

The Enslavement of the Muse in the Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Winner, Humanities

Author: Shyloe Beals

Following its establishment in 1848, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood saw the swift rise in fame of its most prominent member, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (hereafter DGR), a leading poet and painter of the mid-Victorian period. As I shall show in this paper, DGR's artwork and poetry invites us to consider the problematic relationship between the artist and his muse Elizabeth "Lizzie" Siddal, a model for the Pre-Raphaelites. Lizzie became highly critical of how women, primarily herself, were represented by the Pre-Raphaelites. In this regard, she aligned with DGR's sister, the poet Christina Rossetti, in offering a strident critique of the group's enslavement of the muse: the male artist's objectification of his model, which renders her an object of illustration to be gazed upon. The representation of the Pre-Raphaelite muse reflects DGR's unsettling relationship with Lizzie, first as his model and later as his wife. An exploration of the relationship between DGR and Lizzie sheds light on the destructive, real-life effects DGR's work had on Lizzie as the living muse, encouraging the reader or viewer to revisit the work and perhaps revise their interpretation of it.

The artwork and poetry of DGR shows a close connection between the two aesthetic forms. At its exhibition, DGR's painting *The Girlhood of Virgin Mary* (1849) was accompanied by two sonnets that were attached to its frame, which acted to "translate... the substance of the painting into a verbal equivalent" (McGann). Another well-known example of DGR's marriage of these sister arts is found in his works of *The Blessed Damozel*, for which the artwork (1875-1878) was created to accompany his already-famous poem (1847) of the same title. Through his mastery of the two forms, DGR created a "double work of art" (McGann). DGR's ambition to represent two things simultaneously appears in both his form and content, as he strived to create a perfect convergence of both the physical and the spiritual within his work. Yet the representation of the physical is so overwhelmingly present in many of DGR's works that, as we will see, there is often little space left for the spiritual. Therefore, DGR's endeavour to create a perfect union between the two is ultimately ineffectual. The physical beauty of his muse is illustrated with striking artistry, but in this representation she becomes a spiritually empty vessel. Such a lack both Christina Rossetti and Lizzie Siddal come to criticize as bordering on perversion.

Christina Rossetti's 1856 poem "In an Artist's Studio" is a response to her brother's sense of dissatisfaction with his own inability to adequately represent both the spiritual and physical capacity of the subject. An already-established poet, Christina Rossetti had a legitimate platform from which her critique could be heard. "In an Artist's Studio" describes the appalling way in which the artist's own limitations lead to the violent physical obliteration of the female body. Through her poetry, Christina Rossetti emphasizes the way that an imprisoned, faceless muse provided much of the content of DGR's

art. This corrupted the traditional function of the muse, which was to give inspiration to the form. Christina Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio" humanizes Lizzie as the subject of DGR's paintings in a way that suggests the model's eternal entrapment, as the speaker describes how the ravenous artist "feeds upon [his subject's] face by day and night" (9). The poem's opening lines describe how "One face looks out from all his canvasses,/One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans;/We found her hidden just behind those screens" (1-6). Moreover, Christina Rossetti describes DGR's recurring muse as a "nameless girl" (6), repeating words such as "one" and "or" coupled with "same," which suggests that the woman is herself interchangeable and arbitrary. The true identity of the subject is "hidden," screened or concealed, even ironically, as Pre-Raphaelite artwork illustrates a tension between the concealment and exposure of the female body. "In an Artist's Studio" describes the artist's control over his muse's altered representation in stating that she appears in his paintings "not as she is but as she fills his dreams" (14).

Unfortunately, the theme of the powerlessness of the artist's human subject, portrayed in Christina Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio," extended into the life of DGR's living muse, Lizzie. DGR seemed to have found his Blessed Damozel in real life—who was first his model, then his mistress, and finally his wife. Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal became the living exemplar of the idealized beauty Rossetti had depicted in his earliest pictures and poems (Hunt 186). There, Lizzie became a passive physical object, illustrating how "[t]he women of the Pre-Raphaelite circle were compelled to make compromises in the name of art" (Orlando). Lizzie is often represented in Pre-Raphaelite artwork as a silent heroine who is sleeping, ill, or otherwise condemned to submission. Her life became an embodiment of this assigned narrative: Lizzie suffered a long illness followed by suicide. Her work as the model for Pre-Raphaelite member John Everett Millais's renowned *Ophelia* (1851-1852), who famously committed suicide in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in reaction to her lover's oppressive behaviour, becomes eerily ironic in this context. Modern scholars believe that Lizzie may have suffered from anorexia nervosa (Orlando), perhaps a result of the Pre-Raphaelite tendency to equate "deathlike" with "beautiful." She had become but a "nameless" subject to serve the male painter's erotic dreams, as "her enigmatic silence left Rossetti's imagination free to sanctify her as his incarnated Madonna" (Stevenson 35).

Yet DGR's living muse was herself a talented poet and painter. Although DGR recognized Lizzie's own artistic promise, he strove to maintain control over how history would remember her. In an 1850 sketch entitled *Parable of Love*, DGR depicts a young man and woman, presumably himself and Lizzie, before an incomplete self-portrait of the woman. Looming over her shoulder imposingly, the man gazes into a mirror at her reflection as she paints. What is most disturbing about this sketch, however, is the placement of the man's hand over the woman's as she paints herself. Moreover, the artist's paintbrush, guided by the man, is positioned directly over the woman's eye, effectively eclipsing it (Orlando). When one considers that vision is absolutely crucial to the craft of a visual artist, it is difficult to ignore the subtle violence that this young female artist is struggling against—she is not permitted to portray herself without constant intervention by the male gaze. This depiction of the futility of the female gaze also appears in some of DGR's more notable Pre-Raphaelite artwork, in which the eyes of the female subject are not purposeful in their direction, but stare longingly toward an unknown object in the distance. The

subject's dreamy gaze seems merely introspective. It does not objectify anything, but simply manifests an inward rumination and psychic disturbance coded by the artist as sexual "desire."

Another revealing example of DGR's careful construction of Lizzie's identity is the changing of her surname. Originally "Siddall," DGR had her name changed to "Siddal," as he felt that dropping an "l" gave the name a more refined look. Interestingly, DGR's altered spelling is what is widely accepted by scholars (Orlando). More disturbing is a recorded event that took place following Lizzie's death, wherein a woman approached DGR to request a photograph in memory of her now-deceased friend. Insisting that no photograph ever taken of Lizzie had been able to accurately capture her beauty, DGR instead offered her a small copy of one of his own paintings of Lizzie, and later made efforts to have all existing photographs of his wife destroyed, leaving only his own paintings (and one surviving self-portrait) for history to remember her by. It is through DGR's depiction of Lizzie that she is remembered: not as an artist or poet in her own right, but as an object of art. Her image dominated DGR's paintings throughout the 1850's, which were, as nineteenth-century painter Ford Madox Brown stated, all "stamped with immortality" (McGann). It is thus perhaps not surprising that "Elizabeth Siddal's prominence as DGR's model has until recently nearly obliterated her own efforts as a creator of both painting and poetry" (Taylor 29).

Despite her physical deterioration and DGR's active control over her, Lizzie retaliated, much in the manner of Christina Rossetti, against the way DGR represented her. Although her works are less well known than those of Christina Rossetti, Lizzie's response took the form of poetry and artwork in which she offered a strident critique of her representation as a passive physical body to be gazed upon by men. In the place of the narrative that has been assigned to her by her husband's work, Lizzie provides an alternative, autonomous representation of herself. Three years after DGR's disturbing *Parable of Love*, Lizzie created a sketch entitled *Lady of Shalott* (1853). In this visual depiction of Tennyson's famous poem of the same title, there are subtle details that seem to respond directly to DGR's earlier sketch of the influenced self-portrait. As we have seen, DGR's *Parable of Love* shows a man looking intently at his companion's reflection in a mirror, guiding her hand and eclipsing her eye. In *The Lady of Shalott*, Lizzie depicts a fully-clothed woman with her hair pinned back neatly to illustrate her modesty, which offers a striking opposition to DGR's exposed muse with free-flowing hair. Secondly, as occurred when Tennyson's Lady of Shalott looked down at Camelot, the mirror in Lizzie's drawing has been shattered. This suggests that the situation in which DGR's male subject in *Parable of Love* casts a dominating stare through a mirror at the female artist cannot possibly exist in this drawing—a violent act of rebellion has hindered the male gaze. Thirdly, there is nobody present to guide the subject's hands as she weaves her creations at the loom. Finally, in contrast to DGR's image of the male artist impeding the female artist's vision (which relates to the lack of purpose in the gaze of dozens of other Pre-Raphaelite depictions of Lizzie), the most important thing that Lizzie's subject is doing is looking: she earnestly gazes toward Camelot.

Lizzie's resistance to DGR's representation of her extends into her poetry as well, perhaps the most obvious example being *A Silent Wood*, wherein the miserable speaker states that "[f]rozen like a thing of stone/I sit in thy shadow – but not alone" (11-12), perhaps an allusion to Christina Rossetti, as they were arguably the women most closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This follows an earlier line in which the speaker longs for a place where she "may not faint, or die, or swoon" (8).

In conclusion, the study of the relationship between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his model, muse and wife, Elizabeth Siddal, deepens and complicates our understanding of the enslavement of his muse in his poetry and artwork. The recurring image of the muse in the artwork and poetry of DGR is problematic in that it consigns the muse to a pedestal from which she can never fully descend, while the artist struggles with his own inability to encapsulate both sacred and profane love in his artwork. This exploitation of the muse's beauty in life as well as in death renders the muse a figure of abject powerlessness. The critical responses of those women most closely affiliated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Lizzie Siddal and Christina Rossetti, complicate our understanding of the artwork and poetry of DGR.

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