossetti also supported himself through book illustration, submitting designs for William Allingham's The Music Master in 1855, and the Moxon edition of Tennyson's poems in 1857. Rossetti's illustration for The Palace of Art, sometimes called St. Cecilia, is especially interesting for in his poem, Tennyson visualized the soul as a woman, much in keeping with the antique conception of Psyche and with Rossetti's own personal philosophy.

The image of the blessed damozel, savior of man, flourished during Rossetti's engagement to Lizzie, and his increasing absorption in Medieval subject matter provided the perfect milieu for the execution of this theme. Before the Battle (pl. 9), a water colour of 1858 for which Lizzie posed, perhaps best exemplifies his Medieval/ Neo-Platonic ideal. A young maiden stands on a dais and fastens a halbred held by a knight. Behind them are tightly packed registers of ladies embroidering the banners for the foreground maiden to fasten to the spears. The knight would enter the service of his lady,

here shown properly elevated, and in doing battle under her colours, would achieve a deeper purity of action and thus, being. Wrote Huizinga in The Waning of the Middle Ages:

> Yet the complex of aspirations and imaginings, forming the idea of chivalry...would never have made so solid a frame for the life beautiful if love had not been the source of its constantly revived ardour...the hero who serves for love, this is the primary and invariable motif from which erotic fantasy will always start. It is sensuality transformed into the craving for self-sacrifice, into the desire of the male to show his courage, incur danger, to be strong, to suffer and to bleed before his lady-love... the young hero delivering the virgin.[4]

This chivalrous custom essentially acts out the Dantesque worship of the ideal woman and Rossetti's personal Neo-Platonic conception of the soul. In both, the knight sublimates himself to the ideal woman (i.e. soul's image) and in doing so, comes closer to the attainment of his ultimate reality.

Chapel Before the Lists, a water colour of 1857-64, is another pre-battle scene of the knight and his lady. Their embrace, reminiscent of the re-united lovers in The Blessed Damozel's heaven, again reinforces the idea of the soul's reunion. The embrace figures most prominently in Rossetti's Medieval iconography as the symbol for eternal happiness and salvation. It is used in this positive sense in The Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra of 1857, Carlisle Wall of 1853, and Ruth and Boaz of 1855.

The denial of the embrace resulted in great pain as can be seen in the 1851 water colour, Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast,

Denies Him Her Salutation (pl. 10), based on the Vita Nuova. Elizabeth Siddal is recognizable as the haughty Beatrice. Dante's visible distress in the foreground is juxtaposed to the joyful bride and groom who appear in the upper left corner. There are three separate passages in the Vita Nuova that refer to the Salutation of Beatrice. The aforementioned denial of 1851 is the second occasion mentioned. The other two deal with Beatrice's acknowledgment of Dante. Rossetti, strongly identifying with his namesake, illustrated all three instances.

The earliest treatment, depicting the first occasion[5] is a pen and ink sketch entitled Il Saluto di Beatrice (pl. 11). The drawing is in the form of a diptych, with a mystical figure of Love between the two compartments. The left side represents, in Dante's own words:

> the same wonderful lady appeared to me dressed all in pure white, between two gentle ladies elder than she...and by her unspeakable courtesy she saluted me with so virtuous a bearing that I seemed then and there to behold the very limits of blessedness.[6]

The figure of Dante holds a volume of Virgil and at his feet is a sculptured slab bearing the effigy of a mounted knight. This portion is dated 1849. The right side of the diptych deals with the meeting of Dante and the soul of Beatrice in Paradise, an incident taken from Canto XXX of Purgatorio, wherein Beatrice declares: "Behold me well, I am, I am in sooth Beatrice."[7] Paradise becomes a field of tall lilies. This part is dated 1850. The angularity of the style

in these two drawings reflects Rossetti's affiliation with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at this particular time. In 1859, Rossetti treated the same pair of subjects again in oil as panels for a cabinet in William Morris' Red House. In this later rendition, the couple eye each other more directly.

The image of Love separating both sets of compartments is generally known as Dantis Amor. Love stands in a diagonally divided sky, bearing a sun dial held vertically to show the hour of Beatrice's death. The head of Christ looks down from the upper sun-lit half. Around his profile are the words: "Qui est per omnia saecula benedictus." The head of Beatrice, encircled in the moon in a star-lit sky, gazes upward toward Christ. An ink study for Dantis Amor (pl. 12) dated 1860 reveals that originally Rossetti had intended the words "Quella beata Beatrice che mira continuamente nella faccia di colui" to be inscribed around the head of Beatrice, and along the dividing diagonal line, "L'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle."[8]

Dantis Amor, depicting the hour of Beatrice's death when she is united with God forever, acts as a unifying device between the earthly and heavenly rendezvous of Dante and Beatrice that occur on either side in the major compartments. This pair of meetings were usually not associated with each other. The salutation to the left was from the Vita Nuova and the meeting in Paradise on the right, from Purgatorio They dealt with different events from different sources. Rossetti's joining of the two disparate scenes with the Dantis Amor panel is again

indicative of his Neo-Platonic hierarchy. In both the 1849-50 and the 1859 renditions, the earthly encounter is in the left compartment and the heavenly meeting in the right, with the allegorical figure of Love acting as a bridge between the two spheres of existence. The figures of Dante and Beatrice are used symbolically. Beatrice, as the ideal woman, represents the detached half of the soul that Dante recognized in her beauty. The union of the lovers in heaven signifies the consummation of the Neo-Platonic quest.

The use of the embrace and the juxtaposition of earth and the afterlife occur in a negative context in Paolo and Francesca da Rimini (pl. 13), a water colour of 1855. The story is from Dante's Inferno, Canto V, and deals with adultery and its consequences. In the form of a diptych, the left compartment deals with the illicit caress on earth of Paolo and Francesca, who is married to Paolo's elder brother. The right compartment depicts their eternal embrace in hell as punishment for their sin. The figures of Dante and Virgil in the central panel gaze in sadness upon the swirling figures of the damned lovers. On the left panel is written in Italian: "Quanti dolci pensier Quanto disio;" on the right panel, "Meno costoro al doloroso passo;" and in the central panel, "O lasso!" This writing, as in Dantis Amor, has a tendency to nullify the space upon which it is written.[9a]

The image that occurs here is the negative or reverse of the

Dante-Beatrice theme. The love of Paolo and Francesca was lustful, and thus degrading. The result of such passion was eternal union in each other's arms, floating purposelessly through the howling flames of hell.[9b] The real punishment, however, lies in the pain of never rising to the ideal world of absolutes, being forever imprisoned in earthly passion. Considering Rossetti's hierarchy, this must be considered as a vision of the worst possible form of damnation. Here too the iconography of the lovers is used symbolically.

The negative aspect of the lovers is again exemplified in Arthur's Tomb, a water colour of 1855, which depicts the last meeting of Launcelot and Guenevere. Just as Dante and Beatrice signified the chaste concept of courtly love for Rossetti, so did Launcelot and Guenevere represent for him the evil lust that was responsible for the downfall of Camelot and Launcelot's failure to attain the Holy Grail. Like Francesca, Guenevere was unfaithful to her husband. Rossetti depicted the couple embracing over a stone effigy of the dead Arthur. A snake, symbolic of evil and, in this case, lust, slithers out of the lower right corner.

Perhaps his most striking image of the adulterous pair occurs in Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael (pl. 14) In 1857, Rossetti, along with William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, undertook the task of decorating the walls of the Oxford Union Debating Society with paintings based on Malory's Morte D'Arthur. The venture was a fiasco and the murals began to deteriorate soon after they were

finished. Rossetti's contributions are evident only through studies for the murals. In accordance with the dualistic forces within him, Rossetti chose to illustrate two scenes based on the legend of the Sanc Grael (i.e. Holy Grail). The first one, Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael, deals with the failure to attain the vision; the second, How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors, and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Grael; but Sir Percival's Sister Died by the Way (pl. 15), with the achieving of it. In both, the keeper of the Sanc Grael is visualized as a beautiful woman who bears a strong resemblance to Elizabeth Siddal.

Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael, in its unfinished state, reveals Guenevere posed against a tree much like a snake with an apple in her hand. To the left of her lies the vision of the Sanc Grael and, to the right, the sleeping Launcelot. In effect, what occurs in this painting may be interpreted as Launcelot's dream. Guenevere clearly obstructs his view, again symbolic of the evil, earthbound nature of their love. In the water colour of Sir Galahad's vision, the son of Launcelot receives the Sanc Grael from a heavenly lady bearing bread and wine, symbolic of the Eucharist. A lily glows at her feet and at her shoulder, a dove bears incense. A chorus of angels, their wings crossing, form a tightly-packed frieze in the background.

It is interesting to note that Guenevere, a creature of the earth, begins to assume powers of her own. This is especially apparent in Sir Launcelot's Vision wherein she becomes a major evil force. Rossetti has even likened her to a snake by placing her in a tree and having

her bear the forbidden fruit, certainly like the serpent of Eden. Thus, a new image begins to emerge from Rossetti's Medieval iconography, that of the temptress--here very traditionally rendered. Whereas earlier he had conceived of women strictly in a spiritual context, and when he had referred to lust, it had been a mutual sin, with Guenevere, he openly acknowledges her sensual powers as a source of detriment to the male. In Sister Helen, a ballard of 1854, Rossetti relates the Medieval tale of a woman, spurned in love, who made a wax image of her former lover in revenge. As she melted the wax over the fire, so too did her lover perish by the powers of love turned to hate. The seeds for his later femme fatales are present in these early interpretations of the woman as a destructive force.

It is not exactly known why Rossetti became interested in the negative aspects of women which were later to obsess him. Considering his youthful idealsim, it would seem that as he matured and his attitudes were tempered by personal experience, his ideals and thus his images would develop with him. Rossetti's relationship with Lizzie during the latter half of the decade probably had great bearing upon him. Although their first years together were happy ones, Lizzie's increasing ill-health and her vascillations between depression and rage, caused the "English governess side"[10] of Rossetti to feel that perhaps he was to blame for her declining health and beauty.

This guilt is best reflected in a pen and ink sketch of 1858 entitled Hamlet and Ophelia (pl 16). The drawing illustrates Act III, Scene i of Shakespeare's play where Ophelia, here seated in a small

oratory, is in the act of returning to Hamlet, her former lover, the letters and presents he has given her. Depicted on the up-turned misericord behind him is the death of Uzah after touching the Ark of the Covenant; the back panel is elaborately carved with the Tree of Knowledge, encircled by a crowned serpent and heraldically guarded by two angels with uplifted swords.

David Sonstroem in Rossetti and the Fair Lady[11] interprets this as an image of the victimized woman: Rossetti, of course, having interjected himself into the role of the bully, Hamlet, with frail, consumptive Lizzie as the reclining Ophelia. It can not be determined whether or not this speculation is true. However, many biographers (i.e. Doughty, Grylls) attest to the fact that at this time Rossetti felt unduly obligated to his ailing fiance, and that his love most certainly turned to pity as a result. Rossetti's later versions of the Ophelia theme, The First Madness of Ophelia of 1864, and a later rendition of the earlier Hamlet and Ophelia of 1866, also portray Ophelia as preyed upon by her former lover. Sonstroem asserts that if in fact Rossetti did harbor these guilt feelings toward Lizzie then their love, in turn, would cease to be pleasant and thus work as a destructive force against him. If we assume that this is true, then we can account for the emergence of Rossetti's interest in the femme fatale because she too represented a source of detriment. In a sense, it expresses the failure of Rossetti's identification of Lizzie with Beatrice. Moreover, these Ophelia images suggest that Rossetti acted out his own personal fantasies in his paintings in

addition to the visualization of his ideology.

Thus far this discussion has been aimed at the imagery of Rossetti's Medieval-Romantic period in an attempt to prove how these characters from legend dramatize pictorially the Neo-Platonism of the artist. The meetings of Dante and Beatrice in heaven and on earth represent the culmination of the ideals originally proposed in The Blessed Damozel, whereas Launcelot and Guenevere portray their failure in the real world of human passions. Moreover, Rossetti's predilection for seeing others sub specie litteratum caused him to interject both Lizzie and himself into roles already predetermined by the characters they played upon the canvas. His Medieval period also allowed him to follow the logical deductions of his philosophical system and therefore develop his imagery to a fuller extent. Thus, the femme fatale and victimized woman emerge as reactions to or as outgrowths from the heavenly lady image.

What is most apparent about Rossetti's work of this time is the overall sense of fantasy, this intangible quality of belonging to another world at another time, that pervades. Several of his water colours of 1857 such as The Blue Closet and A Christmas Carol (pl. 17), appear to have been executed purely for aesthetic reasons sans the conscious dramatization of ideals. The Blue Closet depicts a colourful and self-contained Medieval chamber in which the mood of reverie infuses the two queens as they listlessly play upon their clavichord. It was to inspire William Morris to write a poem of the same title in

his Defense of Guenevere. In The Christmas Carol, the seated figure of Elizabeth Siddal loses herself in the music of the dulcimer as her two attendants become rapt in the spell of her long, golden hair. The facial features of these women assume an intense, psychological expression that paradoxically means all things yet nothing at once. The downcast, heavy-lidded eyes discourage one's glance yet at the same time arouse one's sense of mystery. This elusive, evocative quality, suggestive of more than meets the eye, is certainly much like the symbolic-expressive nature of Medieval art.

Rossetti's means of achieving this effect are also like those of the Medieval craftsman. His water colours are characterized by bright, vivid colour, a carry-over from his Pre-Raphaelite years, and by a tendency toward claustrophobic interiors. This flatness of space wherein the elements of the composition were subordinated to the overall sense of design created a

> ...pattern rich in that sheer music of design that is associated in our minds with primitive art.[12]

As is known from his experience with Madox Brown, Rossetti most definitely had his shortcomings as a draftsman. This awkwardness with three dimensional space was most apparent in Ecce Ancilla Domine. In his work of the later 1850's, however, Rossetti avoided deep space at all costs and, as a result, ended up with some very flat, two dimensional visions, again indicative of Medieval art. These self-contained, claustrophobic interiors heighten the drama of the situation, our focus

riveted to the central action, and result in a very interiorized point of view. Timothy Hilton attributes this intimacy once again to the concentric nature of the Rossetti-Siddal romance.

Rossetti concentrated on the design elements that his composition afforded him. In keeping with the Pre-Raphaelite doctrine of Truth to Nature, he depicted each object, each accessory, and detail of costume with the greatest intricacy not as it actually appeared but as it pleased him as an artist.[14] Thus, this "antiquarian curiosity" causes these water colours to assume the same cluttered effect that occurred in his earliest painting, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, except the symbols of Christianity here concede to the trappings of the Medieval court. The accessories now dominate the painting and become more important than the actual drama within. And it is the triumph of these accessories that allows them to flourish as design elements. Wrote Roger Fry in 1916, upon viewing these water colours for the first time:

> The ordinary world of vision scarcely supplied any inspiration to him. It was only through the evocation in his own mind of a special world, a world of pure romance, that the aspects of objects began to assume aesthetic meaning. Passionate desire was the central point of this world, but passion in itself was not enough; it must rage in a curiosity shop, amid objects which had for him peculiarly exciting associations.[15]

Thus the Middle Ages provided Rossetti with the perfect medium for his technical expertise as well as for his philosophical conceptions. And it is the combination of his skill and ideas which result in the creation of this "world of romance."

In the midst of this period of Medieval Romanticism, Rossetti made but one major excursion into the real world of human experience when he painted Found (pl. 18) in 1854. This work deals with the image of the prostitute or the fallen woman which was a popular Victorian theme due to its moral connotations. William Holman Hunt, a fellow Pre-Raphaelite, treated the subject in his Awakening Conscience of 1852, which no doubt influenced Rossetti to do likewise. An earlier narrative poem, Jenny of 1847, dealt with a similar topic.[16] The painting depicts a prostitute who is being pulled to her feet by a determined farmer. His calf, tied and on its way to slaughter in the background, is indicative of the woman's moral dilemma. The symbolism here is quite mawkish. Rossetti never finished Found and it is quite obvious that he did not feel comfortable with the fallen woman theme. As I mentioned earlier, Rossetti tended to take a female-oriented point of view, and such a position necessarily gives the female the active and domineering role. The fallen woman assumed a minor part, giving the male the assertive position. Although the man was able to bring the woman back to his level of morality, he did not have the power of the heavenly lady to raise his loved one to spritual heights. It must be remembered that Rossetti considered the woman to represent the soul and this would be inconsistent with Found wherein the woman is degraded. That Rossetti never finished the painting attests to the fact that he preferred his imagination and its sphere of fantasy to the real, contemporary world in which he himself lived.

234. *Fazio's Mistress* (Cat. no. 164)

Fazio's Mistress: a portrait of Fanny Cornforth

"I do not wrap myself up in my own imaginings,
it is they that envelop me from the outer world
whether I will or no."

CHAPTER THREE

THE MIDDLE YEARS: MUSES, SACRED AND PROFANE

Elizabeth Siddal died on the tenth of February, 1862 from an overdose of the drug laudanum which she had been taking to ease her pain. Rossetti's paintings underwent drastic stylistic changes consequently. The two had finally married in 1861 after a prolonged engagement and their short, ill-fated marriage was marked by the birth of a still-born daughter and Lizzie's increasing physical decline. Whether her death was accident or suicide still gives cause for speculation.[1] Yet whatever the case, biographers of Rossetti agree that the incident took unpleasant toll upon the man's emotions. His grief was uncontrollable and his guilt, voracious. So affected was he that he placed the only existing copy of his poems in his wife's coffin, exclaiming: "I have often been working at these poems when she was ill and suffering and I might have been attending to her and now they shall go."[2]

Rossetti's first piece of work after his wife's death was an oil portrait of Madox Brown's servant-girl peering from a window and called simply, Girl at a Lattice (pl. 19). The model's heavy-lidded eyes and faraway expression, however, bear a stronger resemblance to the features

of Lizzie. The painting attests to the stylistic changes that Rossetti was undergoing. First of all, Girl at a Lattice is a bust length portrait of a woman who is surrounded by the accessories of her station in life. Here these attributes are coral beads and a tiny pitcher of violets. Secondly, the painting is rendered in a naturalistic manner; there appears to be little concern here for other than obtaining a good surface likeness. Lizzie does not fit in with this new naturalism, however. Her downcast expression suggests a certain uncomfortableness. Lizzie belonged to the Middle Ages, the era of Dante and Beatrice. Perhaps the sadness in her face reflects Rossetti's own grief at this point, but I tend to think that it is indicative of her belonging to another sphere of existence. She clings timidly to the window and does not venture outward to us. Rather, the ethereal Lizzie, like the Lady of Shallot, seems to fear the real world outside her lattice.

The innovations of naturalism and the bust length format had been attempted a few years earlier in 1859 with Bocca Baciata ("the kissed mouth"). This painting (pl. 20) is an oil portrait of Fanny Cornforth, a voluptuous blonde whom Rossetti had met during the mid 1850's.[3] Fanny, whom Rossetti affectionately nicknamed "my Funny Elephant," was as full of life as Lizzie had been aloof. Swinburne, who had adored the reticent Miss Siddal, referred to Fanny as "a clot of dung in the gutter at nightfall."[4] Just as Lizzie had been the embodiment of and the inspiration for Rossetti's blessed damozels, so did Fanny become the prototype for all that was of the earth. She was a woman, not a chivalric abstraction, and she made Rossetti grow up.

Bocca Baciata was condemned at the time for its coarse sensuality. The painting is a faithful likeness of Fanny against a background of marigolds. Flowers and jewels, the attributes of beauty and love, adorn her hair and body. An apple, indicative of the forbidden fruit, rests at her left elbow. Inscribed in Italian on the back of the painting are the words: "The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon."[5] The painting represents a turning point in the artist's career. Gone are the dramatization of Arthurian and Dantesque themes. With Lizzie's death, the small, angular figures with their medieval accessories, familiar from early water colours, gradually disappear and in her place appears a new type of woman whose physical beauty itself becomes the major subject. And it is the heavy-lidded eyes, the fullness of the lips, the indolent tilt of the head, and the masses of curling hair that become the new symbols in Rossetti's already extensive iconography.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Bocca Baciata and her medieval predecessors is the absence of the man in the former. This is due to the differences inherent to each style. In his water colours of the 1850's, Rossetti had employed a narrative style of painting in order to visualize his Neo-Platonic ideals, and thus the male became an actor vital to the drama. Without Lizzie, Rossetti no longer had cause to depict the lovers together. The tragedy of his earlier poem, The Blessed Damozel, had cursed his own life: Lizzie was dead and gone, presumably in heaven (although Miss Siddal, an atheist, would have scoffed at the idea) and Rossetti was the lover, abandoned on earth. Thus, he

committed himself to a life long search for the elusive half of the soul, the key to his self-completion, which had so briefly been his. Beginning with Bocca Baciata, executed when his love for Lizzie was waning, he devoted his energies to the testament to feminine beauty, that beauty indicative of the soul's image. From this point on, Rossetti would investigate the faces of his models, or "stunners" as he called them, with true Pre-Raphaelite intensity. The result is more than a series of photographic images, however. It is a deeply religious search for what was beneath the surface.

This capacity of exploring reality to its fullest and piercing through the veneer--to visualize the unseen as a logical extension of the seen--was a Victorian phenomenon. The Fairy Painters applied the same principles to nature and found miniature creatures to exist behind blades of grass. Spiritualism was rampant among the Victorians whose faith had been jolted by industrial and scientific advances and the discovery that the Bible was not literal truth. These, along with progress in the field of psychology, created a strong desire for escapism: to communicate with the other world and to establish something meaningful in a then modern age. Rossetti himself was deeply immersed in the occult and had tried to contact the spirit of Lizzie a number of times through various mediums and seances.

In keeping with the concept of the unseen, several of Rossetti's images in the early 1860's deal with the kept woman who awaits her lover. The union of male and female (cf. earlier embrace) is planned for yet is

not consummated before our eyes. The painting becomes largely suggestive, therefore, of what is to come. Fair Rosamund (pl. 21) of 1861 is a bust length portrait of Fanny and it depicts her as the mistress of King Henry II who awaits her royal lover upon a balustrade. In her right hand, she holds a red silk cord which tightens as the King approaches. Once again, Fanny is richly dressed and adorned with the symbolic flowers and jewels, decked out for her lover. Her expression is one of faraway longing which reminds us of her unfulfilled nature. Yet is is her incompleteness as the lost half which gives her the power of drawing one inward to her small chamber. One feels her sadness. Essentially she becomes an earthbound blessed damozel. This certainly can be considered a major advancement over the Medieval water colours with their archaic, conceptualized vision. In Fair Rosamund, one's imagination is allowed to soar. The action is subtler; the symbols, more evocative. The consummation occurs within the mind as a logical extension of the picture.

The Beloved, also called The Bride of 1865-6 (pl. 22), perhaps best illustrates the concept of the viewer completing the action of the picture. Rossetti had originally intended this work to be a painting of Beatrice, but he became so enchanted by the healthy good looks of his model, Marie Ford, that he depicted the bride from the Song of Solomon who, "shall be brought unto the king in raiment of needlework; the virgins that be her fellows shall bear her company."[6] Marie Ford is the central figure in the composition and our attention is riveted to her through a series of concentric circles. The soft oval of her

face is echoed first by the heavy mantle she wears and secondly, by the array of dark-haired attendants at her back and the Negro boy below her. Her features are fairer than the others and she stands out of the painting like a rare jewel. She is attired after a most elegant fashion and her attendants bear flowers in her honor. She is the eager bride, decorated and waiting, who draws back her veil to reveal her virginal beauty to us. The spectator becomes her spouse as his gaze directly meets her's and the action of the picture is consummated.

This calls to mind the moot question of if a tree were to fall in a forest and no one were there to hear it, would, in fact, sound occur? Both Fair Rosamund and The Beloved depend heavily on this sort of sense participation. Although the paintings stand alone on their own merits as works of art, they become whole, complete when appreciated by an audience. Rossetti's work of this period depends heavily on the spectator. One must consider the artist's Neo-Platonism. Rossetti is a man in search and this search is best expressed in the longing faces of his kept women, who, like himself, are imprisoned by earthly bonds and are separated from their loved ones. Their completeness, like Rossetti's, rests in their reunion with their lover, the formal representation of the twin soul. In this sense, the spectator himself in communicating with her becomes that lost element, the missing link, who completes the picture.

The Beloved is one of the few of Rossetti's muses who communicates with us so sweetly and so directly. Fair Rosamund, for example, looks

beyond the viewer, as if waiting for another. Her evasiveness makes it impossible for one to establish contact with her and adds to the melancholy of the painting. One is drawn in by her sadness yet frustrated in his attempts to solace her. P. T. Forsyth in his essay, "The Religion of Natural Passion," interprets this sorrow of expression as one which ennobles affection and refines passion, thus contributing to the dignity of the muse.[7]

Whether contact is established or not, however, it can not be denied that the image produced is of an open and evocative nature. Both The Beloved and Fair Rosamund can be likened to the central actress in a drama who delivers a soliloquy to the audience. She replaces the heavy props and plentiful cast of Rossetti's Medieval works and the action of the plot moves from a narrative, easily understood level to a subtler, more intellectual sphere. The theme of the kept woman, heavily decorated and waiting, is repeated in The Blue Bower of 1865 (p. 23), Monna Vanna of 1866, and Fiammetta also of 1866, although these works tend to be purely decorative, art for art's sake images.

As is known from his Medieval-Romantic years, Rossetti often identified or rather, confused, personal experience with events and characters from literature. The most obvious example occurs in his painting with the identification of Lizzie with Beatrice and then Ophelia, and himself with Dante and consequently, Hamlet. By seeing himself and others sub specie litteratum, Rossetti was able to order his own experiences

and thus, he thought, make sense out of them. However, real flesh and blood people do not fit into pre-determined roles, and thus Rossetti was frustrated in his attempts at reconciling the world of his imagination with the real world in which he lived. His paintings represent the union of these personal fantasies with real life people and situations. His relationship with Fanny Cornforth during the 1860's provided no exception. In fact, it sheds light upon Rossetti's fascination with the kept woman theme.

After Lizzie's untimely death, Rossetti set up living quarters at Tudor House, 16 Cheyne Walk. Fanny became his mistress (as there is evidence to believe she had been before Lizzie's death) and spent much of her time at Cheyne Walk with Rossetti and his friends. This period was a very happy one for Rossetti: he attained artistic recognition and financial success and he enjoyed the friendship of many well-known personages of the day. He developed a menagerie of exotic pets and became particularly attached to his wombat, about which many humorous accounts have been written. Fanny fit in well with this period of his life. She was good-natured and fun, representing no ideological problems with which to boggle the mind. But, as she was his mistress, Rossetti was intent upon seeing her in the role of the kept woman. Thus, Fanny is depicted as such in his paintings of her. At first these representations are beautifully sensual and harmless (i.e. Bocca Baciata, Fair Rosamund, The Blue Bower) yet gradually these images take on a threatening nature that reaches its culmination in Lady Lilith, the femme fatale. Fanny, according to all biographical

accounts, represented, in fact, no such threat to Rossetti. She was far too easy-going and simple-minded to be cast into the lot of the cold, calculating seductress. Yet her position in life predetermined her place in Rossetti's heart.

The painting of beautiful women was a well-established tradition in the history of art harking back to the Mona Lisa.[8] The nineteenth century especially explored the possibilities of representing women, and Rossetti was aware of these new attitudes through his friendship with Whistler and his visit to Manet's atelier in 1864, the latter's work which he dismissed as "scrawls." Rossetti's work of this period was in a transitional stage; he had successfully eliminated the abundance of anecdotal detail of the past into design elements and simplified compositions of women. His paintings of the 1860's are often compared to those of Whistler. Both were interested in colour arrangement and producing decorative effects as well as in their extensive use of women for subject matter. Whistler's treatment, however, lacks the intense psychological nature of Rossetti's, even though many of their paintings have comparable compositions and colour patterns. The Little White Girl which has been likened to Fazio's Mistress of 1863 (pl. 4)[9] seems purely fanciful in light of what is occurring within the latter. Indeed, both Fazio's Mistress and the closely related Woman Combing Her Hair of 1864, depict Fanny as a creature coldly pre-occupied with her own beauty. She does not gaze out of the picture to communicate with us or to search for her lover. Rather, she is self-satisfied and as a result, the pictures are very

self-contained, needing no outside source for completion. The spectator is excluded from this private, intimate world.

This interior view of woman, intimate, not knowing that she is being observed, catching her at a "snap-shot" moment as she combs her hair or sighs for her lover, preludes the later nineteenth century realism of Degas and the Impressionists, or perhaps the more decadent vision of the Fin de Siecle. Rossetti's treatment is of a more romantic nature, however. Although he was aware of compositional innovations, he was more concerned with the higher order of meaning which his women represent for him. His woman is on a pedestal and one does not doubt for a moment that he is looking up at her, acknowledging her supernatural powers and searching for meaning in her beauty. Rossetti's muses, be they sacred or profane, are the objects of love.

> Rossetti's instinct was...prophetic in indicating that more and more they (women) will become the subjects of art...There are signs that the great battle of society will be fought round the position of women, and their relation to men...Art must feel this and utter it in its own way.[10]

Rossetti's treatment of the Lilith theme during the late 1860's best illustrates the femme fatale image in both his painting and poetry. According to popular Hebrew belief, Lilith was a female spectre in the shape of a finely dressed woman. Another version of the story relates that she was the wicked first wife of Adam before he married Eve. Rossetti used both legends: the former, for his painting and the latter, for his poem. In 1868, Rossetti painted Lady Lilith (pl. 24)

from Fanny Cornforth. Lilith, as the oldest seductress known to man, is seated in a richly decorated Victorian chamber in the guise of a modern woman. She is very much involved with herself, languidly brushing her long golden hair and gazing blankly at her reflection in the mirror.

> And still she sits...
> And subtly of herself contemplative,
> Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
> Till heart and body and life are in its hold.
> (Body's Beauty ll. 5-8)

Much detail is given to her costume and background of roses and poppies. The anecdotal details here are all materialistic (hairbrush, mirror, etc.), again symbolic of her purely external nature. She does not project outward toward the spectator, but is coyly pre-occupied with her own beauty. Her eyes are half-closed, in true Rossetti fashion, and are tilted upward, her brows arching slightly. Her lips are full and sensual yet smugly pursed. Her beauty is of a very cold and calculating nature. Lilith can be likened to a spider spinning its web.

> All the threads of my hair are golden,
> And there in a net his heart was holden.
> (Eden Bower, ll. 22-3)

and:

> ...so went
> Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
> And round his heart one strangling golden hair.
> (Body's Beauty, ll. 13-14)

Rossetti's hair fetish was revealed as early as The Blessed Damozel. In A Christmas Carol, a water colour of 1857, the long golden

tresses of Elizabeth Siddal created a euphoric spell in which the man could easily lose himself. This sweet indolence is repeated in an 1864 version of the same subject entitled Morning Music. In direct opposition to this harmless pleasantry, hair takes on negative symbolism in Lady Lilith as well as in Fazio's Mistress and Woman Combing Her Hair. It becomes a means for ensnarement used to trap one's prey, the victim here being the unsuspecting male. Body's Beauty, the accompanying sonnet to Lady Lilith, furthers this idea.

Eden Bower is the correlating poem to Lady Lilith and was written in 1869 as if narrated by Lilith herself. The image of the femme fatale is much the same here as it is in the painted version as far as the idea of the seductress goes, but the poem is by far more explicitly sexual. Rossetti sees Lilith as a serpent turned woman who, when Adam replaces her with Eve, plots vehement revenge upon the two, much like the earlier Sister Helen. As the spurned woman, Lilith reverts back to her snake form and tempts Eve in the garden with the forbidden fruit. Thus, Rossetti views Lilith not so much as an isolated seductress as he does the cause of the pain and unhappiness of all men.

With respect to the artist's Neo-Platonism, this comes as the perversion of his original conception of woman as redeemer. Having failed to achieve this ideal with Lizzie, Rossetti devoted his energies to destroy what was left of the image through the creation of the femme fatale. He took cynical delight in denigrating that impossible perfection that had once been his vainly sought goal. And Fanny became the vehicle for this destruction. No doubt, by escaping into a

world of pure sensuality, Rossetti hoped to mitigate his bitter loss.

Eden Bower is packed with vivid sexual imagery. Linking Lilith with a snake decidedly makes her a creature of the earth. Lilith speaks of her lovemaking thus:

> What great joys had Lilith and Adam!
> Sweet close rings of the serpent twining,
> As heart in heart lay sighing and pining.
> (Eden Bower, ll. 29-32)

Perhaps most perverse is Lilith's consorting with the King Snake, her lover before Adam.

> To thee I come when the rest is over;
> A snake was I when thou wast my lover.
> ...Once again shall my love subdue thee;
> (Eden Bower, ll. 11-19)

It is quite obvious from this poem that the femme fatale, although his own creation, terrified Rossetti. The fact that he denotes Lilith the power of the phallus masculinizes her to a great degree; she becomes the symbol of pure lust. This is certainly a castration phobia on Rossetti's part. It would seem that in destroying his treasured ideal, he was also destroying a part of himself.

The image of woman as serpent first appeared in Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael wherein Guenevere obstructed the knight's holy vision by imposing herself upon a tree much like the snake in Eden Bower. In the latter, however, the snake becomes a more active and threatening force. The delicate symbolism of earlier years has given way to a robust sensuality. Eden Bower is a narrative poem and thus best suits its topic. Both the language and imagery within are concrete without the slightest trace of mysticism or otherworldliness, just as is the painted treatment of Lady Lilith.

The same image of woman as femme fatale occurs in the paintings Helen of Troy of 1863 and Venus Verticordia of 1864-8 (pl. 25), and in the narrative poem, Troy Town of 1869. Rossetti was fascinated with the legend of the Trojan War for a woman's vanity had been the cause for the downfall of an empire. Helen of Troy, on the back of which he inscribed in Greek: "destroyer of ships, destroyer of men, destroyer of cities," is depicted as the egocentric, cold-hearted seductress. Troy Town, like Eden Bower, is loaded with sexual imagery:

> Each twin breast is an apple sweet...
> Taste and waste to the heart's desire:
> Mine are apples meet for his mouth.
> (Troy Town, ll. 43, 60-1)

Venus Verticordia likewise is shown with bared breasts, holding the apple in her left hand. With her right hand she poises an arrow which "follows its brief sweetness to his (Paris) heart" (from accompanying sonnet). Venus is surrounded by lush flowers and butterflies, the latter being the classical symbol for Psyche, the soul. In the Trojan War series, Paris, like Adam, is seen as the victimized man through whom the femme fatale worked to destroy men in general.

It would appear from Rossetti's fascination with the femme fatale that, after the death of his wife, the artist rediscovered women all over again. That this obsession was the result of thwarted idealsim and not merely sensuality pursued for its own sake, is apparent in his treatment of the heavenly lady. Rossetti's sensuality was twofold for he used it to conceive of the sacred as well as the profane. The Blessed Damozel originally put forth the idea that exterior beauty was indicative of

the soul's goodness and thus provided the route to salvation. Rossetti's conception of the sacred muse of the 1860's differs considerably from his femme fatales. Whereas the femme fatale represented the perversion or turning sour of an ideal, the sacred muse was a reinstatement of his earlier faith. Moreover, whereas Fanny and her counterparts often appear to be purely decorative, art for art's sake images, the sacred muse, such as Sibylla Palmifera (pl. 26), becomes the universal symbol of "The Principle of Beauty, which draws all high-toned men to itself, whether with the aim of embodying it in art or only of attaining its enjoyment in life."[11]

The sacred muse, best personified by Sibylla Palmifera, has a deeper, more noble purpose of existence. She is not a real flesh and blood woman, but an untouchable goddess, an ideal, the true object of Rossetti's search. She is more reserved than the femme fatale, her dark hair modestly pulled back and her garb, classical. Yet it is her sensuality that softens her bearing, placing her in warm and realizable human terms. Her sensuality becomes symbolic of the invisible absolute for which she stands. Such is Rossetti: the unseen visualized and the ideal as sensual. To envision the Platonic absolute of Beauty in terms of a beautiful woman, a muse, is on the one hand, a naive, almost childlike conception and, on the other, a most sophisticated notion.

Rossetti composed a sonnet entitled Soul's Beauty to accompany Sibylla Palmifera. The image of both poem and painting stands in direct opposition to Lady Lilith and Body's Beauty in terms of good and

evil. Rossetti himself said of Sibylla Palmifera that "she is to occupy the leading place among all my beauties."[12] The Sibyl wears loose-fitting robes and sits upon a heavy stone throne embossed with sphinxes. She holds a palm branch (hence her name) and butterflies, the symbol of the soul, hover nearby. The fire of love burns beneath the carved head of a blinded cupid, wreathed in roses. These symbols tell us that this muse is no ordinary earthly woman. The sonnet conjurs up a truly sublime image of her presence wherein "love and death, terror and mystery guard her shrine" (ll. 1-2). The Sibyl upon her throne is thus transfigured into a sacred idol to be worshipped and her surroundings, a holy temple. Indeed, several years later in his House of Life sonnet series, Rossetti was to continue this image by envisioning Jane Burden Morris as an all-inclusive micro-heaven and he, the poet, as her priest.[13]

Much the same image occurs in Regina Cordium of 1866 (pl. 27) which, like Sibylla Palmifera, is a portrait of Alexa Wilding. There is no evidence that there was anything more than a model-artist relationship between Alexa and Gabriel, but Alexa's dark good looks must have provided a sharp contrast to Fanny Cornforth, the seductress.

Rossetti did two versions of Regina Cordium: the first, of 1860, was taken from Elizabeth Siddal; the second, of 1866, from Alexa Wilding. The same format was used in both. The woman sits at a parapet with a trellis in the background. The later rendition is more sharply conceived. However, the two are similar only insofar as format is concerned. Whereas in the 1860 version Lizzie served as the particular queen of Rossetti's heart, Alexa Wilding represented the impersonal

ideal of youth and beauty. It is this very impersonality that is carried over to Sibylla Palmifera, the embodiment of the Platonic absolute itself. Alexa's dark features provided for a crisp severity. Her eyes are bright and alert, not at all languid, and her jet hair is pulled back simply to reveal her clearly defined nose and mouth. Her dress is likewise simple and unadorned. The clean white lace on the parapet, framed with roses, reflects the freshness of the image. She wears the emblem of love, a flaming heart, around her neck and in the background is the blinded cupid. A similar vision of woman occurs in Il Ramoscello ("the little branch"), also called Bella e Buona of 1865. This is a portrait of Amy Graham, the daughter of a friend. The same unaffected simplicity and sense of quietude pervades.

And just as femme fatales from legend served as a source of painterly inspiration, so too did famous women of good repute stir Rossetti. Both My Lady Greensleeves and Joan of Arc (both of 1863) represent the woman as savior of man. They are executed in the same format as Helen of Troy and Venus Verticordia yet offer the opposing image, that of the protectoress. Both have the anecdotal details that spell out their particular roles yet tend to be mawkish and unsophisticated conceptions.

And this brings us to the source of melancholy in Rossetti's art. In Sibylla Palmifera and Regina Cordium, we see him passionately worshipping the absolute of Beauty, an ideal so perfect that no earthly form

was capable of retaining it.

> Beauty...was a soul in nature,
> and a soul so intense that nature
> broke down and died in the effort to
> express it.[14]

So too did Rossetti's art fall short of his known ideal. He was striving to express in affect what could not be expressed. The sadness one feels in his paintings of women, who became for him the physical vehicles of Beauty, is essentially the pain of frustration. Rossetti was attracted to Beauty and felt its power, much as his namesake Dante trembled uncontrollably at the sight of Beatrice. His attempts to capture Beauty became the efforts of enslaving passion upon canvas. Yet it is these very efforts that make one realize that there is "a whole world of splendour about us which we are too blind to see and of sorrow deeper than we have heart to feel."[15] The metaphysical-evocative nature of his painting makes one conscious of a higher sphere of being. And, as Rossetti, one is elated with this new-found knowledge yet saddened with the inevitable realization of his own shortcomings. Rossetti's search was a committed dedication to a dead-end ideal. He aspired for what he knew he could never have because it was the last noble thing to do.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Rossetti executed his greatest tribute to Dante when he painted Beata Beatrix (pl. 28) in 1864. The painting is a bust length portrait of his dead wife and depicts the hour of Beatrice's death. The theme had been treated earlier in the Dantis Amor panels of 1860, which had served to bridge the

earthly and heavenly meetings of Dante and Beatrice. Here, Beatrice sits beside a brick wall which bears the familiar sundial. A haloed dove, holding a poppy, the flower of sleep, in his beak, rushes in at her while the face of Beatrice is "the face of one whose heart's desire is fulfilled beyong the reach of hope."[16] In the background is the city of Florence. To the left, an angel displays a flaming heart, the symbol of love (familiar to us as a charm on the necks of the later Regina Cordium and Helen of Troy). Dante stands to the right. Whereas in Dantis Amor the allegorical figure of love stood midway between heaven and earth, here Beatrice bridges this gap for Dante.

Undated studies taken from Lizzie before her death[17] attest to the fact that Rossetti had conceived of this painting as another testament to Dante, and not to the dead Lizzie, as some would believe. Beatrice, for Rossetti, represented the one human form that was capable of perfection, which attribute Dante no doubt recognized in her. She is more than the symbol for an absolute, however. To Rossetti she proved that it was within a man's power to transcend the realm of the physical and become one with the eternal and universal. In Beata Beatrix, Beatrice is shown at the precise moment of transition. Her body attests to her earthbound nature yet her expression assumes the divine. This "becoming" process in effect represents what is occurring in much of Rossetti's painting. His striving for the spiritual with physical means creates that transitional netherworld between heaven and earth that is so characteristic of the atmosphere in his paintings.

What perhaps is most interesting about Beata Beatrix is that in order to consummate her perfect love, Beatrice must die first. If one considers this statement: "A love of love as an absolute, unrelated to human conditions, is a love of death,"[18] the parallels between Beatrice and Rossetti are many. Both have a common goal; they worship other-worldly ideals. The Medieval Beatrice aspired to be one with Christ whereas the nineteenth century Rossetti was devoted to the Neo-Platonic ideals of Love and Beauty. Beatrice acted as a symbol to Dante and she made him aware of higher things. Such is the painting of Rossetti; it acts as a bridge between his own world of the senses and the world of absolutes he so persistently aimed for. And lastly, just as Beatrice must shed her body in order to free the spirit, so too does Rossetti, in the late 1860's, with his blinded cupids, increasingly grow more self-destructive, perhaps in the very name of Love.

297. *Aurea Catena* (Cat. no. 209)

29:

Aurea Catena: a portrait of Jane Morris

"...and finally, like Aaron's rod swallowing up all the rest, came the face of Mrs. Morris, and so potent was its influence that it is now universally accepted as the 'Rossetti-type', the absolute invention and patent of the poet-painter."

Graham Robertson

CHAPTER FOUR

THE JANE MORRIS AFFAIR

The happiness, wealth, and fame that Rossetti had enjoyed in the 1860's was certainly apparent in the robustness of his painting. His images were clear and his intentions easily interpreted in terms of good and evil. It was during the latter half of the decade that Rossetti, urged on the his friends and buoyed by his success, decided to exhume the volume of poems that he had buried some years before with his dead wife. This action was to haunt him for his remaining years, as if Lizzie herself wreaked vengeance from the grave. Although an accomplished painter, Rossetti had always been a poet at heart. It comes as no surprise then that at his height as a visual artist, he would feel secure enough to make public the record of his most intimitate feelings, his poems. This volume was published in 1870 and immediately received scathing criticism from Robert Buchanan, a portion of whose review I quoted at the outset of this study. This, along with imagined attacks by Browning and Tennyson, caused the sensitive Rossetti to believe that a secret conspiracy had been formed against him and was out for his destruction. Considering the breakdown of his earlier ideals and his growing obsession with the femme fatale just a

few years before, one can see Rossetti as a man who felt deeply threatened and persecuted, as if his whole world were about to fall in. It was during this period that Rossetti had become addicted to the drug chloral which he took in generous portions to cure his insomnia. Chloral was physically harmful, and under its prolonged use, Rossetti began to deteriorate. His disturbed imagination distorted people and situations all out of perspective while his ailing body experienced failing eyesight and occasional paralysis. This culminated in a suicide attempt in 1872 with the same drug that earlier had killed his wife. From the publication of Poems in 1870 until his death in 1882, was a period of intense physical and mental anguish highlighted only by his love for Mrs. William Morris.

"Janey," as she is affectionately regarded by Rossetti scholars, was the wife of his friend and associate, William "Topsy" Morris. It is in his painted tributes to her that Rossetti's personal fantasies and poetic vision reach their zenith. During his clandestine love for Janey, Rossetti once again became the Medieval knight who served his lady and the courtly bard who sang of their love. As he had before with Lizzie, Rossetti identified Janey as the object of his Neo-Platonic search upon whom he could channel all his energies and order his existence. But there was one major difference between his relationship with Janey and his earlier relationship with Lizzie. Whereas he had cast Lizzie into the mold of the blessed damozel, Janey became the nexus for all his fantasies in whom he could recast old dreams and restate old problems.[1] Janey was all-inclusive; she became the "one necessary person" for him.

Rossetti had met Janey, then Miss Burden, at the theater in 1857 with his friends, Morris and Burne-Jones; the trio immediately proclaimed her a "stunner." Shortly thereafter, Rossetti persuaded her to model for Guenevere in the Oxford mural, Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael, and for the Virgin in the Llandaff Cathedral triptych, The Seed of David. It would seem that even his first impressions of Janey were dualistic. William Morris soon married her; and Rossetti saw little of this woman he was to love until 1865, when the Morrises moved to the Bloomsbury section of London.

Rossetti's first portrait of Mrs. Morris (pl. 29) was executed in 1868 and, at this point, he had not yet begun to fantasize. Janey is seated at a table and wears a blue dress, the colour of faithfulness. A vase of roses, the flower of passion, rests near her elbows. His desire for Janey is ever so subtly indicated. Mrs. Morris, however, turns her head away from the tempting flowers. Inscribed along the top of the painting are the Latin words: "Famous for her poet-husband and famous for her face, may my picture add to her fame." He readily attests to her beauty, yet is ever so cautious to acknowledge the fact that his sitter is married. This painting best describes the early stages of their relationship: a beautiful woman, faithful to her husband, whose charms have aroused the affections of another.

It was not long thereafter that Rossetti abandoned his objective treatment of Mrs. Morris and began to see her, also, sub specie litteratum. These first fantasies, rightly enough, deal with the unhappy marriage theme. Rossetti depicted Janey as famous women from legend

who were bound through wedlock to men for whom they had no love, a situation that he no doubt felt was parallel to his own. It is interesting to note here the changeover in his imagery from the absolutes of good and evil to the personal and the particular. Rossetti was no longer trying to define his ideals; with Janey, in the unhappy marriage series, he subjectively investigates the situation at hand, imposing his own attitudes. The result is not a clearly defined image in terms of black and white but, rather, a deeply intimate, profusely melancholic point of view.

Perhaps his greatest tribute to Janey as the victimized woman occurs in La Pia de'Tolomei (pl. 30), which was begun in 1868 and completed nearly twelve years later, this period of time spanning Rossetti's love for her. The source of this painting is from Dante's Purgatorio (Canto V, ll. 130-6) and deals with Pia de'Tolomei, the victim of an unhappy marriage, whose wicked husband imprisons her within a castle where he later murders her. The significance of this subject is dual. First, with Janey as Pia, Rossetti expresses his anguish that she, his beloved, is trapped by the bonds of marriage and is thus unattainable to him, just as la Pia is imprisoned here. Secondly, the concept of unhappy marriage was already a nightmarish reality to Rossetti whose own wife had committed suicide some years before.

Two preliminary studies to La Pia, dated 1868, emanate the aura of sadness that is to become overwhelming in the finished work. Aurea Catena (pl. 28), "the golden chain," shows Janey upon a balcony thoughtfully fingering the golden chains about her neck, here symbolic of bondage. In the background, two rivers flow side by side far into the

distance yet never join, a comment on the futility of their love. In Reverie, the most like La Pia in format, Janey gazes broodingly into space. In both, the elevated poses and the longing, faraway expressions are reminiscent of the maiden in The Blessed Damozel and Rossetti's earlier kept women.

The finished la Pia sits upon the balcony of a fortress-like castle. Heavy green ivy, symbolic of memory, frames her form. The distant sky of the background is overcast with dark clouds, indicative of her impending doom. On the ledge at her feet lie an open missal, a few sheets of paper, and a sundial. The sundial, a device used in both Dantis Amor and Beata Beatrix, suggests the hour of her death. Embossed upon the side is a winged angel with a wheel of fire, the allegorical figure of Love. The religious details no doubt are a reference to her place in Purgatory, the Circle of the Unshriven, for those who have died suddenly without time to repent their sins. Here la Pia ignores her prayers as she inwardly ponders some mysterious secret. Indeed her face is a most interesting paradox, for as her eyes soulfully gaze in one direction, her shapely head is turned in the other. It is as if her inner turmoil and indecision is echoed in this outward contrast. The letters, which are not directly related to the story, are, perhaps, a personal reference on Rossetti's part to the correspondence that he and Janey carried on over the years during periods of painful separation.

These items of the foreground are indicative of the present moment--they tell of what is now occurring. The background symbols, however,

are suggestive of what is to come in the near future. A bell tolls and the sky darkens, both symbolic of death. A flock of ravens, a reference to Edgar Allen Poe, hovers menacingly. Certainly the melancholy of the raven who calls "Nevermore!" pervades this entire painting. In the yard below, several spears and a standard lie horizontally in the traditional position of surrender. This figures directly with la Pia's expression which is also one of quiet submission. Thus, there is this all so subtle interrelation of background to foreground via a tightly knit network of symbolism. The premonitory objects of the foreground find their counterparts or fulfillment in the background and vice versa.

In La Pia, then, the composition holds together by the content of a readable pictorial surface. It is through the digestion of the individual symbols that one consumes the painting as a whole. Although Rossetti had been using this device throughout the 1860's, the accessories in Lady Lilith or Sibylla Palmifera serve as attributes to the woman's position; that is, they tell the spectator whether this muse is sacred or profane. In La Pia, however, these same symbols are used to tell a story. Here Janey does not represent an absolute virtue, but a particular woman in a particular situation. Considering Rossetti's romantic involvement with Janey at this time, the painting takes on an extremely personal nature. Rossetti had used narrative devices in his Medieval water colours also, but unlike those works, the action in La Pia is incomplete. The stage has been set, if you will, but the drama has yet to occur.

It is primarily in this way that Rossetti differed from his Victorian counterparts. True, like Millais, Hunt, and Frith, he made use of anecdotal devices to illustrate a story, but his vision extends beyond the mawkish sentiment of his contemporaries to the realm of symbolist art.

> ...this sense of an equal and indefeasible reality of the things symbolized and of the form which conveys the symbol--this externalism and internalism--are constantly to be understood as the key-note of Rossetti's aim and performance in art.[2]

Moreover, Rossetti is most modern in his subjectivity: the projection of himself and his personal experience into his work. Certainly he is much like the "new messiah" that Werner Hoffman refers to in The Earthly Paradise.

Other paintings in the unhappy marriage series include Penelope (1869), Janey as the faithful wife of Ulysses; Proserpine (1877), Janey bearing the fateful pommegranate that binds her to Hades; and Desdemona's Death Song (1878-81), illustrating Othello, Act IV, Scene iii. Mariana (pl. 31) of 1870, although usually not included in this series, depicts Janey as the love-sequestered lady of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure and Tennyson's poem. Once again Janey wears the blue colour of faithfulness, and her beautiful face is clouded with melancholy as she listens to the words of the minstrel's song: "Take, o take, thy lips away." An earlier study reveals that Rossetti had originally considered using the vase of roses once again in place of the young page. So involved is Mariana in the song, that her sewing drops unnoticed into her

lap. In all of Rossetti's unhappily married women, there is this same sense of idleness and inner pre-occupation: La Pia ignored her prayers and fingered her wedding band; Aurea Catena, her golden chains; and both Penelope and Mariana lost track of their needlework. One must conjecture that these muses are brooding over their lonely positions, just as Rossetti must have brooded over his separation from Janey.

These characteristics of idle waiting and langour shrouded with melancholy do not exclude Rossetti's other portraits of Janey. Indeed they appear strongly in La Donna della Fiamma (pl. 32), also of 1870, who is perhaps the most wistful and humourless of all his muses. Gowned in flowing robes, her jet hair wildly curling, Janey darkly glares into empty space. From her right hand, in what appears to be a careless gesture, a flame and winged figure issue forth into the air. At first glance, the flame appears to be a scarf that Janey casually waves in the breeze. The winged figure no doubt represents the ever-familiar figure of Love. But what is Love doing, flowing so effortlessly from Janey's outstretched palm? Initially, this brings to mind lines seventeen and eighteen of the sonnet written for the painted version of The Blessed Damozel:[3] "And the souls mounting up to God/ went by her like thin flames." Also, in the sense of Pandora's box, which will be discussed later, it could be some sort of mystical power, thus denoting Janey supernatural capabilities. Or, more likely, it represents the elusiveness of love which Rossetti, who has imposed himself upon the image of Janey, felt was escaping his grasp.

It is interesting to digress here to examine briefly William Morris, the man whose wife Rossetti so passionately courted on canvas and in verse. In May of 1871, Rossetti and the Morris family jointly leased Kelmscott Manor. In July of that same year, William Morris left for a journey to Iceland and did not return until the following autumn. Rossetti, left alone with Janey, undoubtedly allowed himself to realize his hidden fantasies. Janey's influence could be felt in his poetry, particularly in the House of Life sonnet series, the record of his clandestine passion for her. Janey gave him the renewed hope and moral purpose that had been lacking during the 1860's. His work shed the sensuous eroticism exemplified by Lady Lilith and Eden Bower and was imbued with new emotional fervor. The work of William Morris, on the other hand, revealed the sadness and despair due to rejected love.[4] He wrote a long, contemporary novel about two brothers who loved the same woman, a work he never finished. Also, his stories "The Earthly Paradise," "The Lovers of Gudrun," and his poem "The Pilgrims of Hope" dealt with the theme of infidelity. No doubt he compared himself to King Arthur, whose own wife and dearest friend had betrayed him.

If we can assume from the unhappy marriage series that Rossetti was interjecting his own personal fantasies into his paintings of Janey, then can we not assume also that perhaps the melancholy in Janey's expression is but a mirror of his own unhappiness, longing, and frustration? This is not at all far-fetched if one examines the use of the mirror image throughout the painting and poetry of Rossetti. It

appears in his early literary works: Hand and Soul, St. Agnes of the Intercession, and The Mirror. In How They Met Themselves (pl. 6), an ink sketch of 1861, he illustrated the legend of the doppelganger wherein a couple encounter their exact doubles while walking in the forest one night, a sure presage of death. Clearly this sort of thing fascinated him, and perhaps accounts for why he enjoyed identifying with or finding duplicates in characters from the past for himself and the women with whom he was involved. However, the doppelganger legend resulted in death, and he soon discovered that placing people in pre-determined roles did not always work. There was something morbid with his obsession with the mirror image, an observation that is made fact upon examination of the Willowwood sonnets written in 1868 (House of Life, XLIX-LII).

The four sonnets deal with the imagined meeting of a pair of lovers. The narrator muses in a forest, his thoughts lending a melancholic mood to the poem. As he gazes into the brook before him, his own reflection is transformed into that of his lover. The description of this reflection bears a startling resemblance to Jane Morris: "the dark ripples spread to waving hair" (line 12); "its grey eyes" (line 7). In the last sonnet, he stoops to embrace the image before him, only to have it vanish into the dark waters from whence it arose. The mood becomes one of despair. Certainly the action of kissing one's own reflection can be likened to the self-destructive gesture of Narcissus.[5] This poem is crucial to an understanding of Rossetti's later painting and of his love for Mrs. Morris. It is obvious that Rossetti sees

himself in her, that in essence, Janey becomes the mirror for his soul. Therefore, she reflects his own feelings. The melancholy in her face is his own melancholy imposed upon her image. Moreover, his love for Janey becomes a love of death.

In The Blessed Damozel poem, Rossetti set forth his ideal of the beautiful woman as the symbol of the soul, the key to his self-perfection. His Medieval water colours and his later paintings, Regina Cordium and Sibylla Palmifera, reveal that he worshipped the absolute of Love. However, as I mentioned earlier, a love of love is essentially a love of death. The failure to achieve these ideals in his life caused him to create the femme fatale that denigrated all that he held sacred. Much of this earlier painting wavers between good and evil, the sacred and the profane. During his later years, however, Rossetti realized, as the logical development of his philosophical system, that it was possible to achieve these vainly sought ideals through death. He had failed to find them in his lifetime; and thus, as an older man whose time was running out, he looked toward death as a new hope. What had essentially been a worship of Love evolves into a worship of Death, Beauty acting as the vehicle of expression in both. And Jane Morris becomes the last desperate object of his lifelong search.

Consider also his sonnet Through Death to Love (House of Life, XLI). Once again he acknowledges death as the liberating force behind which lies perfection. The entire House of Life sonnet series deals with the themes of love and death, reunion and separation--these reflecting back upon his relationship with Mrs. Morris. In Sonnets XCIX and C, Newborn

Death I and Newborn Death II, Rossetti conceives of Death as a newborn baby upon his knee ("to find no terrors in a face so mild," line five). He toys with idea of death and does not seem to fear it; rather, his obsession is most morbid. His love for Janey, actually a self love, was an expression of his death wish.

> The desire for death as the consummation of love, this physical and spiritual vampirism which in its narcissistic urge would absorb, destroy the beloved and indeed the self, was in fact, a basic psychological attitude of Rossetti. [6]

During his last years, Rossetti realized that his ideals had failed him and that he was growing old and weary. He lived with the constant fear of losing his eyesight, as his father had gone blind some years before. And thus, Jane Morris became his last desperate hope for salvation. He had to make the idea of Janey work for him, otherwise his life really would have been in vain.

The death wish is best expressed in the painted version of The Blessed Damozel (1875-8). Although Alexa Wilding was the model for the bereaved maiden, the actual importance of the painting lies in the background. There the "lovers newly met" are shown in full embrace (pl. 33). A closer look reveals that all the women have been modelled after Janey. Indeed, even their partners appear to be masculine versions of Mrs. Morris. This male-female Jane Morris unit thus becomes a sort of androgen wherein the sexes are indiscernable different in appearance, and are fused together in the inseparable, all-consuming embrace. In this way, Janey becomes the fulfillment of Rossetti's earliest dream, originally put forth in The Blessed Damozel poem. In the painting, the

dream becomes a very real possibility, achievable only through death. And Janey, as both male and female, becomes the Ideal that Rossetti had always searched for--the perfection of the Self, the union of man with his soul.

Rossetti's later work, then, is heavy with death. His poetry sings its praises while his paintings dramatize the fulfillment of the death wish. As a result, many symbolic devices undergo a change in meaning from their previously held associations. An apt example of this is music which formerly had been the embodiment of pleasant euphoria (i.e. The Christmas Carol, Morning Music, The Blue Bower). In The Bower Meadow of 1872 (pl. 34), the quality of music loses its lightness, becoming heavy, solemn, and pondersome. The stop action poses in balanced opposition to one another create the effect of a dull, repetitive cadence--not unlike that of a dirge. In A Sea-Spell (pl. 35) of 1877, Rossetti deals with the song of the Lorelei whose music destroyed all those who listened. Indeed, even the bird in this painting, which was usually a positive symbol (cf. Beata Beatrix), takes on a negative connotation.

In keeping with the idea of the death wish, Rossetti envisioned Mrs. Morris as his most terrifying femme fatales. Gone is the eroticism of his past seductresses and in their place is a deadly voluptuousness coupled with diabolical powers. As with both Astarte Syriaca (pl. 36) of 1877 and Pandora (pl. 37) of 1871, he portrays Janey as a mystical sorceress whose magical abilities surpass her darkly evil beauty. Indeed, the lurid orange smoke that oozes forth from Pandora's

box is symbolic of the new spirit of death in his work. Although it might seem strange that Rossetti would envision his beloved Janey as his most decadent image of woman, one must keep in mind that as the destructress, Janey could better satisfy his death longing. She was the ever-malleable form that would fit into any mold.

Astarte Syriaca especially emanates a heaviness of mood that reminds one of death. Janey's features have been exaggerated for symbolic effect. Her eyes, lips, and hair become larger than life and her body is elongated to superhuman proportions. Mrs. Morris and her starry-eyed attendants seem drugged and sluggish, echoing the overall mood of the painting.

> ...a characteristic 'poetic' mood of Rossetti's in which he glimpsed the lotus land of his heart's desire: where sensuous beauty, peace, langour, sadness, pleasure, mingle to form for him a ravishing harmony of flesh and spirit. [7]

Once again Janey becomes the androgen. She has the face and breasts of a woman yet her Michelangelesque body is more like that of a man. The space in this painting is suffocated by the large bodies of Janey and her attendants. Stepping forward, she numbly moves toward the spectator as if to snuff out his life. If she is to symbolize hope, it is a very sick hope to be sure.

Indeed, Jane Morris represented all things to Rossetti. As his beloved, his one hope for salvation, she paradoxically became the symbol of death. Rossetti imposed more fantasies upon her than he had with any other woman, for she became the ploy for all his own very

complex feelings. Just as in the 1860's, when he explored opposing images in his search for the Ideal, so too in his later painting does this duality appear between the sacred and the profane. His last images of Janey deal with the themes of renewed hope and confusion, sentiments that are echoed throughout the House of Life.

Although he had placed Janey into the roles of his most decadent femme fatales, she was, after all, his beloved and he never entirely gave up hope in her powers of salvation. He was ever intent upon seeing her as the blessed damozel and for inspiration, turned to Dante. Perhaps his most successful attempt at this occurs in La Donna della Finestra (pl. 38) of 1879. This painting depicts Janey surrounded by roses and seated at a window, thoughtfully looking outward. The subject is from the Vita Nuova and represents the Lady of Pity who gazes compassionately at Dante who is grieving over the recent death of his Beatrice. Allegorically, she is to be Philosophy, but Rossetti interpreted her as Gemma Donati[8] who was eventually to become Dante's wife. Thus, Janey in this role provides Rossetti with the promise of future happiness. In this portrait he places his last and most desperate hopes. For, just as Dante whose Beatrice has died, he who has lost his dreams pins his hopes on this one last resource.

Rossetti turned to Dante again for renewed feelings in his final triumph to Beatrice, The Salutation of Beatrice[9] (pl. 39) of 1880-1. This painting illustrates the lines from the second sonnet to the Vita Nuova:

> My lady looks to gentle and so pure
> When yielding salutation by the way,
> That the tongue trembles and has nought to say,
> And the eyes, which fain would see, may not endure.
> And still amid the praise she hears secure,
> She walks with humbleness for her array. [10]

Clasping a missal, Janey walks through the streets of Florence as roses spring up around her. In the background, the Angel of Love shelters Dante with its wings. Beatrice's head is bowed and she avoids any direct spectator contact. This particular situation differs from his earlier salutations wherein there had been either a direct giving of or denial of the salutation itself. This instance does not offer such satisfaction; Beatrice is in an ambivalent position.

Just as his last Beatrice reflects the artist's own confusion, so too does The Day Dream (pl. 40) of 1880, often called Monna Primavera, occupy an ambiguous position. Whereas in the 1860's Rossetti had formulated two distinct types of women, the blessed damozel and the femme fatale, and his paintings of women, for the most part, fell into one category or the other, Janey, because she meant all things, was capable of either role. In The Day Dream, she straddles both categories and one can not reconcile her true position. The painting is supposed to personify the season of Spring, and Rossetti has placed Janey in a tree, no doubt to be a new blossom. This treatment is quite unusual for formerly a woman in a tree symbolized lust (cf. Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael, and the character Lilith in Eden Bower). And just as his late Beatrice, one can not reconcile her true position. David Sonstroem most aptly wrote: "Janey's greatest disservice to Rossetti was her meaning too many things to him."[11]

Perhaps much of the ambiguity and confusion can be traced back to Jane Morris herself. With her, more than with any other woman, he came closest to achieving the synthesis of spiritual and physical beauty which he was always seeking. She was an uncommonly attractive woman, her beauty belonging to the realm of the sublime. And Dante Gabriel Rossetti devoted himself to that beauty as if it were an ideal in itself. William Michael Rossetti, the artist's brother, said of her appearance:

> Her face was at once tragic, mystic, passionate, calm, beautiful and gracious--a face for a sculptor, and a face for a painter--a face solitary in England, and not at all like that of an Englishwoman, but rather of an Ionian Greek. It was not a face for that large class of English people who only take to the "pretty," and not to the beautiful or superb... [12]

and of his brother's paintings of her:

> For idealizing there was but one process--to realize.[13]

There is no doubt that Rossetti's portraits of her were true to life, that, in fact, Mrs. Morris really did look that way. The writer Henry James described a painting of Janey which he called "so strange and unreal that if you hadn't seen her you'd pronounce it a distempered vision but in fact an excellent likeness."[14] No matter what situation Rossetti placed her in or what fantasies he imposed upon her, Janey's appearance always spoke most eloquently for itself. Her face was so potent that it has since become the universal symbol of Rossetti's work.

This ambiguity, the inability to identify an image in terms of the sacred and the profane, is symbolic of the final dissolution of

Rossetti's ideals. The Day Dream and The Salutation of Beatrice lack the strong positive values that ordinarily accompanied his heavenly ladies. And his femme fatales lose their sensual robustness, becoming strangely mannered and morbid. A little known drawing of 1875 called The Question (pl. 41) sheds considerable light upon this late ideological impotence. The drawing illustrates the allegory of the Sphinx, a subject which Ingres had painted in 1808. According to Rossetti, it was to commemorate the premature death of Ford Madox Brown's promising young son, "the mystery of early death, one of the hardest of all impenetrable dooms."[15]

The Question represents the three ages of man: a youth swoons at the feet of the Sphinx, letting his spear drop; a man in his prime bears in at the creature, as if demanding an answer; and in the background an old man, bearded and leaning on his staff, wearily creeps upward. The Sphinx is depicted as the traditional hybrid of a woman, a lion, and a bird. With eyes upturned, she evades the hardput stare of the central man, remaining eternally inscrutible and mysterious. There are three possible interpretations of this drawing. First, it may be a purely commemorative work dealing with the death of Nolly Brown. Secondly, it is possible, though highly improbable, that Rossetti merely wanted to illustrate the legend of the Sphinx with no ulterior motives. The third and most likely option is that The Question stems from Rossetti's desire to express pictorially his view of the mystery of life which he had articulated in several of his poems at this time,[16] such as The Cloud Confines and Soothsay. I feel that

this is the most logical explanation, for at this period in his life, Rossetti had reached a standstill and a state of frustration similar to that of the central male figure in The Question. In this sense, the drawing becomes an allegory of his own life.

It is not difficult to imagine that the dead youth is symbolic of Rossetti's early ideals, the eager ones set forth in The Blessed Damozel which had failed him in his life. At the time of this drawing he was forty-seven years old, the approximate age of the central male. His painted and literary work at this time reflected an extremely personal, introspective nature that is expressed by the male figure. His impending old age is indicated by the elderly figure in the background. The Sphinx becomes the symbol of the mysteries of life, but moreover, she represents Rossetti's career as an artist, for she is, after all, a woman. The allegory of the Sphinx is perfectly applicable to Rossetti's own situation at this time, considering his creation of the androgen and the ambiguity in much of his imagery. The robustness and precision of his painting of the 1860's had deteriorated into exaggerated forms, reflecting his own sick and confused state of mind. This drawing represents a direct confrontation with the ideals that had so miserably failed him in his life and, subsequently, his art. The confrontation is left unsolved. This drawing gains even more significance when one learns that on his deathbed on Easter Sunday, 1882, Dante Gabriel Rossetti dictated two sonnets dealing with the theme of the Sphinx.[17] His conflicting fantasies and inward struggles remained unresolved to the very end.

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

1 The poetry here referred to is that which was exhumed from the grave of Elizabeth Siddal Rossetti nearly seven years after her death and published in 1870 simply as Poems.

2 Buckley, Jerome H. (editor) "The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti " by Robert Buchanan. The Pre-Raphaelites. New York: The Modern Library. 1968. p. 444.

3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet. London: The Royal Academy of the Arts. 1973. p. 19.

4 For more on Rossetti's Neo-Platonism, see "Rossetti's Conception of the 'Poetic' in Poetry and Painting " by Oswald Doughty. Royal Society of Literature. Essays by Divers Hands. London: Oxford University Press. 1953. pps. 99-100.

5 Buckley. Op Cit. Hand and Soul. p. 190.

6 The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in September, 1848 by a group of enthusiastic young men: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, William Michael Rossetti, Thomas Woolner, Frederic George Stephenson, and James Collinson. The first three were the recognized leaders of the group.

7 Nochlin, Linda. "England: The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Friends." Realism and Tradition in Art: 1848-1900. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1966. pps. 117-123.

An unfavorable criticism of the Pre-Raphaelites appearing in The Times goaded Ruskin into his famous defense of the Brotherhood in 1851.

8 Rossetti spent six years at art schools. He entered Sass's Drawing Academy in 1841, and in 1845, studied at the Antique School of the Royal Academy for the next two years. In 1848, he studied with Ford Madox Brown and upon breaking away from his teacher, took up a studio with William Holman Hunt in August of the same year.

9 Six books represent the seven Cardinal Virtues. According to Surtees, the missing virtue is Justice. I am struck by this for in his painted version of The Blessed Damozel of 1875-8, there are are but six stars in the damozel's crown, again leaving out the seventh virtue.

10 Christina Rossetti sat for the young Virgin and Frances Polidori Rossetti, for St. Anne. St. Joachim was modelled after the Rossetti family servant and a child model was used for the angel.

11 William Michael Rossetti modelled for the angel, who is grown up from his predecessor in The Girlhood, and Christina Rossetti is again the Virgin.

12 Both Werner Hofmann in The Earthly Paradise and Edith Hoffmann in "Some Sources for Munch's Symbolism," Apollo, 1965, suggest the possible relations between Rossetti's vision of puberty and Munch's later treatment of the same theme.

NOTES

CHAPTER TWO

1 Surtees, Virginia. The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. London: Oxford University Press. 1971. p. 13.

2 Buckley, Jerome H. (editor). "The P.R.B." by Christina Rossetti. The Pre-Raphaelites. New York: The Modern Library. 1968. p. 203.

3 Hilton, Timothy. The Pre-Raphaelites. New York: Abrams. 1970. p. 100.

4 Huizinga, J. The Waning of the Middle Ages. New York: Doubleday. 1954. pps. 78-9.

5 Rossetti's last treatment of the Salutation of Beatrice dealt with the third passage in the Vita Nuova, and was executed in 1880-1. This painting is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

6 Marillier, H. C. "The Salutations of Beatrice: as Treated Pictorially by D. G. Rossetti." The Art Journal. December, 1899. p. 353.

7 Marillier, H. C. Ibid., p. 354.

8 The translation of these lines are roughly as follows:
"Qui est per omnia saecula benedictus:" He who is holiest of all things.
"Quella beata Beatrice che mira continuamente nella faccia di colui:" She, blessed Beatrice, whose direction (i.e. gaze) is continually toward his.

"L'Amour che muove il sole e l'altre stelle:" Love, he who moves the sun and the other stars.

9 a. The translation of these lines from the Italian is roughly: "Quanti dolci pensier Quanto disio:" Such a pleasant thought, such desire.

"Meno costoro al doloroso passo:" No less their painful journey.

"O lasso!": Alas!

b. "Lust is a type of shared sin; there is mutuality in it and exchange...For this reason Dante, with perfect orthodoxy, rates it as the least hateful of the deadly sins." Dorothy L. Sayers, translator. The Divine Commedy: Hell. Baltimore: Penguin Books. 1949. p. 101.

10 Grylls, Rosalie Glynn. Portrait of Rossetti. London: MacDonald. 1964. p. 78.

11 Sonstroem, David. "The Victimized Woman." Rossetti and the Fair Lady. Wesleyan University Press. 1970.

12 Wood, T. Martin. "The True Rossetti." The Studio. 69:3-12. October, 1916. p. 3.

13 Hilton, Timothy. Op. Cit., p. 100.

14 Fry, Roger. "Rossetti's Water Colours of 1857." Burlington. 29:100-9. 1916. p. 100.

15 Fry, Roger. Ibid., p. 100.

16 Rossetti wrote a sonnet to accompany the painting Found, of the same title, which I have included in the Appendix.

NOTES

CHAPTER THREE

1 In addition to these possible causes, Violet Hunt in The Wife of Rossetti (New York, 1932) went so far as to accuse Rossetti of having murdered Lizzie!

2 Grylls, Rosalie Glynn. Portrait of Rossetti. London: MacDonald. 1964. p. 89.

3 The exact date of their first meeting is questionable. Fanny is usually credited as the model in Found, which was painted in 1854, (according to Surtees); yet other sources (i.e. The Royal Academy of Arts Catalog, 1973) place the event as late as 1857.

4 Mander, Rosalie. "Rossetti's Models." Apollo. July, 1963. p. 18.

5 Surtees, Virginia. The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Volume One. London: Oxford University Press. 1971. p. 68.

6 Ibid., p. 104.

7 Forsyth, P. T. Religion in Recent Art. London: Hodder and Stoughton. 1905. p. 32.

8 Walter Pater, a contemporary of Rossetti, wrote a book entitled The Renaissance in which he saw the Mona Lisa as a femme fatale, whose enigmatic smile betrayed knowledge of "secrets from the grave."

9 Grieve, Alistair I. "Whistler and the Pre-Raphaelites." Art Quarterly. Vol. 34. No. 2. 1971. pps. 221-2.

10 Forsyth, Op. Cit., p. 23.

11 Surtees, Op. Cit., p. 112.

12 Surtees, Op. Cit., p. 111.

13 Sonstroem, David. Rossetti and the Fair Lady. Wesleyan University Press. 1970. p. 141.

14 Forsyth, Op. Cit., p. 32.

15 Forsyth, Op. Cit., p. 34-5.

16 Benson, Arthur C. Rossetti. London: MacMillan and Company, Ltd. 1926. p. 193.

17 See Surtees' Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Vol. II. Catalog #239, #240, #241.

18 Doughty, Oswald. A Victorian Romantic. Yale University Press. 1949. p. 407.

NOTES

CHAPTER FOUR

1 Sonstroem, David. Rossetti and the Fair Lady. Wesleyan University Press. 1970. p. 121. The last three chapters of Sonstroem's book deal exclusively with Jane Morris and the influence she wielded over Rossetti's late poetry. For more details of the Morris-Rossetti romance, see Doughty's A Victorian Romantic; his account is extensive.

2 Rossetti, William Michael. Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer. London: Cassel & Co., Ltd. 1889. p. 108.

3 See Surtees, Volume One, page 141 for a copy of this poem. Rossetti wrote a special poem later in life specifically to illustrate his painting, The Blessed Damozel (1875-8). This later sonnet and earlier poem are indiscernable in meaning although the latter is much longer and more elaborate.

4 Doughty, Oswald. A Victorian Romantic. Yale University Press. 1949. p. 461.

5 Sonstroem, Op. Cit., p. 132.

6 Doughty, Op. Cit., p. 407.

7 Doughty, Oswald. "Rossetti's Conception of the 'Poetic' in Poetry and Painting." Royal Society of Literature. Essays by Divers Hands. London: Oxford University Press. 1953. p. 97.

8 Surtees, Virginia. The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Volume One. London: Oxford University Press. 1971. p. 151.

9 This is the last painting in his series of the Salutations of Beatrice, and differs considerably form his other two renditions. Again, this is in keeping with the confusion of his later years.

10 Rogers, Millard F., Jr. "The Salutation of Beatrice: by Dante Gabriel Rossetti." Connoisseur. 153:180-1. July, 1963. p. 180.

11 Sonstroem, Op. Cit., p. 173.

12 Sonstroem, Op. Cit., p. 125.

13 Sonstroem, Op. Cit., p. 125

14 Mander, Rosalie. "Rossetti's Models." Apollo. July, 1963. p. 19.

15 Surtees, Op. Cit., p. 140.

16 Peterson, Carl A. "Rossetti and the Sphinx." Apollo. January, 1967. p. 48.

17 Both sonnets dealing with the theme of the Sphinx are included in the Appendix section.

PLATES

Plate 6:

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin

Plate 7:

Ecce Ancilla Domine
(The Annunciation)

Plate 8:

How They Met Themselves

Plate 9:

Before The Battle

Plate 10:

Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Wedding Feast, Denies Him Her Salutation

Plate 11:

Il Saluto di Beatrice
(The Salutation of Beatrice)

Plate 12: Study for Dantis Amor

Plate 13: Paolo and Francesca da Rimini

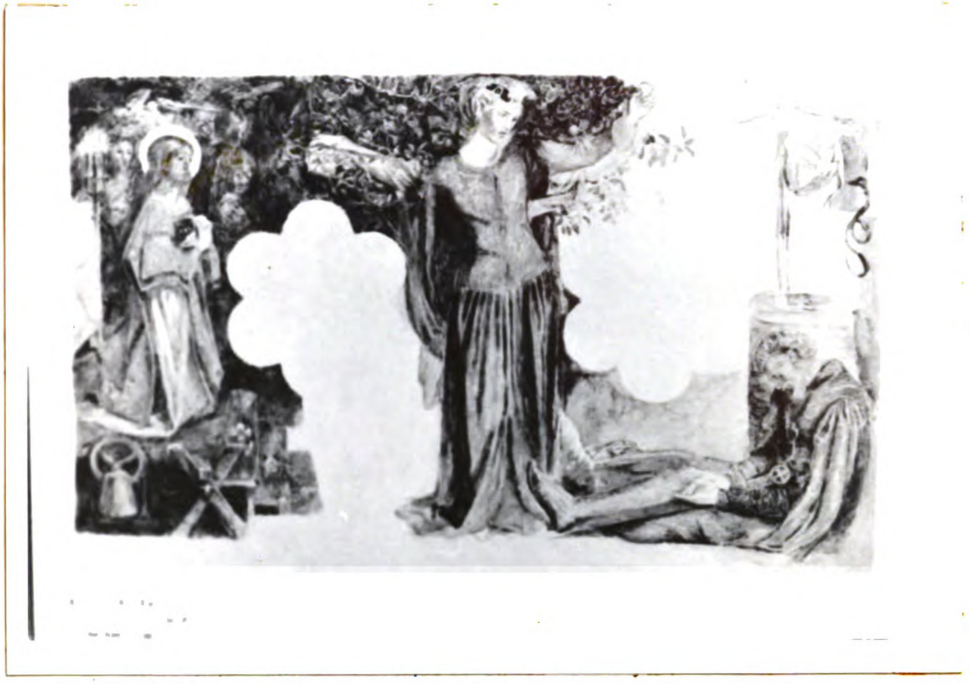

Plate 14: Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael

Plate 15: How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors, and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Sanc Grael; but Sir Percival's Sister Died By the Way

Plate 16: Hamlet and Ophelia

Plate 17: The Christmas Carol

Plate 18: Found

Plate 19: Girl at a Lattice

Plate 20:

Bocca Baciata

Plate 21:

Fair Rosamund

Plate 22:

The Beloved (The Bride)

Plate 23:

The Blue Bower

Plate 24:

Lady Lilith

Plate 25:

Venus Verticordia

Plate 26:

Sibylla Palmifera
(Venus Palmifera)

Plate 27:

Regina Cordium

Plate 28:

Beata Beatrix

48. *Mrs. William Morris* (Cat. no. 372)

Plate 29:

Portrait of Mrs. William Morris

Plate 30: La Pia de'Tolomei

Plate 31: Mariana

Plate 32: La Donna della Fiamma

96c Study for *The Blessed Damozel* (Cat. no. 244 c)

Plate 33: Background Study for The Blessed Damozel

Plate 34:

The Bower Meadow

Plate 35:

A Sea-Spell

Plate 36: Astarte Syriaca

Plate 37: Pandora

Plate 38:

La Donna della Finestra

Plate 39:

Salutation of Beatrice

Plate 40:

The Day Dream (Monna Primavera)

Plate 41:

The Question

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APPENDIX
OF
CORRELATING POEMS

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 soul 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 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
  This 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.)

(1847)

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin

I

'This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect
God's Virgin. Gone is a great while, and she
Was young in Nazareth of Galilee.
Her kin she cherished with devout respect:
Her gifts were simpleness of intellect
And supreme patience. From her mother's knee
Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;
Strong in grave peace; in duty circumspect.

So held she through her girlhood; as it were
An angel-watered lily, that near God
Grows, and is quiet. 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.'

II

'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 palm seven-leaved
Are 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.'

(1849)

Found

"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!"

(1854)

Soul's Beauty

'Under the arch of Life, where love and death,
Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw
Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,
I drew it in as simply as my breath.
Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath,
The sky and sea bend on thee,--which can draw,
By sea or sky or woman, to one law,
The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.

This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise
Thy voice and hand shake still,--long known to thee
By flying hair and fluttering hem,--the beat
Following her daily of they heart and feet,
How passionately and irretrievably,
In what fond flight, how many ways and days!'

(House of Life, Sonnet LXXVII)

Body's Beauty

'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 web 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.'

(House of Life, Sonnet LXXVIII)

Willowwood Sonnets

XLIX. Willowwood--1

I sat with Love upon a woodside well,
Leaning across the water, I and he;
Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,
But touched his lute wherein was audible
The certain secret thing he had to tell.
Only our mirrored eyes met silently
In the low wave; and that sound came to be
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.
And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;
And with his foot and with his wing-feathers
He swept the spring that watered my heart's drouth.
Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.

(1868; 1869)

L. Willowwood--2

And now Love sang: but his was such a song,
So meshed with half-remembrance hard to free,
As souls disused in death's sterility
May sing when the new birthday tarries long.
And I was made aware of a dumb throng
That stood aloof, one form by every tree,
All mournful forms, for each was I or she,
The shades of those our days that had no tongue.
They looked on us, and knew us and were known;
While fast together, alive from the abyss,
Clung the soul-wrung implacable closs kiss;
And pity of self through all made broken moan
Which said, "For once, for once, for once alone!"
And still Love sang, and what he sang was this:

(1868; 1869)

LI. Willowwood--3

"O ye, all ye that walk in Willowwood,
That walk with hollow faces burning white:
What fathom-depth of soul-struck widow-
hood,
What long, what longer hours, one lifelong
night,
Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed
Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite
Your lips to that their unforgotten food,
Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!
Alas! the bitter banks in Willowwood,
With tear-spurge wan, with blood-wort burn-
ing red:
Alas! if ever such a pillow could
Steep deep the soul in sleep till she were
dead,--
Better all life forget her than this thing,
That Willowwood should hold her wander-
ing!"

(1868; 1869)

LII. Willowwood--4

So sang he: and as meeting rose and rose
Together cling through the wind's wellaway
Nor change at once, yet near the end of day
The leaves drop loosened where the heart-
stain glows,--
So when the song died did the kiss unclose;
And her face fell back drowned, and was as
gray
As its gray eyes; and if it ever may
Meet mine again I know not if Love knows.
Only I know that I leaned low and drank
A long draft from the water where she sank,
Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:
And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face
Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and
grace,
Till both our heads were in his aureole.

(1868; 1869)

The Question

'This sea, deep furrowed as the face of Time,
Mirrors the ghost of the removed moon;
The peaks stand bristling round the waste lagune;
While up the difficult summit steeply climb
Youth, Manhood, Age, one tripling labouring mime;
And to the measure of some mystic rune
Hark how the restless waters importune
These echoing steeps with chime and counter-chime.
What seek they? Lo, upreared against the rock
The Sphinx, Time's visible silence, frontleted
With Psyche wings, with eagle plumes arched o'er.
Ah, when those everlasting lips unlock
And the old riddle of the world is read,
What shall man find? or seeks he evermore?'

II

'Lo the three seekers! Youth has sprung the first
To question the Unknown: but see! he sinks
Prone to the earth--becomes himself a sphinx,--
A riddle of early death no love may burst.
Sorely anhungered, heavily athirst
For knowledge, Manhood next to reach the Truth
Peers in those eyes; till haggard and uncouth
Weak Eld renews that question long rehearsed.

Oh! and what answer? From the sad sea brim
The eyes o' the Sphinx stare through the midnight spell,
Unwavering,--man's eternal quest to quell:
While round the rock-steps of her throne doth swim
Through the wind-serried wave the moon's faint rim,
Sole answer from the heaven invisible.'

(Easter Sunday, 1882)