Journal of Literature and Art Studies, ISSN 2159-5836
December 2013, Vol. 3, No. 12, 772-786

Muse Turned "Femme Fatale" in D. G. Rossetti's Painting and Poetry*

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In many of D. G. Rossetti's paintings, Elizabeth Siddal appears as a model. In real life, they formed a married couple, and the relatonship was not as idealistic as it might have been, between a muse-figure and an artist. After Elizabeth's death, Rossetti seemed to have been preoccupied with the "Lilith" theme in his painting and poetry, and somehow he could not free himself from the haunting memory of the "wronged wife", the muse. This often found manifestation in his portrayal of the "femme fatale" images. Applying psychoanalysis to art-criticism and literary appreciation, this paper is an attempt to explore the relationship between a model and an artist, which both psychologically and aesthetically, seemed to be working beyond the former's death. Through a detailed analysis of the "Lilith" image in D. G. Rossetti's art, this paper has shown the coplexities of the artist's agony and anxiety over the image of a muse, a homely beloved—turned into a threatening "femme fatale", now distant, unknown, frightening yet fascinating, and mystified by death.

Keywords: D. G. Rossetti, "Lady Lilith", Elizabeth Siddal, femme fatale, pre-Raphaelite art

Introduction

In pre-Raphaelite art, the portrayal of the female figure combines sensuality with poetic idealism, fantasy with corporeality. The iconography of the female body represented by male art, in general, is broadly of two kinds: it is either idealized or demonized, or, in other words, "muse" on the one hand, and "femme fatale" on the other. In psychological terms of gender and representation, it can be seen as a form of male anxiety with the female "other", which needs to be pushed into the binary structure of perception. However, binaries are not free from the possibilities of challenge, coming from a different level of reality which tends to collapse the oppositions: one kind of iconography seems to merge into another. With this point in mind, one may proceed to explore an intriguing aspect in D. G. Rossetti[1]'s art, involving his personal and psychological engagements with his muse, wife, model—Elizabeth Siddal.

* **Acknowledgements:** For informative details, background studies, and general interpretations of the poems and the paintings, the author is largely indebted, besides the letters and biographical texts cited at the "references" section, to the Rossetti Archive at <http://www.rossettiarchive.org> and "Feminism and Womens' Studies" at <feminism.eserver.org>. However, the speculations and main findings regarding the "presence" of the dead Elizabeth Siddal behind these works, are the author's own.
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[1] All references to "Rossetti" within the text are to be understood as D. G. Rossetti, if not mentioned otherwise (W. M. Rossetti and C. G. Rossetti, for example).

D. G. Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal: The Relationship

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal's face looks out from some of the most famous paintings of the Victorian Age; she is Millais' Ophelia and Rossetti's Beatrice. Siddal has most often been identified as the principle model and muse of the pre-Raphaelite art movement of the mid-nineteenth century. An idealistic approach, though it may be too simplistic, will find it apparent that Rossetti had placed her on a pedestal; she was someone to be loved from afar, idealised and admired as an artistic muse and not merely as a woman of flesh and blood. His sister Christina Rossetti (n.d.) alludes to this artist-muse relationship in her poem "In an Artist's Studio":

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

In reality, however, everything in the relationship between Rossetti and Siddal was not so ideal, pure and beatific. Rossetti's marriage with Elizabeth was fated to last two years. Even before their marriage and during the courtship, they have endured separations, tensions and misunderstandings several times, and reconciliations as well. Their individual share of responsibility for this problematic relationship has already been a debated issue. Some would blame Rossetti's whims and involvement with other women, others would criticize Elizabeth for her manipulative nature and self-pitying obsession with illness and opium. Such arguments have a danger of being partial, especially where the question of gender-sympathy comes in. This is evident from the reaction of another artist-couple who visited Elizabeth, distraught, caught in a world of depression, grief and addiction, after the loss of her baby. Lucinda Hawksley (2004) describes this period in *Lizzie Siddal: The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel*, in deeply emotional details. Elizabeth Siddal, in her grief, became a pathetic figure, sitting in the drawing room for hours without moving her position, just staring silently into the fire. She refused to take any food, and became increasingly emaciated. Once Edward Burne-Jones and his pregnant wife Georgiana came to visit the Rossettis, and found Elizabeth alone, staring at the empty cradle, which she would rock tenderly from side to side as if soothing her child to sleep. As the door was opened by the visitors, she looked up and told them to be quiet so as not to wake the baby. The pregnant Mrs. Burne-Jones found this heart-rending, while her husband thought it over-dramatic and ridiculous.

On February 10, 1862, Elizabeth, Rossetti, and their friend, the poet Swinburne dined together. Later that evening, Rossetti had an engagement at Working Men's College. When he returned, she was in a coma due to an overdose of laudanum. Doctors were summoned, but nothing could be done. Elizabeth passed away in the early hours of February 11, 1862. It remained a mystery whether she took an overdose of the drug with a purpose to commit suicide, or she was totally out of her sense and unaware of the danger of taking a heavy quantity of it.

Without going into the sensational discussion regarding the death or suicide, this paper will now concentrate on the impact of the tragedy, trying to explore how the haunting reminiscences of the dead muse-wife-beloved changed into a personification of fear, agony and mystery, a kind of "Femme Fatale", in Rossetti's imagination .There was, of course, an apparently idealized side to his tribute to his dead wife, along with a tough of elegiac irony. He immortalised her in his painting "Beata Beatrix", where Elizabeth-Beatrice is sitting with closed eyes and a dove puts a poppy flower in her hands. Opium is derived from poppies; the dove delivered to her the very source of the ingredient that killed her. A drowsy Beatrice, however, was not Rossetti's sole vision of the dead Elizabeth; it was rather in a much more subtle, complex and darker way that Rossetti struggled with his wounded ego, to come to terms with himself and a state of fear, insecurity and depression that he was thrown into both as man and artist.

In 1863, Rossetti began painting the first version of "Lady Lilith", which he expected to be his "best picture hitherto" (W. M. Rossetti, 1895, ii, p. 188). He referred to this painting as the "Toilette picture" in his letters to his mother, highlighting its decorative and embellished quality and the central figure's location within an intimate boudoir-like setting (W. M. Rossetti, 1895, ii, p. 188). Although Lilith, in the apocryphal version of the Biblical sense, is not a "lady" as we are expected to understand the term in the Victorian context, Rossetti deliberately entitled it "Lady Lilith", forcing the audience to appreciate her sensuality and womanhood, along with her supposedly marital status and the authority of a mistress. A married woman's matured sexuality and power of being a woman, through her experienced and non-virginal body have long been a threat to manhood in the West, and thus the threatening figure of the "phallic mother" has gained its powerful position in culture.

"Lady Lilith" is one of the many "mirror pictures" completed by Rossetti during this period. Others include "Fazio's Mistress", "Woman Combing Her Hair", and "Morning Music", paintings that centralise a female figure rapt in contemplation of her own beauty.[2] "Lady Lilith" represents a paradox: she can be viewed as both an excessively sexualized object as well as an empowered woman. Rossetti paints her within an ambiguous setting which is neither indoors nor outdoors. At first glance, the lady seems to be reflecting on her appearance as she sits in a relaxed pose in the intimate setting of her toilettte. The reflection of the candles indicates that the mirror in the top left corner is indeed a mirror, though it also serves as a window. Interestingly, the mirror also reflects a woody landscape , denoting the world outside the toillete. The flowers which surround Lady Lilith add to the ambiguity of the setting, for a keen observer is likely to discover poppy flowers among them. With its obvious association with narcotic power, and with its tragic impact on Elizabeth's life, the poppies become pregnant with symbolic dynamics working at a deeper psychological level for the artist himself.

The painting focuses on the lady's seductive charm. Her loose, flowing hair and off-shoulder clothing emphasise her voluptuous, overtly sexual figure. Her revealing attire and loose-fitting corsetry may be taken as symbolic of her refusal to fit into socially inhibiting rules and constrains for women. Although her physical appearance and posture seems to be inviting the attention of the male viewer, her facial expression is so self-absorbed in its own grace and dignity that it strikes an expression of cold indifference to the male gaze. The figure of Lilith thus challenges and resists the feminine role of being-looked-at-ness' destabilizing the gendered

[2] Informative details and general interpretations of the poem and the painting are retrieved from http://feminism.eserver.org/theory/papers/lilith/ladylil.html and http://feminism.eserver.org/theory/papers/lilith/bodybeau.html.

notion of Laura Mulvey's theory of gaze. Lady Lilith does not engage the viewer in any eye contact, but instead toys with her hair and delights in her own reflection. Thus, she enjoys her sexuality for herself, not for a male viewer.

Lady Lilith's self-absorbed gaze both parallels male voyeurism and reverses it. Unlike female subjects such as D. G. Rossetti's Blessed Damozel who looks longingly from heaven down on her lover and Millais's Mariana who continually pines for her beloved at the window, Lady Lilith is completely satisfied with herself. In contrast to the tenderness and submissiveness expressed by many of Rossetti's other fair ladies, Lady Lilith's expression exudes haughtiness and deviousness which would be more likely to inspire fear rather than desire in the male viewer.

Bullen (1998) argues that these mirror works of Rossetti "opened the way for a whole series of paintings in the 1860s of narcissistic female figures, each with potentially fatal characteristics" (p. 123). A brief glance at the background images of this painting gives the illusion that Lilith is seated in the interior space of her boudoir. Actually however, the setting is an "ambiguous realm" of "pure artifice" (Bullen, 1998, p. 136). Although a chair, mirror, and other interior objects are located in the background, this "room" is simultaneously teaming with flowers. Cold, white roses—symbols of sterile passion—envelop the top right of the painting and spread out across the line of Lilith's hair. Poppies—symbols of drug, delirium and death—are also present. The space is at once realistic, illusory and mythic. This background space of "Lady Lilith", which is both interior and exterior, illustrates the double-meaning of "bower" which Rossetti would later explore in his poem "Eden Bower".

Another mysterious object in the painting is the magical mirror in the top left. This mirror shows the reflection of the candles in front of it, indicating that it is indeed a mirror and not a window into some other world. Yet, the majority of the reflection reveals a magical woodland landscape. In his essay "The Mirror's Secret", Miller (1991) indicates that this image speaks to the "persistent castrating nightmares" symbolised in the poem "The Orchard Pit" (p. 334). There is much indication, as will be considered later in this paper, that "The Orchard Pit" indeed draws on the Lilith theme, echoing many of the themes present in "Eden Bower" (Bullen, 1998, p. 125). Seeing this woodland reflection as a view into the world of "The Orchard Pit", therefore, successfully links together this painting and various Rossetti poems which explore the theme of Lilith.

Any interpretation of a mirror-image, in the post-Lacan scenario, obviously resorts to a psychoanalytic approach, focusing on the "mirror stage". The child at this stage identifies with its ideal image—an "ideal I" reflected in the mirror, which constitutes for him a "gestalt" or "whole". At the same time, the ego's dependence on the mother-figure is established, in order to achieve that wholeness. In Rossetti's painting , the mirror is in Lilith's control: it faces her, held in her own hand, and the viewer, or the artist can see only the back of it. Thus, if a perfect image of herself, in the mirror gives Lilith her "wholeness" and self-content dignity, the back of the mirror, presented to the artist symbolises a collapse of any possibility of constituting "wholeness" for him. Hence his sense of insecurity and fragmentation. On a personal level, the painting "mirrors" several things. As Miller (1991) suggests in his article, "The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art", the painting "mirrors… also Rosseetti's feelings about Fanny Cornforth" (p. 333). However, Cornforth the living model is not alone; a shadow of the dead Elizabeth can also be felt, the particulars of which will be discussed later. Moreover, Rossetti's insecurity as poet and artist, after Elizabeth's death (which led him to her exhumation) seems more significant in the light of this mirror-mystery. The absence or loss of the former muse to depend upon, might have added to his feeling of not being "whole" any longer.

Lilith's own appearance in this painting establishes her as "the embodiment of carnal loveliness" (Waugh,

1991, p. 134). The painting was thus described by Marillier (1899):

> She is the incarnation of the world and the flesh, with all sorts of latent suggestions of the third element. A beautiful woman, splendidly and voluptuously formed, is leaning back on a couch combing her long fair hair, while with cold dispassionateness she surveys her features in a hand mirror. She is not only the Lilith of Adam, the Lilith who in "Eden Bower" makes that weird compact with the serpent, but the Lilith of all time; lovely but loveless. (p. 132)

Besides, what is perhaps most visually striking about the picture is Lilith's clothing, "clothes that look as if they are soon to be removed" (Marsh, 1985, p. 235). Her body, almost negligent of the clothing, invites the viewer to read Lilith as sensual and beautiful. Yet, at the same time, that body of Lilith is not to be enjoyed by the "other"—the male desire; it is rather to be asserted for its own selfhood. By "othering" the concept of male desire for and authority over the female body, Lilith becomes radical in her assertion of selfhood and womanhood.

It is not only the nonchalant and revealing nature of Lilith's attire that draws attention to her image as a sexualised being. There are other things which cannot be seen in the painting, and therefore the impact of that "absence" is also much important. According to Bullen (1998), Lilith's sexual power and control over her own body is all the more prominently suggested by "the absence of corsetry, tight-lacing, and other marks of bourgeois moral rectitude" (p. 141). It is a gesture of utter self-sufficiency of the body itself, its "being there" is all, there is no further need to decorate her presence by ornamentation. Bullen (1998) also cites an anonymous source on the subject, saying that the corset is "an ever-present monitor individually bidding its wearer to exercise self-restraint: it is evidence of a well-disciplined mind and well-regulated feelings" (p. 142). With her hair loose and corset absent, this Lilith is assuredly a symbol of open sexuality, which at the same time bears a dignity rigid enough to ignore any male approach towards itself.

Rossetti (1870) himself sensed what his painting is becoming, and asserted the view that this representation was divergent from earlier portrayals of Lilith. In 1870, he wrote about this picture: "Lady [Lilith] … represents a *Modern Lilith* combing out her abundant golden hair and gazing on herself in the glass with that self-absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle" (Rossetti, 1886, p. ii, 850, D. G. Rossetti's emphasis).

As indicated in this description, Rossetti was fully aware that this picture would present a "Modern Lilith", one who differed from the Pre-Biblical Lilith of the Talmudic lore. In *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, Bullen (1998) elaborated on the meaning of this transformation, stating:

> The threat posed by Lilith in the literary and mythological accounts is translated by Rossetti into this act of contemplation [her gaze into the mirror], and that danger is given an added edge by the contemporaneity of the figure: she is a "Modern Lilith". She has stepped out of the past and into the nineteenth century. She is to be found in the modern upper-class Victorian boudoir or bedroom, and is as potent an influence over the nineteenth-century male mind as she was over the ancient male mind. (p. 136)

Lilith's role, therefore, is just as powerful as it ever was. The result of this portrayal is to bring her from the mythical past into what was, for Rossetti, a realistic present. However, if Rossetti's earlier sketches and portraits of Elizabeth and "Lady Lilith" are placed side by side, one may realize what "modern" means: it may be the artist's "modern" or "new" or "present" vision of an earlier memory—that of a face and a being, whom he wanted to see, in her lifetime, not as herself, but "as she feels his dream".

Lilith's seductive beauty is one of the essential elements of this painting, extolled especially by the erotic

entrapment of her beautiful hair. It is this object which plays the primary role in the picture, occupying the center space and being held out by Lilith to show its full extent and beauty (see Figure 1). This focus on the hair harkens back to earlier portrayals of Lilith, including the hair imagery of Goethe that so highly influenced Rossetti, and foreshadows the emphasis which Rossetti will place on Lilith's "castrating, cutting" golden hair in his poem entitled "Lilith" (Bullen, 1998, p. 130). In Rossetti's poem, a deep sense of insecurity is involved in the male viewer's (or the poet's) contemplation over Lilith's hair. From a personal, psychoanalytic consideration, one may be tempted to think of Elizabeth Siddal's hair, long and rich in quantity, coppery-golden, which was reported to have filled her coffin. In many of his earlier portraits and sketches of Elizabeth, her hair is given much importance (see Figure 2). If Rossetti's fascination with Elizabeth's hair can thus be read from his paintings for which she was the model, it can also be assumed that the mental image of the dead muse's hair played some influence, at least subconsciously, while he was painting Lilith's hair. Interestingly, the woman's hair in the painting, "Lady Lilith" and that of Elizabeth in another painting, the image of which is given below side by side with "Lilith" for comparison are almost similar, except in colour and curls. In close examination, some other similarities (if not exact sameness) can also be found between these two paintings: the noses, off-shouder gowns, the curve of the lips and the position of the fingers of the right hand, one holding a flower and the other, a comb.

The metaphor of women's hair has always been potent, but, during the Victorian period, this was especially so. In her article on "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination", Gitter (1984) states: "The more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied in its display. For folk, literary and psychoanalytic traditions agree that the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness" (p. 938).

Thus, Lilith's excessive hair indicates an excess of sexuality. The manner in which she holds it out, purportedly to comb it, serves to openly display her sexuality on the canvas. It is the first and last impression that a viewer will receive. As noted earlier, Goethe's influence on this painting is direct. Rossetti's watercolour of "Lady Lilith" is often accompanied by the epigraph from Goethe which Rossetti translated in 1866. An alternate translation of that passage further illuminates the correlation between this painting and Goethe's portrayal of Lilith. Pointing to Lilith, Mephistopheles cautions Faust:

> Adam's first wife is she.
> Beware the lure within her lovely tresses,
> The splendid sole adornment of her hair!
> When she succeeds therewith a youth to snare,
> Not soon again she frees him from her jesses. (Goethe, 1828-1829, *Faust I*, pp. 4208-4211)

This threatening sense of entrapment seems to emanate from Rossetti's picture, for the beautiful Lady Lilith does not appear to be inviting the audience or any other to watch her.

Instead, she holds a look of self satisfaction. Although not directly recognised by earlier critics, this aspect gives ample opportunity for feminist interpretation. Expounding on the voluptuousness of Lilith's self-absorption and haughtiness indicated in Lilith's gaze, Ussher, in her 1997 book *Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing the Boundaries of Sex*, states:

> Lady Lilith stands as a classic example of the artistic representation of this passionate, fearful woman…. It is a painting of a beautiful, almost haughty woman whose hand toys with her luxurious long hair as she gazes unsmiling at her

> own reflection in a mirror. She is engaged and satisfied with herself, not with any male voyeur. She is sexual, dangerously seductive, and does not give the appearance of an acquiescent femininity which will be easily satisfied… Fear of and desire for “woman” is incarnated in one painting. She is both sexual and selfish, gazing upon herself with satisfaction, symbolising her rejection of “man”. (p. 96)

Figure 1. Portrait of Elizabeth Siddal. Source: Adapted from http://imgc.allpostersimages.com/images/P-473-488-90/29/2939/44YRD00Z/posters/dante-gabriel-rossetti-portrait-of-elizabeth-siddal.jpg, 1860.

Figure 2. Lady Lilith. Source: Adapted from http://www.geocities.jp/weathercock8926/images/lilith.jpg, 1873.

This relatively recent criticism points clearly to Rossetti’s role in opening the mythical figure of Lilith to feminist interpretation. Resisting male voyeurism, she delights in the pleasure of looking at herself.

Similar to Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, Lilith possesses a beauty without tenderness or sympathy for others, she is lovely but loveless (Marillier, 1889, p. 132). She does not engage with the spectator in any reciprocal eye-contact, but looks only at herself. Her passive self-absorption and simultaneous lack of submissive acceptance of a male voyeur results in a threat to masculinity. This passive threat is markedly different from the active and aggressive threat posed by Lilith the succubus or Lilith the child-slaying witch, marking a transformation from these earlier images of Lilith as actively aggressive and unjustifiably evil.

This self-involvement likewise symbolises a rejection of "man", a rejection of the roles of "wife" and "submissive, sexualized other" which are so often given to women. It is for this reason—not any inherent wickedness—that Lilith is labeled a "witch". Ussher (1997) explains, "She is a witch who is cruel and castrating, *because* she is powerful and strong" (p. 96, emphasis added). Readers of Rossetti will note that it is this story—the story of the powerful and strong woman—which is further drawn upon in the poem "Lilith", written to accompany this painting. Finally, "Lady Lilith" serves to problematise the nature of masculine desire by raising questions about the relationship between subject and object and threatening the identity of the male subject. Although some recent feminist criticism has stressed the absence of agency in Rossetti's female figures, it has failed to recognize the degree to which these figures, especially Lilith, are empowered (as cited in Bullen, 1998, p. 147). Bullen (1998) states: "Within that discourse on masculinity the female is envisaged as significantly, if damagingly, empowered…. Lady Lilith's self-contained indifference offers an unanswerable challenge to the male psyche" (p. 148).

By resisting compliance with the male gaze, Lilith, therefore, threatens the identity of the male voyeur. She arouses desire in men but also threatens them with her power as an unobtainable beauty. While this combination makes her irresistible, it also leads to the capture, castration, and death of any male who enters her private space. In the light of the exhumation of Elizabeth's grave by Rossetti's order, this theme of symbolic and psychological desire, descent, capture and death becomes important, demanding a "willing suspension of disbelief". After Elizabeth's death, the bereaved Rossetti plunged a manuscript of poetry he was working on into her coffin. Some years later, by 1869, Rossetti's career suffered a gradual decline, he was involved in an illicit affair with Jane Morris, and in order to retrieved his buried manuscript, probably with the hope of having his fame restored, he finally ordered the exhumation of his wife's coffin. Rossetti was not present when her coffin was exhumed in the dead of night. It was said that the manuscript was found with worm-holes, though not irrecoverably damaged, while Elizabeth's body was perfectly preserved, her hair as coppery-red as ever; waist-long when she had died, it had continued growing till it nearly filled the coffin.

The poems were published but did not do well commercially or critically. One cannot be sure of Rossetti's mental dilemma prior to the decision of the exhumation, perhaps the thought of dishonouring his dead wife's grave appealed to him less than his renewed interest in the manuscript, and thought of publication. However, after it was done, Rossetti, was haunted by a guilty conscience: he never could overcome the fact that he had ordered the exhumation. Now addicted to laudanum himself, he had several attacks of illness, he attempted suicide in 1872 but survived. He died twenty years later, a wasted version of his former self.

In Freudian terms, the nature of Rossetti's desire to retrieve the manuscript, even at the cost of having the dead Elizabeth exhumed, is a regressive and forced descent into the darkness that separates life and death. His male ego as artist and poet sought to break into the private space allotted to Elizabeth by death. At an unconscious level, he seemed to have given little respect to the possible (mis)use of Elizabeth's memory just as he used her body and beauty or his art, when she was alive. His attempt to exercise the same authority over her memory, after death drew consequences on him, in the form of guilt, obsession, addiction and ultimately, death.

Marillierhas noted some interesting points in regarding the history of the final version of the painting. In *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of his Life and Art* (1899), he writes:

> *Lilith* (Marillier's Italics), though dated 1864, was not finished completely until 1866 or 1867. It was commissioned by Mr. F. R. Leyland, who, unwisely as the event turned out, let Rossetti have it back in 1873, after one of his illnesses, when he became seized with a sort of mania for altering his work. The face, which had first been painted from Mrs. Schott, was entirely redrawn from a different model, and with anything but satisfactory results, although he himself was not displeased with the work which had been done upon it. (p. 134)

This account tends to trigger one's psychological curiosity. Rossetti's maniac zeal for altering the work, redrawing the face (compare Figures 2 & 3), using a new model can be seen as his desperate effort to come to terms with some intriguing image stored in his troubled psyche, an image which called for some alteration, especially after two incidents—Elizabeth's exhumation, and Rossetti's own "illness" (possibly the aftershock of his attempted suicide in 1872).

Ut Pictura Poesis: The Sonnet Accompanying the Painting

The sonnet titled "Lilith" written to accompany the painting "Lady Lilith" carries this psycho-analytic interpretation further. First published in 1868 in Swinburne's pamphlet-review, "Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition", the sonnet reappeared alongside Rossetti's painting "Sibylla Palmifera" and the sonnet "Soul's Beauty", which was written for it. In 1870, both of these poems were published among the "Sonnets for Pictures" section of Rossetti's poems.

By 1881, however, in order to contrast the two as representatives of fleshly and spiritual beauty, and Rossetti transferred them to "The House of Life". The Lilith sonnet was then renamed "Body's Beauty" in order to highlight the binary between it and "Soul's Beauty", and the two were placed sequentially in "The House of Life" (sonnets number 77 and 78, as cited in *Collected Works*, 1886). The sonnet is quoted below:

> 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 deceive,
> And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
> And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
> And subtly of herself contemplative,
> Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,
> Till heart and body and life are in its hold.
> The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
> Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
> And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
> Lo! As that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
> Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
> And round his heart one strangling golden hair. (*Collected Works*, 1886, p. 216)

The myth of Lilith as "Femme Fatale" is evident, but what is more interesting, is the uncanny suggesting in the line—"And still she sits, young while the earth is old". By the time, Rossetti was growing middle-aged, with his declined genius, while time could not touch Elizabeth any more. When her grave was exhumed, the body's condition, so far preserved without decay, became even more telling. Again, her long hair, which almost filled the coffin, proved to be an obsession with Rossetti, only its colour changed in his haunted imagination from reddish to gold. The symbolism of the hair, read in the light of the Rossetti's intriguing private and inner life, offers much complexity. Lilith's golden hair echoes the "bright" hair of which Goethe wrote in Faust and Rossetti painted in

“Lady Lilith”. Although it is used as an instrument of death in the end, its physical beauty is what Rossetti first draws attention to, describing it as “the first gold” (line 4). Yet it is the “spell’ cast by her entrapping hair which eventually penetrates, emasculates, and kills the “youth” of this poem. It may seem rather disturbing repeatedly to draw upon the poet’s personal or psychological concerns into the understanding of his work, yet in the context of the present study, the description and depiction of Such analogies can be explored further: The supposed allegory of killing the youth under Lilith’s spell may be interpreted the as “death” of Rossetti’s youthful glory as artist, which flourished when he had Elizabeth as his model and muse-figure, whom later he wronged; now she is separated by the mystery of the other world, and her memory continuing to cast an ominous spell over Rossetti’s life and art. At a deep psychological level at least, the earlier image of the mentor-beloved-muse somehow turned threatening to the poet’s guilty existence.

“Subtly of herself contemplative”, a phrase echoing Walter Pater’s famous tribute to “Mona Lisa”, highlights Lilith’s voluptuous attitude of self-applause, an attitude which is so visually apparent in Rossetti’s painting. As in her picture, Lilith is placed among the rose and poppy, symbolising sterile love and sleep/death, images which add to her representation as an attractive and desirable, yet deadly, woman. Looking back at the painting while reading the poem, in an effort to find a shadow of Elizabeth in both, this phrase can be read with an added significance. In some of Rossetti’s earlier paintings for which Elizabeth posed as model, this self-contemplative attitude is also evident. “Regina Cordium”, for instance, bears striking similarities with “Lilith” (see Figures 3 & 4): Both figures have untied hair, though different in colour, both put on a contemplative look, wearing supposedly off-shoulder garments. Even the curves of the lips are similar. The difference is that, whereas Elizabeth, even in contemplation, presents her face to the viewer, though avoiding direct eye-contact, Lilith is completely self-contemplative.

Figure 3. Lady Lilith. Source: Adapted from http://www.whimzical.com/Art/Rossetti/LadyLilith.jpg, 1864-1867.

Figure 4. Regina Cordium. Source: Adapted from http://www.saleoilpaintings.com/paintings-image/dante-gabriel-rossetti/dante-gabriel-rossetti-regina-cordium.jpg, 1960.

In "Regina Cordium", the contemplative look in Elizabeth's eyes, as it seems, is not for "herself": rather her contemplation is of the image she was to represent according to the artist's demand. It is for Rossetti the painter. Now, in the Lilith-image, Elizabeth is not present in person as a model, but a sense of her absent presence, which seemed to be haunting Rossetti's creative tension, becomes "subtle" and contemplative of herself defying the artist's demand and need which could bind her in her lifetime.

In terms of the explicit allusions, however, the Lilith portrayed in this sonnet is undoubtedly the first wife of Adam, for Rossetti told this to his readers outright, setting this knowledge off in quotes as if to inform an audience whom he did not think would be familiar with the legend. Her existence as the first wife is highlighted in the description of her hair as "the first gold" and in the revelation that she can deceive even before the snake, representing Satan (or possibly Lilith herself) during the Fall.

The poem's emphasis on the snake-image is obvious, as noted in several general interpretations of it. The image is introduced early in the sonnet, and invoked again in lines 10-11. The pronouns "his" and "her" can be used interchangeably, for it is not clear whether Rossetti deliberately wants the reader understand the snake and Lilith as one or as separate entities. In any case, the "soft-shed kisses" of Lilith seem to draw upon Keats' Lamia, the serpent-woman. The instrument for the male character's death is Lilith's "one strangling golden hair", which can also be seen as a metaphor for the coiling bodyof a snake.[3]

The extensive snake imagery in the poem can also be read as an indication of Lilith's powerful sexuality, as Marsh (1985) indicated when she stated, "the sexual qualities of her nature are barely concealed beneath the insistent Freudian imagery" (p. 235). This is one reading of the snake imagery which is certainly insisting on the theme of sexuality present in Rossetti's other portrayals of Lilith, while at the same time not prohibiting others

[3] Similar interpretations of the poem and the images, in general terms, are retrieved from http://feminism.eserver.org/theory/papers/lilith/ladylil.html.

from reading the snake as an actual character. However, the tendency of some readers may naturally resort to interpret the serpent more as a symbolic character than an actual one.

The Lilith Image Recurring in Other Works: Muse Turned "Femme Fatale"

Regarding the fact that "Lilith" was first published only one year prior to "Eden Bower", one may expect to have read similar versions of the Lilith legend in these two poems. This assumption can easily lead to the point that "Lilith" portrays the figure of the "Femme fatale" to be reincarnated as the snake in the later poem, "Eden Bower". The narrative concern in the longer poem "Eden Bower" is more explicitly pre-Biblical or Apocryphal, and thus an elaborate discussion of it will be beyond the specific concern of this paper. With the thematic similarities in mind, it will be enough to say that the unnamed "youth" in the Lilith-poem (line 12), can possibly be identified with Adam. In that sense, the second stanza of this sonnet seems to dramatise the demise or defeat of Adam, at Lilith's hand. So lines 10 and 11 indicate Lilith's incarnation in the body of the snake and. Line 12 explain why "that youth's eyes burned at" her, implicating the lust and anger Adam felt when Lilith refused to lie beneath him. Then, Lilith would have cast her "spell" on him, possibly suggesting the way she became one with the snake in order to deceive Adam and Eve, causing their Fall from the pre-lapsarian Eden. Finally, the figure of Adam is left with "his straight neck bent"—a sign of defeat, submission and death.

Rossetti's "Lilith" thus posits a caution for men against all womankind in their elemental essence. It suggests that any woman so charming as Lilith, so self-content and elemental, possesses an uncanny power to cause a man's death—either real or symbolic. The castration-image in line 13—that she "left his straight neck bent"—results directly from her "spell", her excessive beauty, her voluptuous body, her long, flowing hair. Thus, while the experience of being in love with Lilith, of loving her physically, may surpass any other mortal experience—much like the experience of loving the femme fatale of Keats' "La Belle"—it will ultimately result in symbolic castration through the loss of power or, even, literal death.

The figure of Lilith explicitly appear in "Lilith" and "Eden Bower", but her images come in several other poems by Rossetti, including "A Sea-Spell" and "The Orchard Pit". Both have received very little attention, being "minor poems". As Waugh (1991) notes, "it is kinder to the memory of the artist to say nothing. It is the work of a prematurely faltering mind and hand" (p. 211). Yet, with the purpose of finding Elizabeth's shadow in Rossetti's "widowed art, it is not difficult to discover allusions to Lilith, in the sonnet 'A Sea-Spell'". Imagery in this sonnet directly relates this Siren-figure to Lilith, making the poem worthy of consideration here. The sonnet reads:

> Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree
> While flashing fingers weave the sweet-strung spell
> Between its chords; and as the wild notes swell,
> The sea-bird for those branches leaves the sea.
> But to what sound her listening ear stoops she?
>
> She sinks into her spell: and when full soon
> Her lips move and she soars into her song,
> What creatures of the midmost main shall throng
> In furrowed self-clouds to the summoning rune,
> Till he, the fated mariner, hears her cry,
> And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die? (*Collected Works*, p. 361)

As evidenced above, both specific Lilith-imagery and Lilith-related themes are present in this sonnet.

The poem begins with an immediate reference to Rossetti's Lilith, with the line: "Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree" (line 1). This image is reminiscent of Lilith's apocryphally supposed tempting of Eve under the apple tree in the garden of Eden. The second line borrows imagery directly from "Lilith". The corresponding lines of "Lilith", for example, are:

> And subtly of herself contemplative,
> Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,
> Till heart and body and life are in its hold. (lines 6-8)

A similar story constitutes "A Sea-Spell". The beautiful Siren weaves her magical "spell" that will enthrall men to death ("Sea-Spell", line 2; "Lilith", line 13). In both poems, the male figures succumb to the Siren's charms, leading themselves to demise. Like Lilith and La Belle, the power of this unnamed Siren is far-reaching and overwhelming. Able to lure all the "creatures of the midmost main", she apparently performs the same kind of seduction that Rossetti's other 'femme fatale' women are capable of, yet there lies a difference. Unlike Lilith's seduction of the unnamed, everyman-like "youth", this woman seduces a "fated mariner", one who acts more as a symbol of the elemental and vast world of nature than of the human. Although not representing Lilith alone and specifically, the siren of "A Sea-Spell" nevertheless reflects the themes and issues raised by Rossetti in "Lilith" and "Eden Bower". She is beautiful, seductive, and deadly—both desirable and feared—attributes that, for Rossetti, depict the magnificent and eternal "femme fatale".

"The Orchard Pit" also makes allusion to Lilith. In theme, it contains similar ideas as in "The Sea Spell", thus playing a complementary role towards the latter as "Eden Bower" did towards "Lilith". All these poems, therefore, can be seen as complements of one another, as the general interpretations at "Feminism and Women's Studies" have aptly discussed[4]. "The Orchard Pit" begins with an image of the apple-tree which links this unnamed "femme fatale" to Lilith:

> Piled deep below the screening apple-branch
> They lie with bitter apples in their hands;
> And some are only ancient bones that blanch,
> And some had ships that last year's wind did launch,
> And some were yesterday the lords of lands. (*Collected Works*, 1886, p. 377)

The images here reminds the reader of how Keats recalls several powerful men—kings, princes, and warriors—who succumbed to La Belle. As in Keats' poem, this unnamed woman has power over the "the lords of lands"(line 5), as well as over the common men of the past, "ancient bones that blanch" (line 3). Furthermore, the term "ancient" can also refer to the bones of the first man: Adam. Stanza three connects this figure to Lilith—with all other "femme fatales"—by describing her body in terms of simultaneous passion and pain, life and death:

> This in my dream is shown me, and her hair
> Crosses my lips and draws my burning breath;
> Her songs spreads golden wings upon the air,
> Life's eyes are gleaming from her forehead fair,
> And from her breast the ravishing eyes of Death. (*Collected Works*, Vol. i, 1886, p. 377)

[4] General interpretation adapted from feminism.eserver.org/theory/papers/lilith/femmeftl.html.

The lady's hair, emphasized so sensually in line eleven, draws "burning" breath from the narrator's lips in line 12, suggesting a feverous passion. Again, Rossetti's preoccupation with Elizabeth's hair casts a shadow over an otherwise plain interpretation of the poem. Her two sets of eyes indicates the gaze of Life and of Death, simultaneously. Interestingly, the eyes of Life are located on her forehead while the "ravishing eyes of Death" are on her breasts, obviously far more sexualised a location.

In the last stanza, a modern reader may find a Freudian juxtaposition of "Eros" and "Thanatos", which seems to reinforce Rossetti's relationship with Elizabeth as an underlying force behind the composition of the poem:

> My love I call her, and she loves me well
> But I love her as in the maelstorm's cup
> The whirled stone loves the leaf inseparable
> That clings to it round all the circling swell
> And that the same last eddy swallows up. (*Collected Works*, Vol. i, 1886, p. 377)

Even if this Lilith-figure causes death to innumerable men, Rossetti does not (or cannot) condemn her, for which his own guilt-feeling about Elizabeth might have been a psychological explanation. He has not not painted Lilith as a vicious witch but as a beautiful temptress whose beauty inevitably—though may not be purposefully—claims anyone whose life gets too intimate to her charms. After partaking of "her apples", life in this world is no longer worth-living for these men, for they have experienced the ultimate bliss in pleasure and love. By granting "her magic hour of ease" (line 9), therefore, this Lilith-figure gives her admirers the only experience possible after a perfect consummation of love, that is, death, or, which may be called euthanesia.

Conclusions

This strange overlapping of "Eros" and "Thanatos" is a theme common in all these works discussed above, and by categorising them as Rossetti's "widowed" art, the assumption of his being "haunted" by Elizabeth's memory, gains a strength of interpretation. The image of Siddal is generally seen as tragic and pathetic: To feminists she represents a woman twice wronged, in life and in death, a woman forced to live in the shadow of her male peers, a girl who gives her love and dedication but sees that love returned only to her idealised self: "Not as she is, but as she fills his dream". Once she becomes a real person and her beauty fades, she is emotionally abandoned by her lover who chooses to seek out newer, younger, and possibly less demanding companions. However, it cannot be ignored that her death created a liberation for her, a freedom from that idealised self which she had to represent for her artist at work, and a sense of loss, despair, insecurity and fear for Rosseetti. The image of the dead muse-wife continued irritate his dark fears and desires. The mystery of death and its dark and uncanny aspect seemed to have cast a defamiliarising hue over the image of Elizabeth preserved in his mind, and turned the muse to "femme fatale". Elizabeth Siddal's memory took its revenge, by becoming an ambiguous presence over Rossetti's widowed art.

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