

**Female-Fearing Art and The Facade of the Pre-Raphaelite Rebellion: The Femme Fragile,
The Femme Fatale, and The Fallen Woman**

by
Chana Goldstein

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Sponsor: Prof. Sarah Warren

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Abstract:

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is infamous for their revolutionary presence in Victorian England. They painted a crude reality witnessed from meticulous observation, horrifying the public and mocking academic standards. Red-headed, slim, emotive female characters overtook the premises of their canvases, adorned in flowing garments, muddy florals, and with humanizing impressions of sensitivity. Victorian art, up until this time, had displayed women as empty, virtuous, and childlike, designed from idealized feminine characteristics. The Pre-Raphaelite's anti-Victorian rendering of the female subject has been mistaken as a display of female liberation, and the humanity in these depicted women – seemingly proto-feminist – has been overshadowed by their origin of manifestation: the female-fearing man. Female tropes used by the Pre-Raphaelites, such as the *femme fragile*, the fallen woman, and the *femme fatale*, greatly diminished female authenticity and individuality, and even supported Victorian ideals and regulations regarding female sexuality, emotion, and belonging, contradicting common beliefs. The Pre-Raphaelites did not paint against, and rather painted solely *because* of the rising “woman question,” with little to no true sympathy for their subjects or their conditions. This thesis focuses on these three female tropes and the treatment of the Pre-Raphaelite muse, and analyses the connections these archetypes have to the social backdrop they inhabit. The idea of “myth” and its manifestation in society is also theorized about, and is contextualized within the coexistence of these tropes and their origins.

1: Introduction

The Pre-Raphaelites have a legacy as Victorian revolutionaries, but this thesis argues against that. The common tale goes as so: Amidst a society in servitude to rigorous academic standards lived three great artists; William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. They banded as a brotherhood in 1848,¹ and bonded over their hatred for the overly idealized painting techniques of the Academy. Their own paintings purposefully lacked this idealization, as they prioritized naturalism and realism, painting from life and meticulous observation.² Controversies about these revolutionaries included critiques against their primitivism, female sensuality, and their non-academic mannerisms.³ These three men, overtaken with nostalgia for a time they never witnessed, discussed among themselves in top-secret meetings the lost artistic techniques of the “old masters” of the Middle Ages. They huddled over a folio volume of an Eighteenth Century Italian artist Carlo Lasinio’s engravings inspired by frescoes for Camposanto Monumentale at Pisa (c. 1469–1484) by Benozzo Gozzoli and others.⁴ Although some laughs were shared over the lack of perspective and the incorrect, wonky compositions, the general response was unanimous. Millais and Hunt, the founders of the group, pinpointed the fall of heartfelt, instinctual art to the painter Raphael’s pivotal influence on High Renaissance Italian art. The art produced after Raphael seemed too formulaic and insincere, with characters painted against backdrops much too fantastical, and with idealised stories so unlike their earthly, humane origins. Fascinated by the naturalism, originality, and authenticity relayed

¹Susie Steinbach, “Victorian era”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 13 Apr. 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Victorian-era>.

²Srdjan Smajić, review of *Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism*, by Marcia Werner, *Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English* 34, Issue 2-3, (June/September 2008), 283-287.

³William Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy* (Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1942), ____

⁴Jorge L. Contreras, “James Collinson, The Campo Santo, and the Birth of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,” *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 15 (Spring 2006).

in the older works, they swore to emulate the spirit and rebel against the Royal Academy. And hence the term: before Raphael, pre Raphael, *Pre-Raphaelite*.⁵

These artists were not the first of their time to point out such criticisms or to rebel against the Academy, as the revival of artistic ideologies reminiscent of Medieval styles, particularly Italian, had more or less started in the United Kingdom at the start of the nineteenth-century. The rise of “primitivism” in eighteenth and nineteenth Century counter-culture is accredited to, in addition to other things, the new popularity of the Druid and Stonehenge myth, the hypothesis that Stonehedge, a monument of stone in Salisbury Plain in southern England, was created by ancient Britons, Celtic dwellers in Great Britain from the Iron Age to the Roman Period. Although it was later proven that the Druids inhabited the location thousands of years after the creation of Stonehedge, the myth spread like wildfire nonetheless, inspiring major means of national pride in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain, considering its accompanying ideas that the Britons were people of nature, purity, and unity.⁶ This apparent solving of a “local” ancient mystery entranced the people of Britain residing in the very same location as their ancestors centuries later, and led to countless romanticisms of spirituality and bohemianism in art and culture. And how excited they were by such a fresh discovery, just as the world seemed to be losing its tradition and craftsmanship to industrialism.

By the mid nineteenth-century, these romanticisms shifted from their hazy, “savage,” and primitive origins to a longing for the bypassed Medieval era, the “age of faith.” Structuring their then vague hopes and dreams of the authentic spirit of a world before industry into tangible yearnings for the instinct and artistry of the Medieval primitive, the artists and intellectuals of

⁵Gaunt, 23.

⁶Sharon McFarlan Kahin, *Eighteenth Century British Primitivism*, Thesis (Ph.D.), Cornell University, 1981.

Great Britain sought to revive the rapidly dissolving values of humanity. Untamed by a prescribed, mechanical life, the archetype of the Proto-Christian Medieval primitive represented a life of true art and righteousness to artists. These ideas birthed tangible escapes for tortured artists and outlying poets, imitating in their work the liberty and altruism they so believed belonged to the Middle Ages. Literature and art was overrun with Medieval fantasies and Arthurian legends. The naive and child-like drawings of the Medievals were embraced rather than scolded, as most of the neo-Medievalists did not aim to emulate imperfections such as their linear, unkept, archaic compositions, but only the sentiment.⁷ A sister movement to this would be the Celtic Revival, primarily active in Scotland and Ireland, starting a bit later down the line in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In rebellion against the same industrial lifestyles grew a similar culture motivated by ancient heritage and the untamed imagery it captured.⁸ One of many influences for the “purist” and Catholic aspect of the Medieval Revival was Alexis-François Rio’s *De la poésie chrétienne* (1836), a seminal text praising art created before the Fifteenth Century, claiming that art had been in its highest form then and had only fallen off its pedestal from there and on. He extols the spiritualism most shown in works from the Middle Ages, by artists like Fra Angelico, and not the more recognized Raphael of the High Renaissance. The intruding romanticism of Paganism in High Renaissance art, to Rio, was in much need of an immediate abolition, an idea that helped religiously moralize the Medieval Revival.⁹

⁷Robyn Cooper, “The Relationship between the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Painters before Raphael in English Criticism of the Late 1840s and 1850s,” *Victorian Studies* Vol. 24, No. 4 (Summer 1981): 405-438.

⁸Frances Fowle, “The Celtic Revival in Britain and Ireland: Reconstructing the past,” in J Farley & F Hunter (eds), *Celts: Art and Identity* (2015), 234–259.

⁹Cooper, 407.

The Pre-Raphaelites took this sentiment of morality without the actual ideals it stemmed from, and they made it fit their own desire for purity and naturalism, ignoring its origin. As Romantic, nostalgic, and anti-Victorian spirit poured out from the works of Rossetti, Hunt, Millais, and the rest of the group, it is important to note that the boys of the Brotherhood in fact did not know all that much about the Fourteenth Century, as their narrowed perspective was based on engravings *after* Medieval artists and vague romanticisms of the time, resulting in a simultaneous oversophistication yet oversimplification of the barbaric Middle Ages.¹⁰ As their work caught the eyes and ears of the Academy, their vague, blurry ideas drawn from conclusions they came to based on their little knowledge crossed lines with some hot-topic controversies overtaking the Academy.

At the very same time the term “Pre-Raphaelite” was entering the public sphere, the Medieval-Revivalists were receiving large amounts of backlash from the Academy. Critics less admiring of the olden Italian styles claimed that Revival artists had less care for the visual attraction and quality of their works. As this naturalism and “defective” ideas overtook their canvases, the legacy of British painting was on the line. Charles Robert Leslie, professor of Painting at the Royal Academy delivered lectures against the revival where he proclaimed the defectiveness of the old Medieval masters, and how they only painted and created the way they did out of necessity, considering their available tools and underdeveloped, rough techniques and methods. Nineteenth-century artists making these same amateur mistakes was a mockery of the Academy and all that had been accomplished within the past few centuries, and reversing the mastered techniques of art back to its infancy was an art crime. How could it be possible for these outdated artists to be able to be role models for modern masters?¹¹

¹⁰Gaunt, 24.

¹¹Cooper, 409.

A system of imitation that rejects what such painters as Titian, as Correggio, as Rembrandt, as Rubens, and as Reynolds, have revealed to the world of the beauties of Nature, is based on a mistake as great as it would be in an astronomer to rest satisfied with the state in which Astronomy had been left by Copernicus.¹²

Voices much more hostile to the revival than Leslie's include a section written for the contemporary leading satirical English magazine *Punch*, called "Advice to Aspiring Artists."¹³ The critics in *Punch* railed against the revival-styled decorations in the new palace of Westminster, and criticized the stiffness, use of grids, and absolute disfiguration in Medieval art. Other popular critics insinuated that the so-called "age of faith" was instead an age of monkish superstition, ignorance, and terror.¹⁴ In 1847, a contributor of the nineteenth-century British Publication known for tracking art sales, acquisitions, and exhibitions, *Art-Union*, forewarned its readers of a mania that worships disfigured art and of a "returning to the decrepit littlenesses of a period warped and tortured by monkish legends and prejudices."¹⁵ Charles Dickens, Victorian novelist, journalist, and social critic stands out as the most well-known critic of the Pre-Raphaelites, who claimed their realism to be revolting and anti-art, and that the point of art is the very beauty of art.¹⁶ Ridiculing the Pre-Raphaelite's rejection of Raphael, he wrote:

This poor light, Raphael Sanzio by name, better known to a few miserably mistaken wretches in these later days, as Raphael (another burned at the same time, called Titian), was fed with a preposterous idea of Beauty—with a ridiculous power of etherealising, and exalting to the very Heaven of Heavens, what was most sublime and lovely in the expression of the human face divine on Earth—with the truly contemptible conceit of

¹²Charles Robert Leslie, "Professor Leslie's Lectures on Painting: Lecture II," *Athenaeum* (1848), p. 221.

¹³"Advice to Aspiring Artists," *Punch*, 8 (1845), 103.

¹⁴Edward J. Gillin, *The Victorian Palace of Science Scientific Knowledge and the Building of the Houses of Parliament*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 19-53. Similar material is found in Asha Hornsby, "'A slashing review is a thing that they like': Vivisection and Victorian Literary Criticism," *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Volume 29, Issue 1, January 2024, 121–139.

¹⁵"Topics of the Month: Reported Sale to the National Gallery," *Art-Union*, 9 (1847), 142.

¹⁶Lourença Baldaque, "The Pre-Raphaelites in the Dickens-Ruskin controversy: Resistance and Defense in the Victorian Era," *Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra* (2012).

finding in poor humanity the fallen likeness of the angels of GOD, and raising it up again to their pure spiritual condition.¹⁷

It is no surprise that the works of the Pre-Raphaelites inadvertently clashed with the criticisms overwhelming their contemporary culture, as their intentions and subjects rang similar bells for anti-medieval revival critics. Although stylistically, works by the Pre-Raphaelites were immensely unlike works from the era Pre-*Raphael* and primitive, early Italian and Catholic art, who they pretended to copy, the public was convinced by this imitation. This was because of their use of realism, flat colors, shallow points of view, bold contouring, and the inclusion of frames shaped like Catholic altarpieces. The inclusion of religious subject matter further pushed the association; when Millais painting *Christ in the House of His Parents* (1849–1850) was exhibited, it was seen as a mockery of religious characters and subject matter. Mary and Christ being portrayed in such an unholy, mundane manner startled the public.¹⁸ The association of Catholicism with the Medieval revival and its simplicity contributed to this negative reaction to the Pre-Raphaelites. To critics, this all was the Medieval revival's latest manifestation.¹⁹

¹⁷Charles Dickens, "Old Lamps for New Ones," *Household Words* 12 (15 Jun. 1850), 12-14. Similar material can be found in J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry and Criticism* (Oxford University Press Inc, 1998,) 15.

¹⁸Deborah Mary Kerr, "John Everett Millais's Christ in the House of His Parents: A Pre-Raphaelite Religious Image in the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1850," *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations, 1919-2007*, University of British Columbia, 1986.

¹⁹Cooper, 411.



John Everett Millais, *Christ in the House of His Parents*, 1849-1850, oil on canvas

2. Female Representation in Victorian Culture

Along with the criticisms described above, the Pre-Raphaelite representation of women was also controversial. Most Pre-Raphaelite paintings had women in them, and their rather dullish, introspective, emotive portrayals were yet another topic critics could not let go or ignore. The typical Victorian, a firm religious believer and possessor of an inflexible attitude was well-read on contemporary literature like Alexander Walker's *In Beauty: Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (1836), a book that claimed female beauty is a scientifically classifiable trait, and one that can be traced back to and predict reproductivity, fitness, and mental capacity.

We can see similar ideas demonstrated by authors such as Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope, and how their female characters are specifically depicted with physical attributes designed to be interpreted as a prototype by the reader. In *Pre-Raphaelite*

Challenges to Victorian Canons of Beauty (1992), Susan P. Casteras argues that features like a lady's nose, forehead, demeanor, and the like, were all deciphered as the internal ideals and intentions of their beholders. The Victorians, specifically the men, focused intently on physical form, and how they could use it as a guide to one's practicality, value, and submissiveness in a patriarchal marriage. Within Victorian art, "approved," easily noticeable features recurred, as well, and in the 1850s, publications like the *Art Journal* urged artists to incorporate this crude, "scientific" philosophy into their work. Artists studied gesture, pose, and its further meaning, as the importance of classifying attributes was subtly driving the culture. Critics and writers argued that beauty depends on functionality and symmetry, and deformity is what rids it. True beauty relies on consistency and homogenous expression, and anything too dubious or ambiguous in character is disgustfully unflattering. Proper bodily proportions and facial evenness was almighty, and the lack thereof was untrustworthy. Other *Art Journal* reviews also stated that "the most beautiful soul must have the most beautiful body," and "as in nature we do not infer a superior soul or sentiment from a deformed, imperfect or diseased body, how can such an idea possibly obtain recognition in art."²⁰

The Pre-Raphaelite's disharmonious, unkempt, and shrewd visuals, such as in *Christ in the House of His Parents*, targeted philosophies so engrained within the patriarchal, female-fearing Victorian culture. Critics readily jumped upon the opportunity to reprimand the grotesque, unsightly being of their work. And not only was this because of the physical attributes these subjects held, but the internal meditative elements they hinted to, something of an ugly threat to authority and order in Victorian England. Women depicted as so independent, emotional, and sensual contradicted every Victorian beauty standard, and seemed to stand for

²⁰Susan P. Casteras, "Pre-Raphaelite Challenges to Victorian Canons of Beauty," *Huntington Library Quarterly* Vol. 55, No. 1 (Winter, 1992), 15-16.

every kind of ugliness the standard Victorian viewer knew of. Bold, prominent features like sharp noses, strong jawlines, and overall distinct characteristics, modeled precisely from real-life muses, so unlike the Victorian ideal of painting imaginative, traditional features without realistic human reference, frightened the public.²¹ Faces white as paper, suggesting possible presence of tuberculosis, cholera, or fever startled viewers, and looked like a tragedy. Red hair – a Victorian social indicator of temper, witchcraft²², sensuality, and prostitution – flowed vigorously from the figures in an unrestrained manner, a direct violation of classical Victorian hairstyling and ideals of female purity.²³ In addition to all of this, the female figures were depicted in garments inappropriate for the time's standard, such as in garments only dared to be seen in the bedroom, and with such liberation from the tightly corseted, innocent Victorian beauty queen.

The Pre-Raphaelites were proto-feminist, it seems, and their inclusion of female artists in their secretive group, such as Elizabeth Siddal and Evelyn De Morgan could only strengthen this claim. While Victorian art reeked of desolate, emotion-free female faces and idealized backdrops so factitious and perfectly posed, the Pre-Raphaelites and their devotees displayed faces of concern, of intent, of release, and of emotion. Their subjects were placed in naturalistic environments and with intense emotion, evident of internal realms and capacities beyond Victorian understandings, such as Walker's popular science of beauty. The women depicted in Pre-Raphaelite paintings danced among shrubs and cried behind curtains, wafted in lilies and swam amidst nymphs. They were free and they were sensual, rescued from the rigid confines of the Victorian canvas. The brotherhood thereby outwardly rejected Walker's ideas of feminine

²¹Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, "Sensuality, lust and passion: how the Pre-Raphaelites changed the way the world sees women," *The Guardian*, 18 December 2018.

²²Lucinda Hawksley, *Lizzie Siddal: The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel* (André Deutsch, 2004), 2.

²³Brenda Ayres and Sarah Maier, *A Vindication of the Redhead: The Typology of Red Hair Throughout the Literary and Visual Arts* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p 5.

beauty which was characterized by prettiness, delicacy, submissiveness, and cohesion, and proposed an idea of female beauty with combined masculine traits, such as grandeur, power, and nobility.²⁴ Both sexes, in Pre-Raphaelite painting, regardless, existed on a spectrum of grotesque and magnificence. Female and male stereotypes were flipped around, mingled, and synthesized, and the long-lived pink and white satin and formulaic, rigid marks of sweetness and femininity died promptly as a result.

Now this would have been the case if the Pre-Raphaelites and their devoted Victorian followers were successful in their campaign and in their rigorous, bold claims of female power and sensuality, or even merely sincerely feminist or knowledgeable of the feminist ideas they seem to have so perfectly encapsulated in their works and in their lives, which they were not. Idealization was a constant factor in their work and motive. To properly establish the context in which these claims are true, a summary of female representation in art and literature in the Victorian era, and its paralleling social and political history, must be examined.

3: Overview of the Myth, the *Femme Fragile*, the Fallen Woman, the *Femme Fatale*, and the Cult of Domesticity

Firstly, in order for any social and political history and its manifestation in art and literature to be explained, the definition that I am using in this argument of the word “myth,” the effect it has on a society, and where it originally stems from needs to be understood properly. In its simplest form, the word "myth" is understood as an "untrue story," but we can more productively conceive of it as an explanation of the way stories are internalized and adapted in a variety of ways by society. In *The Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982),

²⁴Casteras, 27.

Nina Auerbach argues that “myth” has a more powerful relationship to its inhabiting society. She explains that certain ideologies, social norms, and usage of “lessons” from stories are what make simple tales and folklore transform from fairytale – feminine, subversive, fictional, dark, and way of escape and liberation for Victorian women – to myth – patriarchal, authoritative, sacred narratives that establish some form of societal structure, allegory, and conduct. Fairytales are merely a form of enjoyment, forbidden escape, and child-like wonder for women mostly, whereas myths are moral and contemporarily interpreted parables meant to shape a community and perhaps warn against ideals that have conflicting interests. Myths, in the Victorian era, also tended to be ancient stories either explained as a call for social order or authored by authoritarian men, while fairytales were authored mostly by free-thinking, dream-catching women for other like-minded women in hopes of challenging male-dominated order, without intent of the stories being translated as morally dense or as a socially reflective tale. Fairytales included tangible, liberated women, whereas myths would take those women as a more lofty, categorizable idea and proceed to strip them of their power and “devilish” intent for the betterment of society.

Because of this, myth, a word that provokes discomfort by sitting so perfectly between the unspoken and the authoritative narrative, holds more of an explanatory reflection of a time and political era than it is given credit for. Myth develops and births a legacy as result of the very environment it lives in, and is not just a lofty, intangible idea or tale that penetrates a culture and a people for no reason at all.²⁵ It is like a parasite in need of a proper host to survive, one that will proliferate its meaning, exploit its original innocence and storytelling manner, and explain away its ambiguous details as ideas that benefit itself and suggest easy answers behind social fears. Without relatability or need for explanations and excuses, myth dies out and becomes a simple

²⁵Nina Auerbach, *The Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, (Harvard University Press, 1982), 10.

fairytale, a joyous, wonderful fable, with no authoritarian purpose anymore. Mythology is interactive with its host society, and works as an explanation for social questions. Myth lives on because of its staying-power and unique tenacity of its story's contents.

Auerbach quotes Frances Power Cobbe, Anglo-Irish activist and leading women's suffrage campaigner of the mid to late nineteenth-century, who explains myth as a universal nature that builds all cultures in the subconscious:

The instant that day-light and common sense are excluded, the fairy-work begins. At the very least half our dreams (unless I greatly err) are nothing else than myths framed by unconscious cerebration on the same approved principles, whereby Greece and India and Scandinavia gave to us the stories which we were once pleased to set apart as 'mythology' proper. Have we not here, then, evidence that there is a real law of the human mind causing us constantly to compose ingenious fables explanatory of the phenomena around us, – a law which only sinks into abeyance in the waking hours of persons in whom the reason has been highly cultivated, but which resumes its sway even over their well tutored brains when they sleep?²⁶

Misogynistic representation was birthed from the female-fearing breeding ground created as result of the nineteenth-century sociopolitical atmosphere: The average nineteenth-century middle class man was hard at work in the factory while his wife was at home with the family, so while the man took care of the secular aspects of the home, like work and industry, the woman maintained the family's religiosity. This lessened male guilt about their seeming betrayal of religious and familial values that stemmed from this new industrialized society. According to the Western society's understanding and modern rhetoric, women are to be trusted more greatly than men with religion, anyway, as they are more sentimental at heart and have an easier time fostering a connection to God. In *The Young Ladies' Class Book: A Selection of Lessons for Reading in Prose and Verse* (1831) by Ebenezer Bailey, Principal of Young Ladies High School

²⁶Frances Power Cobbe, "Dreams as Illustrations of Unconscious Cerebration," *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. 23 (April 1871), 512–523, as quoted in Auerbach, 13.

in Boston, it is stated: “To these high and holy visions of faith I trust that man is not always insensible; but the superior sensibility of woman, as it makes her feel, more deeply, the emptiness and wants of human existence here, so it makes her welcome, with more deep and ardent emotions, the glad tidings of salvation.”²⁷ Here it explains that women have deeper emotional depth and awareness of human existence, leading to them being more open to religiosity.

Another example is found in the *General Baptist Repository and Missionary Observer* in 1840 stated about Mrs Frances Goodby, the wife of the Reverend J Goodby of Ashby-de-la-Zouch in Leicestershire, cited as an example of the ideal Victorian women: “... her ardent and unceasing flow of spirits, extreme activity and diligence, her punctuality, uprightness and remarkable frugality, combined with a firm reliance on God ... carried her through the severest times of pressure, both with credit and respectability ...”²⁸

Claiming women were more destined for religion and empathy was the only way, presumably, to negate male fear of religious and domestic abandonment resulting from the transition to a more secular lifestyle and being too busy industrializing the land to be involved as familiarly as previously expected. This justification for women’s involvement in everything domestic also soothed the male anxieties around the idea of “New Woman,” and how the public sphere started to incorporate more femininity, as women were taking on more public roles and requesting legal rights. This idea of sanctioned female spaces was dubbed the Cult of Domesticity.

²⁷Ebenezer Bailey, *The Young Ladies’ Class Book: A Selection of Lessons for Reading in Prose and Verse* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1831), 168

²⁸“A Brief Memoir of Mrs. Frances Goadby, Wife of the Rev. J. Goadby, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire,” *The General Baptist Repository and Missionary Observer* 2, no. 14 (February 1840), 34.

The feminization of the home space made men feel emasculated just by being in their homes, enforcing the separate spheres even more.²⁹ This familial system set a sense of order and standards to the average middle class family, and ultimately created a cycle of these ideals. Of course, while the world was rapidly changing and daily life was evolving due to the first wave of the Industrial Revolution, women were used as the defining, virtuous constant and a scapegoat to resolve the ever-growing male guilt. If one thing had stayed true and steady in the eyes of these modern working men, it was the meaning of true womanhood. No one dared tamper with the old-fashioned, beloved list of virtues that gave a lady her value, and a wife her purpose. They would blame the loss of virtue in the woman, herself, instead of blaming his newfound secular lifestyle.³⁰ Piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity were the virtues, and society would not entertain any other ideas.³¹ Men would not face the reality of their own religious and civil downfall or work to reconstruct the society that they claimed to miss if it meant reinstating the responsibility of men to be pious and pure.

Religion and purity were also valued in a woman particularly because it did not remove her from the home, and rather kept her confined to it. This comforted men as this meant there would be less women, if any, to be found in public spheres such as in politics, the workforce, and the like, threatening male authority and dominance. In addition to these fears, arguments of biological inferiority claiming that women were incapable of properly involving themselves in politics, commerce, or public service, were gaining the attention of the general population. Men were seen as active contributors to society because of the lack of reproductive responsibility they

²⁹Gwen Hyman, "Men in Charge, Men Underfoot: Nineteenth-Century Masculinities in Private and in Public," *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* Vol. 5, Iss. 2 (Summer 2009).

³⁰Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* Vol. 18, No. 2, Part 1 (Summer, 1966), 152.

³¹Welter, 152.

had, unlike women who were, according to the general understanding of the time, naturally sedentary and bound to the home as result of their constant relationship with reproduction, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and child-rearing. Men were only concerned with fertilization, and had much time to spare. Because of these ideas, fear of hormonally charged insanity sparked additional fear of women taking public roles, as menstruation was considered a time of irrationality, debilitation, and illness.³²

In addition to these anxieties, the sexuality of women was greatly feared in the Victorian Era. In the earlier half of the century, women were seen as fragile, docile creatures with little to no sexual appetite, usually a vessel for sympathy, with no means of blame or intent of harm. Men, lustful and incapable of controlling their naturally driven desires, were seen as taking advantage of the innocence and lack of desire in women. The Pre-Raphaelites, specifically, as will be explained later on in detail, are one of the mid-century Victorian groups that pushed a narrative to transform these saintly, victimized women into this new, rather bizarre feminine type.³³ Walter Houghton, American historian of Victorian literature explains that “the sexual act was associated by many wives only with a duty,”³⁴ and to their husbands, nothing but a mere act of nature and pleasure. As the century progressed and the cult of domesticity dug more deeply into the very roots of society, this ideal flipped around, and men, now the fragile, well-meant beings, were pitied for falling victim to the propositions and advances of devilish, sinful, lowly women, more often than not blamed for the sinful acts of the man, and not the man himself. Female sexuality was also associated with lack of class and the stripping of one’s dignity, with

³²Elizabeth Lee, “Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality,” *The Victorian Web* (Brown University, 1997.)

³³Joseph Clayborne Nunnally, B.A., M.A., “The Victorian Femme Fatale: Mirror of the Decadent, PhD diss., Texas Technological College (June 1968), IV.

³⁴Carl N. Degler, “What Ought To Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 79, No. 5 (Dec., 1974), 1468.

respectable women ideally representing the essence of asexuality, while it was standard in women below the standard. This shift occurred because of the idealized piety and purity in bourgeois women in the latter half of the century, and a sexually charged woman was a threat to the cult of domesticity and civil standards enabling men to maintain authority. Nathan G. Hale Jr. explains in *Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876-1917* (1971), “Many women came to regard marriage as little better than legalized prostitution. Sexual passion became associated almost exclusively with the male, with prostitutes, and women of the lower classes.”³⁵

Some doctors were so convinced that women had absolutely no interest in sexual activity, that they claimed if they showed any signs of it, they resembled a man.³⁶ Later on, other doctors acknowledged the existence of female sexuality and pleasure, and claimed that if pleasure was not found, by means of a man or some other outlet, it could lead to a build up of frustration and weakness.³⁷ Medical writers stated that this resulted in hysteria, mania, and insanity. Dr. William McLaury wrote in *The American Journal of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children* (1887): “Females feel often that they are not appreciated that they have no one to confide in; then they become morose, angular, and disagreeable as a result of continual disappointment to their social and sexual longings. Even those married may become the victims of sexual starvation when the parties are mentally, magnetically, and physically antagonistic.”³⁸ Henry Chevasse,

³⁵Nathan G. Hale Jr., *Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876-1917* (Oxford University Press, 1971), 31.

³⁶Ben Barker Benfield, “The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth Century View of Sexuality,” *Feminist Studies* 1 (1972), 54.

³⁷George H. Napheys, “The physical life of woman: advice to the maiden, wife, and mother,” in *Medicine in the Americas 1610-1920*, (Philadelphia: Maclean, 1872). Similar material can be found in Degler, 1470.

³⁸William M. McLaury, "Remarks on the Relation of the Menstruation to the Sexual Functions," *American Journal of Obstetrics*, 20 (1887), 161; *The American Journal of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children* Vol XX., (February, 1887), 4.

another medical writer and voice of the time, agreed with this idea, explaining why nunneries were notorious as places of fanaticism:³⁹ “Hence the old proverb, ‘The convent and the confessional are the cradles of hysteria and nymphomania.’”⁴⁰ One way or another, female sexuality was villainized, and hysteria was a common explanation for uncontrollable women, disobedience, and prostitution, as they were the ones who threatened the social order idealized by the cult of domesticity.

The myth of the devilish, desperate, frenzied, and forlorn woman was created as a result of these various fears centered around women and their sexuality. Literature, poetry, and art of the Victorian Era was filled with a subtle, yet easily spotted propagandist representation of women that was a reflection of this anxiety, meant to provoke and scare the public. The “fallen woman” and the “woman destroyed by love” tropes and myths emerged, with the *femme fatale* following suit officially some decades later, although strong hints and predecessors to the archetype starting in the mid to late nineteenth-century can be easily spotted. Mythology and its reflective societal standards filled the canvases and minds of Victorian male artists, and whether they were aware of it or they were not, it perfectly mirrored their psyche as products of their society.

Firstly, an explanation of the “love-stricken” woman, the woman destroyed by love, the *femme fragile*, is needed. The *femme fragile*, the counterpart to the *femme fatale*,⁴¹ was a term coined by Ariane Thomalla, who explains that this trope came about because of the paradox of

³⁹Degler, 1472.

⁴⁰Pye Henry Chavasse, *Physical Life of Man and Woman* (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1871), 372-73.

⁴¹Ariane Thomalla, review of *Die femme fragile: Ein literarischer Frauentypus der Jahrhundertwende*, by Walter Theurer, *The Germanic Review*; Washington, etc. Vol. 49, Iss. 2, (Mar 1, 1974), 179.

sexual oppression along with secret sexual activity of the time.⁴² The theme of women being betrayed by unrequited love, seduced by false ideals or false lovers or victimized by tragic love⁴³ is a constant trope in both mainstream Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite art.⁴⁴ A retelling of and emphasis on the rejection of a promise or hope, an unfulfilment of some childlike, innocent, romantic dream hushed by the logical, rational stoicism of men, the tragedy of a lifelong mission to reclaim love only to be unable to obtain it, is present. Highlighted in a vacuum is the woman's anguish, sexual frustration, dramatic sensuality, and punished state as result of adulterous sin. Instead of approaching the representation of women with their intellect, suffering, and history as accessory, they completely obliterate any humanity or personality, creating their painted women, and their lovers and wives modeling as them, as mere vessels of a tragedy and passiveness created and only controlled by men and the emotions they brought about. The very idea that women were engulfed in and completely consumed by their emotions and frenzy served the Victorian gender ideals, and how women were in "scientific," uncontrollable servitude towards their emotions and frustrations.

A brief preview of the in-depth analysis of Pre-Raphaelite female representation that will happen later on will be introduced here. The Pre-Raphaelites moved away from the Victorian classical "angel in the house" motif, removing them from the house and into beautiful, romantic gardens and orchards, sailing along the river as her humanity and grief took her life, but the effect is the same: both women, whether love-stricken or bound to the home, were enslaved by their feminine nature and reliance on men. This *femme fragile* portrayal was the embodiment of

⁴²Friederike Eigler and Susanne Kord, *The Feminist Encyclopedia of German Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 166.

⁴³Hae-In Kim, "The Pre-Raphaelite Women Destroyed by Love in All Its Forms and Fates," *The Victorian Web* (Brown University, 2006).

⁴⁴Eigler and Kord, 165.

the Victorian's greatest fear: the consequences of a woman ill with unrequited love, sexual frustration, and a natural instinct to overly-dramatize.

This originally stems from the Pre-Raphaelites' obsession with the limerence and philosophical nature of Medieval romances, such as Dante Alighieri and his love, Beatrice Portinari. Beatrice and Dante, realistically, were simply acquaintances, as had only met once before Dante declared her his "guide to heaven." He was astounded by and fantasized of her beauty and her intellect, instead of engaging with it in any type of interactive way. Beatrice became his spiritual obsession, his religious purpose, his heavenly muse, his god-like idol, his portal to the pains and beauties of the earthly world. They only interacted from afar, which was all Dante felt he needed anyway, as his mind and imagination created the rest of their story, projecting his own fantasy and infatuation onto Beatrice. He mirrored his own needs and wishes onto her, as if she was a vessel for his own desire, without request of her own input or individual humanity. These fantasies and romances were written down in poems and stories such as *La Vita Nuova* (1294). Rossetti was so in love with Dante's idea of romanticizing the very idea of romance that he attempted to reenact it within his own art, poetry, and relationships. Rossetti's correlation between the spiritual, the beautiful, and the female form and mind is indebted to Dante and his ideas. He was religious at heart, but his religion was one serving female beauty, deeming this beauty as divine and spiritual.⁴⁵ Within the same canvases and environments, Rossetti synthesized his own muses and lovers with Dante's archaic, Medieval idealizations of feminine beauty, morphing his own life into a "retelling" of his hero's.⁴⁶ The women depicted in these stories were stripped of their humanity, transcending into literary ideals and imaginative

⁴⁵Norman Kelvin, "Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti: A Pairing of Identities," *Victorian Literature and Culture* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 240.

⁴⁶Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*, 1871–72, oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, artic.edu.

tropes. What was idealized and fantasized about was their very existence and their saintly, godly being, full of complexity and life, but nothing specific or introspective enough for it to be considered feminist at all. The vague, tragic, hopeless, emotive states of these women morphed them into vessels for male fantasy, void of sentiment in their own right, which went hand in hand with Victorian misunderstandings and fears about women. Portraying women in this love-stricken manner was a form of projection and coping, a means to combat these social fears about women, minimizing their intellect and their autonomy, portraying them as solely emotional and ill with the disease of love.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beatrice meeting Dante at a marriage feast, denies him her salutation*, 1852,
watercolor and gouache paint on paper

An example of this trope in popular Victorian literature is Alfred Tennyson's *Mariana*, a poem inspired by Shakespeare's character Mariana from the play *Measure for Measure*. Mariana is a character forlorn, completely consumed and utterly depressed by the absence of her lover,

pathetically waiting day by day for his fated return. She is left to her own daunting imagination and constant despair, sinking deeper and deeper into isolation and abandonment.⁴⁷ This extremely popular piece of Victorian literature is patriarchally centered, and although it seems to be breaking away from some Victorian norms such as virginal purity, housekeeping, female asexuality, and marriage,⁴⁸ Mariana is still portrayed as dependent on the existence and approval of a male lover.

Her tears fell with the dews at even; Her tears fell ere the dews were dried; She could not look on the sweet heaven, Either at morn or eventide. After the flitting of the bats, When thickest dark did trance the sky, She drew her casement-curtain by, And glanced athwart the glooming flats. She only said, "The night is dreary, He cometh not," she said; She said, "I am weary, weary, I would that I were dead!"⁴⁹

Mariana's only cure, it seems, is the eventual return of her lover, as if her life and sanity depends on it. There is a transition from one patriarchal standard to the next, which some may confuse as feminist, yet the dismantling of one ideal just to replace it with another rejects this conclusion.

The lack of emotional capacity beyond the desire for a man displayed in the "woman destroyed by love" differs from the next female trope, the fallen woman, who is visibly condemned, banished, and shamed, displaying patriarchal standards more overtly, symbolically and allegorically. These tropes are two sides of the same coin: the woman destroyed by love is a helpless, passive, fragile victim to her desire and emotive state, not capable of claiming the fault of her sin, whereas the fallen woman is portrayed as completely transgressive and sinful, and at fault for her evil ways. She is the alter ego of the women destroyed by love, and a representation

⁴⁷R. H. Stoddard, "A Study of Tennyson," *The North American Review* Vol. 133, No. 296 (Jul., 1881), 88.

⁴⁸Entidhar Al-Rahid and Ahmed Al Mayyahi, "Tennyson's Poems 'The Lady of Shalott' and 'Mariana' Represent Fallen Women of Victorian Period," *Asian Journal of Applied Science and Technology* Volume 1, Issue 1 (February 2017), 212.

⁴⁹Alfred Tennyson, "Mariana" in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, (London, 1830).

of the societal ruin, a woman socially dirtied with adultery, rather than emotional ruin, that is a consequence of these morally corrupt actions. She is the cautionary tale, while the *femme fragile* is the fantasy. Mariana, simultaneously, can be viewed as a fallen woman, as well, since this abandonment, shame, and depression is result of her sexual and societal transgression. Tennyson, unlike Shakespeare, made sure to make it apparent to the reader that she is not married to any man.⁵⁰ Her rewriting as a fallen Victorian woman, transgressive and sexually active, in a frenzy over her lover, and residing outside of civilization, emphasizes this particular change in the story. Her seeming banishment from society, slow decline into madness, and spiraling of hopelessness displays not only being destroyed by love, but at fault for it, and in need of a man to redeem her.

The fallen woman, usually typified as a woman of a lesser status and of a troubled background, was a projection for men who contradictingly supported financially and quietly benefited from prostitution, sexual transgression, and anti-family behavior. In *Fallen Women and Foundlings: Rethinking Victorian Sexuality*, Lynda Nead supports this, explaining that “bourgeois respectability concealed a nineteenth-century underworld of prostitution and pornography.”⁵¹ In an earlier article of hers, *The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting* (1984), Nead argues that this can be viewed as mass sexual repression, but in this case, it is better understood as a conditional allowance of sexuality, dependent on class and status.⁵² The woman had fallen from grace and status by partaking in sexual acts with these respectable men, but for the men, that was allowed and

⁵⁰Al-Rahid and Al Mayyahi, 212.

⁵¹Lynda Nead, “Fallen Women and Foundlings: Rethinking Victorian Sexuality,” *History Workshop Journal* No. 82 (Autumn 2016), 177.

⁵²Lynn Nead, “The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting,” *Oxford Art Journal* Vol. 7, No. 1, (1984), 26.

excused, as sexual desire was seen as more pertinent and natural in men,⁵³ creating a paradox of an ecosystem filled with double standards and hypocrisy.

The last archetype formulated by these social norms that will be used here is the *femme fatale*, the dangerous temptress, the antagonist female demon. The *femme fatale* can be seen as the very same woman as the *femme fragile* or the fallen woman, but inside an erotic escapist fantasy. She opposes the asexual, childlike tale of the *femme fragile*, the portrayal of repression, in addition to the subjection to social repercussion of the fallen woman. She lives beyond Victorian life, unlike the last two tropes, direct applications of ideals and consequences. As an imaginative, erotic symbol of vengeance and terror, she displayed male fantasy that could only live outside of daily life.

These *femme fatales* tempt men in gardens in the bible, are pinned up on World War I propaganda posters, and are plastered across the film noir silver screen. Although this villainous trope highly reflects ideas of the Victorian era and the fears of female sexuality, the *femme fatale* as a specific categorizable term was properly implemented in the late nineteenth-century.⁵⁴ Earlier examples can be seen in French literature and poetry during the 1840s, which was adapted by the English by the 1890s. Some argue that the idea stemmed from even earlier origins, such as the eroticism of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a German poet, playwright, and novelist of the Eighteenth Century.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the archetype is pinned to the art and literature of the *fin de siècle* for the most part, and was a social reflector and patriarchal projection for the times. The French Decadence, an extravagant Modernist era following the Victorians and the

⁵³Nead, "The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting," 26.

⁵⁴Amanda McNally, "The Gendering of Death Personifications in Literary Modernism: The Femme Fatale Symbol from Baudelaire to Barnes" (Master's thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2019), 2.

⁵⁵Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (Troy, N.Y. : Whitston Pub. Co., 1983), 1.

Romantics, is widely known for utilizing the sensuality and artificiality of the *femme fatale*, as well, though only somewhat redeeming it of its negative connotation with modern ideas of artistic rebellion and permitted female sexuality.

Italian scholar and critic Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* (1933) and author Patrick Bade in *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (1979) argue that the archetype of the *femme fatale* is the counterpart to the Byronic literary hero figure of the 1800s, a term for a male archetype coined after English Romantic poet Lord Byron, known for his moody, pretentious, dark, and brooding anti-hero characteristics.⁵⁶ “He bears many of the same features which were later to characterize the *femme fatale*. He is pale, impassive, mysterious, with a mirthless smile, and a dangerous magnetism”, states Bade (1979, 10).⁵⁷ Both archetypes are magnetic and mysterious, but the *femme fatale* holds a more sinister allure. Of course, this specific profile was only pointed out once the *femme fatale* received her sultry nineteenth-century-specific nickname and was proliferated through French and English literature. However examples of women being portrayed as so is evident throughout history, and the *femme fatale* trope claimed and categorized these past stories and mythologies into a singular, modern stock-character, instead of respecting them as the multi-faceted, deeply intellectual, and historically unique characters they are. Women, through this archetype, were extracted from their entire personality and legacy, and all remembered about them was their sin and fatality.

The archetype can be found in ancient and modern literature and mythology alike, myths that highlight devilish, wicked temptresses who lead protagonist men to their death. Examples of these are Circe and Sirens, Greek Hera, Aphrodite, Indian Kali and Durga, Nigerian Oya,

⁵⁶Tuğçe Özdiñç, “Femme Fatale 101 - The Basic Characteristics of the Femme Fatale Archetype,” *The Journal of International Social Research* 13, no. 73, (October 2020), 176.

⁵⁷Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (Mayflower Books, 1979).

Polynesian Pele, Sumerian Inanna, Egyptian Hathor, Celtic Queen Mab, and later Biblical Lilith, Eve and Salome. Ancient *femme fatales* such as Inanna, Kali or Hera, although feared, according to the mythology, were still worshipped and respected, whereas *femme fatales* from monotheistic religions were promptly expelled and diminished, such as biblical Eve and Lillith.

Fierce and powerful women were once upon a time perceived respectfully as omnipotent, almighty, and givers and goddesses of life and death. Ancient mythologies likened women and their feminine qualities to their gods of creation and nature. The mother of Earth itself was the goddess Gaia, according to ancient Greek mythology. Over time, however, as the patriarchy emerged throughout many areas of the world, powerful women and their independent and influential feminine traits received their dangerous and evil connotation we are familiar with today, hence the modern *femme fatale* trope.⁵⁸ As authors David Leeming and Jake Page say in *Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine*:

Female power, as represented by the new worldview in the figure of the *femme fatale*—the Sirens, Harpies, and witches of myth—was feared and had to be controlled. The cult of virginity would emerge as a means of ensuring male ownership and would become an important factor in the overthrowing of the matrilineal economic system of the Neolithic cultures.⁵⁹

Writers and storytellers of modern times, such as Charles Baudelaire, Bram Stoker, and Edgar Allen Poe are known for their indulgence in the idea of the villainous *femme fatale*, and can be seen as some of the popular culprits for the widespread cultural hysteria of the *femme fatale* during the nineteenth-century. In Baudelaire's *Danse Macabre*, he likens death to an extravagantly dressed prostitute, performing among desire-stricken men filled with untainted life and prideful youth, now at the daring mercy of Death herself. "Her eyes, made of the void, are

⁵⁸Özdiñç, 176.

⁵⁹David Leeming and Jake Page, *Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 88-89, as quoted in Özdiñç.

deep and black; / Her skull, coiffured in flowers down her neck, / Sways slackly on the column
of her back, / O Charm of nothingness so madly decked!”⁶⁰

Emphasis is put on how Death holds no emotions of her own, rather evokes them in her
male victims. The common trope of the emotive, flaunting, and dangerously alluring nature of
the *femme fatale* is also used:

Do you come to disturb, with your powerful grin, / The feast of Life? Or is it some
ancient fire, / Spurring still the living carcass you dwell within, / Pushing you, fool, to the
Sabbath of Desire? / With songs of violins, with candles’ glow, / Hope to tear your
taunting nightmare apart? / And implore the orgies’ ferocious flow / To cool the hell
enkindled in your heart?

Baudelaire, with his lyrical expression of desire and fateful doom, highlights the mid
nineteenth-century ecosystem and how middle and upper class women are viewed as asexual
maidens of the home, and working and lower class women as energetic, lively, and sexual.

“Yet, who has not clasped a skeleton with passion, / And who has not fed on things of the
graves? / What matter the perfume, the raiment, the fashion? / He who feigns disgust, his own
beauty craves.” He begs the question: if she is so barren of flesh to be “fed on” and so empty of
life, a *femme fatale* symbol of a ghostly trap, is the sin the woman or the desire? Is the woman at
fault for tempting, or the man for being tempted? Is the very desire what makes the man the
tragic hero who danced with Death by no fault of his own? The trope of the *femme fatale* was an
easy way for men to mitigate fault and shame of desire. In *Baudelaire’s World* (2002), Rosemary
Lloyd discusses how Baudelaire had a habit of blaming the women in his life for the
consequences of his own actions and suffering.⁶¹

⁶⁰Baudelaire, Charles. *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶¹Rosemary Lloyd, *Baudelaire’s World* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

Of course, these examples used here are literary and manifested in a medium different from the Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite depictions of the women destroyed by love, the fallen woman, and *femme fatale* in their paintings, but the basis of the myth of the emotive, dangerous women and its social manifestation is the very same, as she inhabits both worlds and mediums with the same connotation and viscerality. These tropes were integrated deeply into Victorian society, affecting the consciousness of its men whether they were aware of it or not.

Because of this social backdrop and the ideals existing before and throughout the presence of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, my argument is as so: the Pre-Raphaelite men, although so rebellious in style, composition, and inspiration, were just as misogynistic, female-fearing, and damaging to the feminist movement and the ideals it stood for as the Victorian era's propagandist and conservative ideologies were. What may have seemed revolutionary to the average Victorian – women positioned beyond the home, loosely dressed, emotive, powerful, sentimental – still reads as shallow, fetishizing, fear-mongering, hypocritical, and detrimental in hindsight. Repackaged boldly were the very same humanity-stripping ideals and limitations forced onto women of the Victorian Era, in the guise of a modernist rebellion of liberated femininity. Instead of her home being her prison, the male gaze was. Her individuality and intellect was hushed and misinterpreted by the male fear of (combined with an extreme fascination with) the myth behind female agency, sanity, and sexuality. They claimed to be painters of nature,⁶² painting enchanted, imaginative Medieval, biblical, and Arthurian scenes with the utmost detail, yet failed to depict the complex individual intellect and sentiment of their real-life sitters in a realistic manner. They claimed to be realists, but ignored the intricacies, mental uniqueness, and personal range of the women sitting right before them each day. Within

⁶²Liz Falconer, "Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian avant-garde," *British Journal of General Practice* 62, no. 604 (November 2012).

the details of flowers, nature, and the Earth as they plainly saw it, they *were* realists, but emotionally and sentimentally, they were not, and these free-spirited characters were missing their agency.

This depiction of women was just an external expression of internal biases and objectification. In *Images of Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Visual and Textual Narratives* (2023), Tülay Dağoğlu explains the “male gaze” and its detriment by analyzing *Ways of Seeing* (1972) by John Berger. Dağoğlu explains that:

In his study of female nude images, he asserts that it is the male desire which legitimately eroticizes models to be stared at. Worse, male artists and viewers incriminate women for the gaze, evading the guilt of gratification. Paintings of women in famous historical works of art are reflections of the male artists’ personal thoughts and desires manoeuvred by his fantasies to control and eroticise *her* through *his* artistic [alleged] supremacy.⁶³

Dağoğlu stresses the paradoxical hypocrisy of men and their depiction of femininity, and how it is, in fact, reflective of their own minds. Through visual analyses of Pre-Raphaelite paintings with this social backdrop in mind, these manifestations of femininity and its representation can be categorized easily.

4: The Femme Fragile and The Woman Destroyed By Love in Pre-Raphaelite Works

The Pre-Raphaelite paintings that best display the trope of the forlorn, hopeless, isolated woman destroyed by love are retellings of Shakespearean plays, Arthurian legends, and Victorian poetry. Often, members of the brotherhood isolated specific female characters from these immensely famous, traditional tales, reframing them as the center of their art, shining light onto these merely secondary, peripheral characters and their own psyches and stories. Of course, these characters included Ophelia from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Mariana from Shakespeare’s *Measure*

⁶³Tülay Dağoğlu, *Images of Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Visual and Textual Narrative*, 2023, 7. Similar material can be found in John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London, UK: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972).

for *Measure*, “The Lady of Shallot” from Alfred Tennyson’s ballad based on Elaine of Astolat from Arthurian legend, and St. Agnes of Rome, popularized by poems by both John Keats and Tennyson. While these female characters are reused by Victorians quite accurately, instead of being placed in a Medieval romance that ends happily, the emphasis is more emotional and stagnant, focusing on the sexual frustration, desperation, and hopelessness of the character.⁶⁴

Arguably the most famous Pre-Raphaelite painting to come out of the brotherhood is John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia*, painted during 1851 and 1852, and is a perfect example of the *femme fragile* and woman destroyed by love trope.⁶⁵ Ophelia, love interest of Hamlet, daughter of the old courtier Polonius, chief counselor to King Cladius of Denmark, endures a “muddy death”⁶⁶ as she – distraught and frenzied with love-sickness from Hamlet’s neglect and with the pain of her father’s death by her lover’s hand – falls into the “weeping brook” as her “clothes spread wide” as it drowns in the dirty lake’s water. Surrounding her are willows, “crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,” symbols of forsaken love, pain, and innocence,⁶⁷ and she sings fragmented sweet melodies to death. Placed on the far right edge towards the bottom are forget-me-nots. Shakespeare adorns the imagery with additional pansies, symbolic of a love in vain, daisies, symbols of innocence and purity, and the flower of the Norse fertility goddess Freya,⁶⁸ fritillaries, symbolic of sorrow, and roses, symbolic of youth, love, and beauty. The poppy beside the floating daisies, representative of death and sleep,⁶⁹ is Millais' personal addition to this sorrowful bouquet, along with a robin as reference to the tune Ophelia sings ‘For bonny

⁶⁴Meredith Ringel, “The Theme of “The Eve of St. Agnes” in the Pre-Raphaelite Movement ‘07,” *The Victorian Web* (Brown University, 2004).

⁶⁵Søndergaard, 115

⁶⁶William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. George Richard Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 4.7.150–160

⁶⁷Søndergaard, 117.

⁶⁸Turchynova Ganna, Tatiana Novak, Lyudmila Pet'ko, The Rose "Ophelia" and Flower Symbolism in “Hamlet,” *Intellectual Archive* 10, no. 1 (March 2021).

⁶⁹Søndergaard, 117.

sweet Robin is all my Joy' (Act IV, Scene 5).⁷⁰ The impeccable attention to natural detail – the wilted ends of leaves, the randomly placed rotted pieces of earth, the disorganized composition of willows and flora – proves Millais a rebel to the academic idealization of nature of the time, heightened by the scare of the Medieval revival.



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-52, oil on canvas

The most important part of this painting, however, is Ophelia herself, her expression, her psyche, and the story of her sitter, Elizabeth Siddal, who will be examined in detail later on. Here lies Siddal as Ophelia, with her solemn expression, formless figure, pale complexion, childlike wonder, and innocent drift to her death, surrounded by floral symbols of distraught and sorrow. She is the Pre-Raphaelite's idealization of the “liberated” Victorian woman, who although is free of Victorian standard of dress and location, is still captive to the male ideal of asexuality, distress, subservience, and total devotion to love-based drama.

⁷⁰William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. George Richard Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 4.5.

In *'Something Strangely Perverse'. Nature and Gender in J. E. Millais's Ophelia* (2018), Peter Brix Søndergaard explains: "The femme fragile has a childlike body, lithe and slender, without fully developed sexual characteristics: 'a body which denies its sexual predestination' and 'ends its artificial existence in perverse over refinement.'" ⁷¹ Ophelia, in all her pure fragility, displays a succumbing to Earth's pitiful punishment of a lover's betrayal and no means to an end: "The femme fragile represents surrender to and resigned identification with normative morality in order to counter and perforate its intolerable pressure... The defining essence of womanhood consisted in idealistic love, delicate feelings, and moral sensitivity." ⁷²

With all of Millais' seeming rebellion against the Victorian standard, he still proliferates the Victorian's agenda of femininity. This dreamlike state brought about by her despair, alone, is so extreme that she serves as the point of "access to a mental spiritualized nature which transcends all bodily and sexual desire," ⁷³ which rings reminiscent of the Brotherhood's obsession with Medieval romances that tended to overly glorify women as means to their own spiritual awakening. Peter Brix Søndergaard from Aarhus University argues that Millais' Ophelia is a product of the Victorian agenda of coping with sexual repression as a result of guilt and fear of their double life of sexual frenzy. ⁷⁴ Millais paints Ophelia so enmeshed within and fatigued against the blanket of nature that swallows her, melting her humanity back into an oblivion that is the womb of nature. It is interesting to note how this indecisiveness of whether to differentiate Ophelia as her own figure properly was not applied to the rest of the scenery, as the flowers and nature are painted with utmost precision and contour. The Pre-Raphaelites, inspired by their devotee and spokesperson John Ruskin, were infamously focused on scientific studies of nature,

⁷¹Søndergaard, 119.

⁷²Søndergaard, 120.

⁷³Regina Schaps, *Hysterie und Weiblichkeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1983), 141.

⁷⁴Søndergaard, 121.

and replicating it in their work as precisely as they could, convinced the display of pure nature became a portal to truth. This lack of precision and unearthly loftiness is specific to Ophelia's figure, her femininity, and her emotive, spiritual state.⁷⁵

Ophelia's expression, an exact formation of Millais' conservative ideal of beauty, femininity, and its connection to nature, lacking an effort to add any such nuances that women may display in these deprived states, strengthens this claim. He painted what he saw, and what he saw in Ophelia through Siddal was a portal to spirituality and personal, selfish fulfillment. "Despite the Pre-Raphaelite obsession with fact, and the requirement of a direct and sustained confrontation with nature, artistic reality was nevertheless always already 'elevated through the choice of beautiful people', in this case in the form of Elizabeth Siddal. It was not enough for the Pre-Raphaelites to reject conventional, standardized, academic formulas. The handling of the medium, in itself saturated with moral significance, was supposed to enter an alliance with improving subject matter. Victorian morality thus intervened as a kind of meditating and purifying filter between image and reality. The theme of the painting had to be ennobling."⁷⁶

Søndergaard also argues that with the Enlightenment and its aim to control nature with humanity's "best in mind", came a subconscious categorization between men and women, nature and control. The Pre-Raphaelite's heavily studied, controllable nature and their simultaneous social entanglement with the Enlightenment shows an irony between studying nature to perfection, while still controlling it and displaying it as seen through long-term study, not as a representation of a single moment's sight. Autumn's buds, spring's willows, summer's roses were all curated to perfection by Millais' long-term study brought together into one single

⁷⁵Søndergaard, 121.

⁷⁶Søndergaard, 122.

canvas, showing a product not of instantaneous nature but of a controlled one. Millais' ongoing study of nature, adding flowers and shrubs to the painting over time, not as he first sees it, creates a fragmented reality of what is at first seen as naturalistic. The painting tries to control femininity in one sense by connecting her dissolving being back with nature – the instinctual drama and hysteria that women were naturally imprisoned to, yet reveals an incoherence in the form of control.⁷⁷ Their source, nature, was beginning to be more and more controlled by men and seem less natural and authentic. Nature was not what they were being returned to, it was a newly revised sense of nature created by men. Women, in time, became symbolic of what must be controlled by men, even if it first seems to be a reclamation of femininity's untainted connection to nature, expressed through symbolism in paintings such as Millais' Ophelia.

Another example of the *femme fragile*, woman destroyed by love, is Millais' *Mariana*, a distraught, love-sick woman awaiting the unlikely return of her lover after her dowry was lost at sea. This Shakespearean character from the play *Measure for Measure*, has only two options for a total cure: the return of her lover, or the sweet release of death. Mariana is richly dressed, standing up from working at her embroidery, reminiscent and pained with rumination and consumed entirely by sorrow, angst, and impatience. All other material elements are merely distractions from her completely ravenous state in which she cannot dislodge herself from. She rests her hands on her lower back as if her spine is unable to carry the burden alone, and throws her head back in complete devastation, in the midst of a sigh of exhaustion and existentialism. Mariana is both rejected from society, as she lives in an abandoned, lonely farmhouse, and by her lover, who is nowhere to be found. Leaves blow at will throughout the space, serving as a

⁷⁷Søndergaard, 124.

reminder to Mariana of the world in which her lover inhabits, entangling her reality with false hope and her lover's promise she once possessed.⁷⁸



John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1851, oil on canvas

In Shakespeare's version of the story, Mariana is granted the yearned position of marriage, whereas Tennyson's poem and Millais subsequent painting do not.⁷⁹ They focus on materializing the anguish and emotional response of the forever-condemned Mariana, as this desperation and pain is what they are most interested in, not the distracting sequential elements

⁷⁸Sally King, "'Aweary' and Waiting: John Everett Millais's Mariana," *The Victorian Web* (Brown University, 2007)

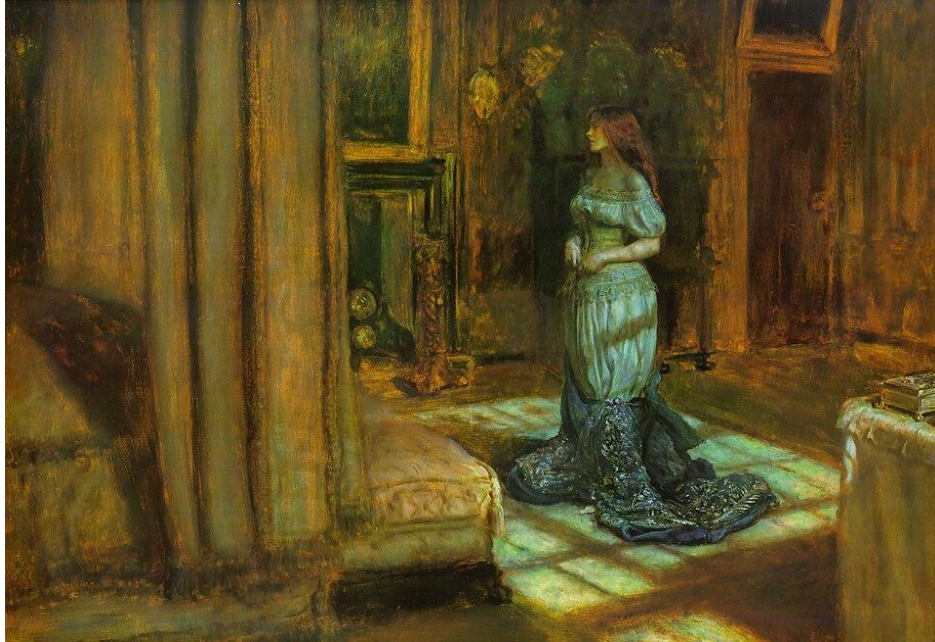
⁷⁹Deborah Hickey, "He Cometh Not: Millais's Mariana and the Position of the Unmarried Victorian Woman." *The Victorian Web* (University College Cork, Ireland, 2018).

of the story she inhabits. Her pain is the story they wish to tell and to explore, and refrain from giving her the coveted ending of peace and love, for this would disrupt their study of emotion as spirituality and projection of victimhood and pity onto women. The tale's man being the problem and the cure at the very same time intrigues the Pre-Raphaelites, as they focus solely on this aspect of what they believe encompasses femininity.

Millais' 1863 watercolor *The Eve of St. Agnes* shares many symbolic similarities to Ophelia and Mariana, as all three experience a reverie inspired by love. Taken from John Keats' 1819 poem of the same name, Millais tells the story in a more personally liberal approach, diverging somewhat from the origin and delving into his own depiction.⁸⁰ "According to folklore, the Eve of St Agnes (21 January) was the night when a woman would see her future husband in her dreams if she followed certain rituals."⁸¹ She stands still in the midst of undressing for bed, transfixed by an enchanted sense of awe and excitement. The dewy, almost melted elements of this painting emphasize the heroine Madeline's dreamlike, emotional state, and this skillfully painted illusionary scene, blending reality and a fantasy of desire, rings reminiscent of Ophelia's spiritual reverie and Mariana's moment of entrancement. Moved by a romantic dream, whether of hope or of loss, she stands just as vulnerable and all-consumed as the two aforementioned women.

⁸⁰"Art. Royal Academy (First Notice)." *The Reader: A Journal of Literature, Science, and Art* (May 1863), 461-62.

⁸¹John Everett Millais, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, ca. 1863, watercolor, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



John Everett Millais, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, 1863, watercolor

Another depiction of the woman destroyed by love is Hunt's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1868), a story from Giovanni Boccaccio's book of tales the *Decameron* (1353), adapted by Keats in 1818. The tale of Isabella and Lorenzo tells a story of two lovers, fated with a tragic end. Lorenzo works for Isabella's brothers, who dislike his being their sister's suitor. They conspire against Lorenzo, have him killed, and his ghost appears to Isabella to let her know where to find his body. She removes his head and places it in a pot of basil, and waters it with her tears. The pot is stolen by her brothers, and she dies of grief.⁸²

⁸²Rebecca Jeffrey Easby, "William Holman Hunt, *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*," in *Smarthistory* (June 27, 2020).



William Holman Hunt, *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*, 1868, oil on canvas

Some argue that the representation of these *fragile* women as so upset, distraught, and neglected by their male lovers may prove that these men were attempting to create social awareness to the injustices placed onto women by the fault of neglectful men, as there is symbolism reflecting betrayal and romantic catastrophe on the man's end. However, even while alluding to the cause for the neglect and fallen state, the female character is still portrayed as in need of pity and male redemption in most cases.⁸³ The men paradoxically serve as both the

⁸³Jessica Webb, "Why Women Fell: Representing the Sexual Lapse in Mid-Victorian Art," *eSharp* 9 (2007), 1.

problem and the solution all in one canvas, completely disqualifying the attempt to shift the blame at all.

5: The Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Work

The fallen woman is the conventional, cautionary contrast to the *femme fragile* and the angel in the house.⁸⁴ Not bound to either her traditional family or to a certain male-centered love hysteria, the fallen woman threatens the Victorian ideal of domesticity and pure femininity. The idea of having fallen is read quite differently by gender; a masculine fall is one in war, filled with martyrdom, strength, and sacrality, often being of patriotic inspiration and generational honor. The feminine fall, however, is shameful and scandalous, associated with sexual acts, particularly out of wedlock.⁸⁵ The fall of a woman, inspirational in more of a moral, cautionary-tale manner, fascinated the members and associates of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but mostly Rossetti, almost to the point of obsession. His paintings and poems were filled with stories of fallen women, and in a letter to William Holman-Hunt written in 1855, regarding his oil painting *Found* (1854), he described the painting's scene as so:

The picture represents a London street at dawn, with the lamps still lighted along a bridge which forms the distant background. A drover has left his cart standing in the middle of the road (in which, i.e., the cart, stands baa-ing a calf tied on its way to market), and has run a little way after a girl who has passed him, wandering in the streets. He had just come up with her and she, recognizing him, has sunk under her shame upon her knees, against the wall of a raised churchyard in the foreground, while he stands holding her hands as he seized them, half in bewilderment and half guarding her from doing herself a hurt. These are the chief things in the picture which is to be called "Found" and for which my sister Maria has found me a most lovely motto from Jeremiah: "I remember Thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals..."⁸⁶

⁸⁴Linda Nochlin, "Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman," *The Art Bulletin* 60, No. 1 (March 1978), 141.

⁸⁵Nochlin, 139.

⁸⁶Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1861-1870* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1965).



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Found*, 1854, oil on canvas

American feminist art historian, Linda Nochlin, analyzes the context and history of the fallen woman in the Victorian era, which may explain Rossetti's ideological assumptions about his subjects, and in this case, the fallen woman, and how it may be representative of his own unconscious biases. As explained previously, nineteenth-century England's ideologies surrounding prostitution, female sexuality, and promiscuity shamed and scolded the woman for her actions, with only salvation through repentance and reintegration into her family seen as true release from sin. The cult of domesticity played a crucial role in this societal set-up,⁸⁷ strategically creating a web of myths around the concept of an unregulated, sexually active, unwed woman, as their very existence was seen as taboo. The fallen woman in this painting,

⁸⁷Nochlin, 141.

adorned with that same red hair symbolic of prostitution and temper, turned away from the man who has spotted her in her ruin, crouched on her knees in shame, is pale and green with a complexion of a fatal disease,⁸⁸ presumably obtained during her forbidden rendezvous. In addition to this, Nochlin analyses how Rossetti uses boundaries and space to declare societal, moral expectations that further explain the canvas' Victorian meaning. Examples she describes include the churchyard wall's separation of the upright and the fallen, the dark bollard, separating the symbolic calf from the rest of the corruption, the graveyard bars, separating life from death, "yet suggesting the immanence of mortality, just as the mesh of the white calf's net suggests that life is enmeshed by death, that innocence is doomed to destruction."⁸⁹

Perhaps most important of all is the bridge dividing city from country, virginal past from fallen present-the bridge whose significance is further heightened, not in the unfinished painting, but in the complete drawings, by the moving presence of an isolated, anonymous female figure. The figure on the bridge is an emblem too of the future alienation of the fallen woman that carries an implication of contemplated suicide: the little figure seems to be walking close to the stairway leading down to the river...⁹⁰

With these particular symbols and elements of sin, moral corruption, and danger in Rossetti's painting, it comes blatantly clear how he views female sexuality within his own society, considering the contemporary scene of choice; in need of regulation and at the mercy of male salvation. The line between pure and impure was blatant, and whoever shall pass it will reap the consequences. This was a cautionary tale made to provoke and scare people of the liberated woman.

This picture can also be seen as a depiction of Christ and a repentant sinner, specifically as a recreation of the *Noli me Tangere* biblical episode. Beatrice Laurent in *Hidden Iconography*

⁸⁸Beatrice Laurent, "Hidden Iconography in 'Found' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 15 (Fall 2006), 16.

⁸⁹Nochlin, 149.

⁹⁰Nochlin, 149.

in *'Found'* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti explains the similarities between the story in the painting and the gospels. Both occur early in the morning, near a tomb, and involve a connection between an apparition that looks like a gardener and a “fallen” woman.⁹¹ This scripture was on the radar of the Pre-Raphaelites, as it was constantly rendered by Renaissance artists that the brotherhood sought to emulate. As to which *Noli me Tangere* engraving particularly inspired the brotherhood is difficult to pinpoint. The ones Rossetti had been inspired by must have been of the various adaptations he saw in museums, such as *Noli me Tangere* by Fra Bartolommeo (1508, formerly attributed to Alberti-nelli) and *Noli me Tangere* by Bronzino (1561), both on view at the Louvre when Rossetti visited in 1849.⁹² He also would be familiar with Titian’s version, as it has been displayed in the National Gallery since 1856, along with some other *Noli me Tangere* variations.⁹³ Specifically, Veronese’s *Noli me Tangere* (1528, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Grenoble) is the closest to Rossetti’s *Found*, as the girl’s posture is remarkably similar. The Pre-Raphaelites were known for their attempt at emulating Old Masters, and Nochlin suggests that Rossetti was also inspired by Jan Van Eyck’s *Chancellor Rollin Madonna*, which is why he used an urban background design, another painting he had seen at the Louvre.⁹⁴ With these countless precedents to the scene and various versions that all have the same roots, Rossetti makes his statement – the man is Christ, and the woman, the sinner, needs saving. The roles are clear as day. A “Magdalene” was a euphemism for a prostitute in the Victorian era,⁹⁵ shown extensively through Rossetti’s *Found*. The woman, at fault and deep in sin can only turn away in shame when being perceived by her respectable male counterpart.

⁹¹Laurent, 18.

⁹²Raphaël Rigal, “D. G. Rossetti’s Trip to Paris and Belgium: A Journey Between Past and Present,” *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* (Spring 2024).

⁹³Laurent, 19.

⁹⁴Nochlin, 151.

⁹⁵Marcia Werner, *Pre-Raphaelite Painting and Nineteenth-Century Realism*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 206.



Paolo Caliari Veronese, *Noli Me Tangere*, 1528, oil on canvas

An interpretation by David Sonstroem views the “Magdalene” here as the embodiment of the Christ figure, instead, as she is the one properly dressed and unwilling to be touched or spoken to, like Christ in the original scripture. This explains her not only as the vessel for her own sin, but representative of the sins of the men who had affairs with her, likened to Christ's sacrificial element.⁹⁶ She can be seen as redeemed because of her sacrifice as being a scapegoat for the good of society, and being the living symbol and result of all that is wrong with it. This is further explained by the choice of a calf in the painting instead of a lamb, which would be a symbol of innocence and often paired with Christ. While the calf still symbolizes innocence and sacrifice like a lamb would, it simultaneously rings reminiscent of the Golden Calf from the Book of Exodus that the Israelites worshipped falsely against their God. With this in mind, the woman represents God, and the man, owner of the calf – the unfaithful servants, the corrupt

⁹⁶David Sonstroem, *Rossetti and the Fair Lady*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1970s), 20.

community, the idol worshippers.⁹⁷ This association shifts the blame onto him, hinting towards his own fault and corruption, resulting in the woman's sacrificial state.

Although the woman, through this interpretation, can be read as being of higher spirituality, purity, and liberated from Victorian domestic norms, concerning her Christ-like sacrifice, and the man, although being of higher status, corrupted by his worshiping of idols, the very idea that the woman's suffering spiritually elevates her is the exact problem I have with the Pre-Raphaelites' view on women: the suffering was the redemption, and the sacrifice of dignity and life declared her holy. Her suffering was inevitable, rudimentary, and a portal for the salvation and reclamation of her humanity, all while carrying the entire community's sins on her back. It should not be her who carries the yoke of sinful men, and the association between her and Christ is another way men relieve themselves of their own sin, declaring women to be of a godly essence who can carry the blame for them, restoring domesticity and pride. The shift of blame onto men here does not rightfully justify or acknowledge the original issue started by these men and their misogynistic attempts to keep women regulated, but only justifies, superficially, the suffering of women to lessen the guilt of male sin. This is a manifestation of the Pre-Raphaelite's obsession with female suffering and victimhood, and their fetishizing romanticism of female spirituality inspired by medieval romances and Victorian male savior-complexes.

6. The *Femme Fatale* in Pre-Raphaelite Work

Nudity, in the Victorian era, proliferated as an independent genre despite the prudish inclinations of society. However to negate the guilt of its explicitness, these portraits were

⁹⁷Laurent, 20-22.

painted and named in reference to characters of mythology, removing themselves only metaphorically and mentally from such promiscuous realms.⁹⁸ Depictions of the *femme fatale* appear in Pre-Raphaelite art mostly during its second wave, when Rossetti, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and William Morris were its main members. With Rossetti specifically, themes he usually turned to such as of love, religion, spirituality, shifted as result of his sexual frustration in his marriage, to themes of prostitution, female terror, and devilish, demonic women. In the book *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (1985), Jan Marsh explains that these men “gazed, fascinated but repelled, at women of a curious frigidity, cold but sensual, erotic but invulnerable,” and that “their attitudes are piped with a fear of female malevolence, and characteristically they attempt to control this fear by boiling down the variety of the individual experience into the image of a single symbolic figure.”⁹⁹ Marsh also claims that “Women are rendered decorative, depersonalized; they become passive figures rather than characters in a story or drama... women are reduced to an aesthetic arrangement of sexual parts, for male fantasies.”¹⁰⁰

As result of this attitude towards the woman and the *femme fatale*, women, in Pre-Raphaelite painting, both served as subject of the piece as well as object, as their features and bodies were painted not simply from individual observation, but from a glossy, overly rendered idealized woman with particularly impossible features, fancying her as “object” of male desire. “Such a treatment, therefore, not only objectified the woman but also dismembered her body and her identity; the artistically rendered woman is no longer an individual person but really the pleasing arrangement of shapes and light, easily allowing ‘peaches and pears’ to substitute for flesh.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, the repercussions of the *femme fatale* as object include not

⁹⁸Elizabeth Lee, “The Femme Fatale as Object,” *The Victorian Web* (Brown University, 1997).

⁹⁹Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (St. Martin's Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁰Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (St. Martin's Press, 1985).

¹⁰¹Lee, “The Femme Fatale as Object.”

only the creation of but an allowance for the entitled sense of power given to the painter and viewer overtaken by scopophilia, both by the artist's omnipotence over the depiction of his model turned idealized woman, and by subjecting the resulting woman to his control through his gaze while stripping away her humanity and ability to reject this perception.

The unfinished study *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1855) by Rossetti is one of his first attempts at the *femme fatale* motif. The scene is a reproduction of Keats' haunting ballad *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy.) Rossetti leans into a Lilith archetype here as he depicts the man as captive to the long, engulfing cape that is her hair, while Keat's version simply states, "Her hair was long, her foot was light, and her eyes were wild," without mention of entrapment or some devilish connotation of the hair.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, 1855, brush drawing in grey wash, and pen and black and brown ink, and graphite on paper

Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1866–1868, altered 1872–73) perfectly encapsulates both ideas of woman as object and *femme fatale* as projection. The sonnet *Body's Beauty* by Rossetti, inscribed

onto the frame of *Lady Lillith*, sets the scene and introduces this biblical character how he sees her:

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.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, (1866–1868, altered 1872–73), oil on canvas

Important to note is Lilith's rare occurrence and the lack of tradition in the replication of her story in high art or serious literature, with her first real appearance most likely being in Goethe's *Faust, Part I* (1810), where it is said about her, "Beware of her beautiful hair, her chief glory; if she catches a young man in it, she will not soon let him go."¹⁰² Such traditions of female temptress depiction included Salome and Judith, and the specific traits associated with Lilith, "Adam's first wife, succubus, night demon, baby stealer"¹⁰³ must have been particular enough for him to use over the more commonly used women to best capture the painting's intended meaning. The idea that she ever so fervently rejected gender roles, refusing to lay with Adam, and in result banished from Eden for eternity, relates deeply to Rossetti's fear, yet fetishizing fascination with the danger of the sexual women.

In "*One Strangling Golden Hair*": *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lady Lilith* (1984), feminist art historian Virginia M. Allen extracts this painting's contemporary Victorian meaning from its separate mythical origin by emphasizing how by inscribing the myth as a sonnet onto the frame of a painting so modernly posed, set in a Victorian bedroom, it connects the myth to the contemporary, as each stands for the other. This reframes the mythical "Lilith," not just as an archetype but as a cautionary tale to the "New Woman" that the Victorian society was so very afraid of.¹⁰⁴ This also is proven by Rossetti's consumption of misogynistic Victorian media and newspapers such as the *Athenaeum*, *Tinsley Magazine*, and the *Saturday Review*. He even had sought out information of the night demon Lilith from the editor of *Athenaeum* in a letter later found by Rossetti's brother, William.¹⁰⁵ Particularly in the *Saturday Review* was an argument that

¹⁰²J. W. von Goethe, *Faust*, Pts. I and ii, ed. R. M. S. Hefner, H. Rehder, and W. P. (D.C. Heath and Company, Boston, 1954), 303.

¹⁰³Virginia M. Allen, "'One Strangling Golden Hair': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lady Lilith," *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 66, No. 2 (Jun., 1984), 286.

¹⁰⁴Allen, 291.

¹⁰⁵Allen, 292.

educated women were unable to nurse their children, if they had any at all, denying their duty to England.¹⁰⁶ It is no wonder these arguments interested Rossetti, for these women were being portrayed to the likeness of Lilith, a childkiller, because they could not or did not bear children. Perhaps this was, too, his inspiration for a contemporary, cautionary Lilith.

As evident from his *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1855) drawing, Rossetti views a lady's hair as dangerous, enchanting, fantastical, yet deadly; a theme he uses over and over again in his *femme fatales*. Lady Lilith's hair shines red, a sign of wickedness and promiscuity, and she takes up almost the entire frame, staring narcissistically into her hand mirror, preparing the thick locks for the entanglement of an unfortunate lover. Her long loose hair is also symbolic of her loose morals.¹⁰⁷ Allen points out Rossetti's use of symbolism and imagery in the painting:

The rose, flower of Venus, suggests her aphrodisiac quality, but the poppy is the flower of Hypnos and Morpheus, sleep and dreams. It is also the source of laudanum, the drug that killed Rossetti's wife, Elizabeth Siddal. Foxglove, lying under the boudoir mirror at the rear of both compositions, produces digitalin, which is not only medicine but deadly poison. In the rear of the composition, two candles flank the mirror, suggesting an altar: to Love, to Lilith, to Vanity, or even to Death.¹⁰⁸

There are many other paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites that depict the *femme fatale* of Arthurian legend and ancient mythology, such as Edward Burne-Jones' *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874-1877), Rossetti's *A Sea-Spell* (1887), his *Venus Verticordia* (1864-1868), and *The Loving Cup* (1867), a painting that displays a cold, dreamlike state of the woman, a cold indifference to the male gaze.

¹⁰⁶Allen, 292.

¹⁰⁷Nead, "The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting," 28.

¹⁰⁸Allen, 291.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Loving Cup*, 1867, oil on canvas

The Beguiling of Merlin, a story of the enchantment of Merlin by the sorceress Vivien, The Lady of the Lake (sometimes called Nimue,) stems from a medieval French Arthurian romance, yet Burne-Jones paints the scene in a classical, Renaissance mode,¹⁰⁹ unlike Rossetti's medievaesque, two-dimensional fantasy scenes, further exposing the Pre-Raphaelite's inconsistency with their original intentions or as a homogeneously minded brotherhood. Burne-Jones' verisimilitude was easily differentiable, as most of his work involved the proper perspective and depth Rossetti shied away from. This scene is the very moment of betrayal in the story, with the atmosphere captured in its sudden realization of fallacy, as Vivien, with Merlin in

¹⁰⁹Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, (New York:Viking Press, 1981).

her full control, holds the book of spells that he had taught her, entrapping him forever in a hawthorn bush. Vivien, an evil temptress, manipulated Merlin into a relationship, extracting his secret skills of enchantment.¹¹⁰



Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, 1874-1877, oil on canvas

A Sea Spell by Rossetti, a golden, melancholy, blank-stared, coldhearted siren, just as seen in *The Loving Cup*, flicks the strings of her lute and adorns herself in fragrant apple blossoms and linens to lure mariners to their demise. The sea fairy seems to have all the time in

¹¹⁰Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, 1873-1877, oil on canvas, National Museums Liverpool: Lady Lever Art Gallery, Bebington. <http://liverpoolmuseums.org.uk>

the world, as she waits for her next victim amid her thoughtful reverie. Even the sea bird breaks away from its instinctive routine to listen to her sweet melody, evident of her ability to entrance anyone who comes across her way.¹¹¹



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *A Sea Spell*, 1887, oil on canvas

Associates and followers of the Pre-Raphaelites, like artist and draughtsman Frederick Sandys, a friend of Rossetti's, as well as John William Waterhouse, an artist of a later decade claiming a name for himself closer to the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, continued the Pre-Raphaelite sentiment in their own paintings. Both artists focused on Pre-Raphaelite-esque themes of mythology and Arthurian legend, depicting these women in the

¹¹¹Pritha Kundu, "Muse Turned "Femme Fatale" in D. G. Rossetti's Painting and Poetry," *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* Vol. 3, No. 12 (December 2013), 784.

very same *femme fatale* format. Frederick Sandys' artistic personality has been made difficult to pinpoint despite his prominence in the Pre-Raphaelite's circles, as his work barely made it to the public eye, and his rejection from the Royal Academy injured his confidence.¹¹² *Medea* (1868) by Sandys, said to be his absolute favorite of his own works,¹¹³ depicts, as per the male gaze and interpretation of the story, a coldblooded murderess in a vengeful state after her lover betrayed her for another woman. Medea, enchantress, daughter of King Aeëtes of Colchis, niece of Circe, and descendant of the Sun god Helios, holds great prophetic powers, generally known for – without leaving room for much-needed nuance – her rampant killing sprees in hopes of the ability to stay with her lover. Those killed include her own children, who were slain in front of her betraying lover.

In “*Her False Crafts*”: *Morgan Le Fay and the Wild Women of Sandys's Imagination* (2016), Sally-Anne Huxtable explores the numerous symbolic elements in the background of Sandys' *Medea*. These include items referring to Gaelic witchcraft, Japanese and Chinese marriage threads, coral as protective spell, and magic circles with copulating toads meant to indicate magic spells and represent her lover's lust for his new lover. There are also poisonous Belladonna berries, from the plant also called Atropa which bears the name of the Third Fate in Greek myth Atropos, the Fate “who cuts the thread of life for each mortal with her shears.” A dried stingray called the “Jenny Hanniver” is next to the toads and berries, believed to have magical powers and used in rituals by the curanderos in Veracruz in Mexico. To the bottom right of Medea is a Paua or Abalone shell containing blood, and above her are cranes, symbols of

¹¹²Thomas Tuohy, Frederick Sandys, *The British Art Journal* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 2002), 82

¹¹³Dennis T. Lanigan, “Medea by Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys (1829-1904),” *The Victorian Web*.

happiness, departing from the picture. These elements are all symbolic of the *femme fatale*, and her devilish, murderous, vengeful character.¹¹⁴



Frederick Sandys, *Medea*, 1868, oil on canvas

In a similar fashion to Sandys, Waterhouse depicts myths with the *femme fatale* trope. Waterhouse portrays the Danaid myth in his painting *Danaides* (1903). Campbell Bonner explains the Danaid myth as so: The fifty daughters of Danaus were compelled to marry the fifty sons of Danaus' brother, Aegyptus, but slayed their husbands to reclaim their freedom. As punishment, the sisters were condemned to the underworld, forced to “expiate their impious deed

¹¹⁴Sally-Anne Huxtable, "Her False Crafts": Morgan Le Fay and the Wild Women of Sandys's Imagination." *PRS Review* XXIV (Autumn 2016), 72-74

by filling a leaky vessel with water.”¹¹⁵ *Danaides* shows the eternal punishment given to the murderous, devilish daughters of Danaus, who violate the sanctity of marriage with murder, a key characteristic of the *femme fatale*, considering the nineteenth-century’s emphasis on romantic, monogamous relationships and the gendered power dynamic it fosters. The demonic transformation into the she-demon is a choice made by the woman considering her lover, and without her lover, she becomes callous.¹¹⁶

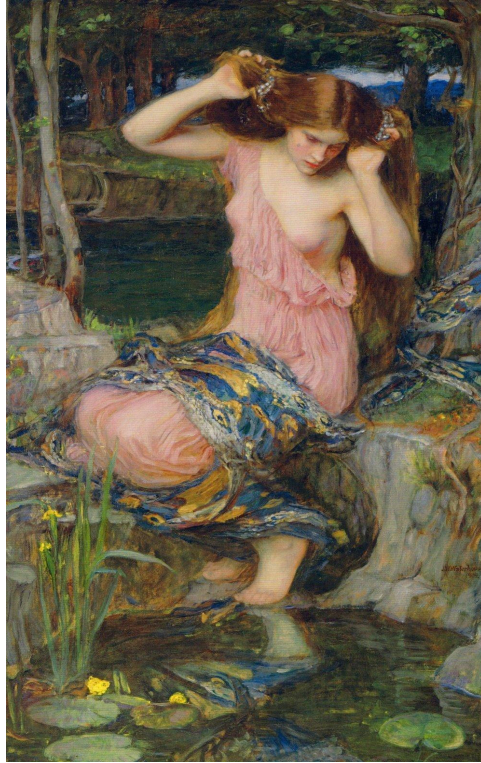


John William Waterhouse, *Danaides*, 1903, oil on canvas

¹¹⁵Campbell Bonner, “A Study of the Danaid Myth,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* Vol. 13 (1902), 1.

¹¹⁶Esther M. Stuart, “Femme Fatales and the Shifting Gender Norms of the 19th Century,” *Electronic Theses and Dissertations* (Jack N. Averitt College of Graduate Studies, Spring 2017), 17.

Other *femme fatales* by Waterhouse include *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (1891), *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891), *The Magic Circle* (1886), *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896), *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1893), *Lamia* (1905 & 1909), and *The Siren* (1900). As if Rossetti's fetishization of fierce and violent women was not enough, Waterhouse accentuates Rossetti's original theme of the *femme fatale* by placing his multiple subjects in spaces much more glossy and hazy, and substantially more reminiscent of a fairytale's dreamy scenery. His subdued environments, set in scarlet-white lighting, are adorned with timid colors yet with such vivid imagery, unlike Rossetti's warm-toned spaces with his singular subjects filling most of the canvas. Waterhouse birthed the lovechild of Rossetti and his idealized feminine fantasy to a bolder, more overt extent than Rossetti had, painting scores of women interacting with each other sensually and with exaggerated explicitness and accuracy to its original mythological origin, something Rossetti shied away from as he tended to create a synthesization including both the myth and the "New Woman."



John William Waterhouse, *Lamia*, 1905 to 1909, oil on canvas



John William Waterhouse, *Hylas and the Nymphs*, 1896, oil on canvas



John William Waterhouse, *The Siren*, 1900, oil on canvas



John William Waterhouse, *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses*, 1891, oil on canvas



John William Waterhouse, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, 1893, oil on canvas



John William Waterhouse, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, 1891, oil on canvas



John William Waterhouse, *The Magic Circle*, 1886, oil on canvas

7: Man and Pygmalion: The Exploitation and Salvation of the Pre-Raphaelite Muse

“Man is the true Narcissus: he makes the whole world his mirror,”¹¹⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe claims in the novel *Elective Affinities* (1809), a statement that easily stands as the foundation for not only understanding the Pre-Raphaelites’ depiction and idealization of women, but how this depiction mirrored the internal realms and egotistical superiorities used in their daily lives. Not only were the Pre-Raphaelites symbolically misogynistic and constantly infantilizing feminine intellect through their art, these ideologies and biases expressed in their paintings represented their own psyches. This section explores their behavior towards women, a perfect reflection of Victorian gender standards and ideals of femininity, despite their seemingly revolutionary inclusion of women in their circles and depictions of liberated women. It is crucial to remember that their muses and female counterparts heavily contributed to and inspired nearly

¹¹⁷Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971), 50.

each painting, as the works are adorned with female subjects painted from real observation. Yet the way these men conducted this inclusion and participation was rooted in male-supremacy and the drunken buzz they experienced when “saving” these less-than beings. These fallen and tragedy-stricken women were not only cautionary tales, but personal illustrated fantasies of ego-driven salvation.

Author Martin A. Danahay theorizes about the Victorian obsession with falling into solipsism, the idea that one can only be certain of their own existence, and with the myth of Pygmalion, the Greek story of a man who falls in love with the statue he built himself of an idealized woman. Depicting the myth of Narcissus would be too overt of a representation of their self-centeredness and solipsism, but “by using the myth of Pygmalion, male painters exploited the conventional association of women and vanity, thereby representing indirectly their own illicit narcissism.”¹¹⁸ Danahay argues that Goethe should have instead claimed that men are true Pygmalions, not Narcissuses, because throughout Victorian culture specifically, men have painted women as captive to male fantasy and idealization. These men have opted for showing women looking through mirrors, expressive of their vanity, when it is actually expressive of male projection of idealization of true beauty, considering their specific attractiveness clearly a target to men.¹¹⁹ The man has created the object of his affections, while projecting vanity onto them,¹²⁰ which, to them, may justify the idealization and yearning for reciprocation. Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, enforces this idea:

¹¹⁸Martin A. Danahay, “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation,” *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1994), 35.

¹¹⁹Martin A. Danahay, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Virtual Bodies,” *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 36, No. 4 (Winter, 1998), 387.

¹²⁰Danahay, “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation,” 36.

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.¹²¹

He claims that this “vain” depiction of woman is indeed a projection, and creating an allowance to desire the woman being displayed. Rossetti’s *Lilith* is a perfect visual representation of this. His poem, *The Mirror* (1850), often referred to as *A Symbol*, perfectly encapsulates the idea of this “double-narcissism,” as well, which ends in the male narcissist still being the one “betrayed” by the woman who refuses to be his reflection:

She knew it not:—most perfect pain
To learn: this too she knew not. Strife
For me, calm hers, as from the first.
'Twas but another bubble burst
Upon the curdling draught of life,—
My silent patience mine again.
As who, of forms that crowd unknown
Within a distant mirror's shade,
Deems such an one himself, and makes
Some sign; but when the image shakes
No whit, he finds his thought betray'd,
And must seek elsewhere for his own.¹²²

Here, it is as if the nineteenth-century version of the Pygmalion myth fuses with the myth of Narcissus, as it includes the aspect of the woman statue, Galatea, projecting the very same vane traits of “looking” and refusing Pygmalion's love after she had been created by him. Danahay explains that set here is a “situation in which the masculine subject's search for a complementary self-image has been thwarted by the woman's refusal to reflect accurately the artist's self-image. The Victorian male lover therefore finds his romantic expectations

¹²¹John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London, UK: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 51.

¹²²Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “The Mirror” in *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* vol. 1 (Ellis & Scrutton, 1886).

‘betrayed.’”¹²³ Rossetti’s search for “self” in another and failure to find it, according to French philosopher Jacques Derrida, quoted by Danahay, is caused by the very realization and threat of *differance*, “the sudden knowledge that what Rossetti would like to designate as an “I” that is present to itself can only be represented through artificial secondary media, such as mirrors, texts, or paintings.”¹²⁴ This idea is the very one used by Pre-Raphaelites like Rossetti when fantasizing about Beatrice and Dante, a woman Dante has barely met yet who he claims to know completely and intimately, declaring her a portal to his most desired fantasies, an idea Rossetti used in his own life. This also goes hand in hand with the idea of repression and male fear and guilt in the Victorian era, and its projection onto women and their sexuality. Danahay explains that “masculinity in the Victorian period was characteristically represented by a swerve into the feminine, the male viewer projecting repressed aspects of his own identity onto the woman.”¹²⁵

To explain how this was all reenacted by the Pre-Raphaelites, it is important to note the recruitment process for the perfect Pre-Raphaelite model. For the most part, the men would seek out lower class women, such as shop girls, creating a dynamic where the man was positioned to teach and “rehabilitate” the woman to his own liking, often exploiting her for his own benefit and desire. This fed the male artists’ delusions, such as Rossetti’s, of an idealized femininity, salvation through a man, and projection of romantic fantasy. These men were drunk on power, taking advantage of their higher status to control and reshape these liberated women to still be liberated, but only in ways benefiting them and perfecting their fantasies. By doing so, they had internally justified recreating these women into the image of their own desire.¹²⁶ Danahay notes that, “They enacted the Pygmalion myth in their own lives by choosing women they could

¹²³Danahay, “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation,” 38.

¹²⁴Danahay, “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation,” 38.

¹²⁵Danahay, “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation,” 39.

¹²⁶Danahay, “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation,” 44.

refashion after an idealized image of middle-class femininity.”¹²⁷ To add onto this, modeling was synonymous with prostitution in the Victorian era,¹²⁸ as models tended to be of lower class and associated with its lowly reputation. Correlating modeling with prostitution worked in favor of the men of the brotherhood, further mentally justifying their rampant sexualization and the romanticized liberation of their models. For the purpose of this thesis, Rossetti’s life will be the one most delved into, along with his infamous muse and wife Elizabeth Siddal.

While working at a hat shop in Leicester Square, London, a tall, red haired, slim-figured girl caught the eye of a visiting promising young artist, Walter Howell Deverall, a close associate of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.¹²⁹ Her name was Elizabeth Siddal – the most known sitter of the Pre-Raphaelites, as she was romantically entangled with them in addition to being their muse. She ended up married to Rossetti in 1860, although so sick and depressed at the time it was questionable if she would still be alive at the time they got to Church.¹³⁰ Rossetti and she had been informally engaged previously in 1853 or 1854, but, against the advice of his friends, Rossetti was in no rush to marry, and only introduced Lizzie to his mother in 1855. It is said that he did this because he particularly wanted their love to be complicated and painful, as he yearned to be as painfully inspired as Dante was by Beatrice.¹³¹ Although Siddal posed for many of the members of the brotherhood, Rossetti claimed her for his own, a perfect candidate for his roleplay of Beatrice and Dante. The following passage from William Gaunt’s *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy* (1942) precisely notes how this relationship was fated.

¹²⁷Danahay, “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation,” 44.

¹²⁸Lucinda Hawksley, *Lizzie Siddal: The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel* (André Deutsch, 2004), 5.

¹²⁹Hawksley, 3.

¹³⁰Hawksley, 25.

¹³¹Hawksley, 32.

The attraction, in a way, was obvious. It was generally agreed that she was beautiful. 'Beautiful as the reflection of a golden mountain in a crystal lake,' said Ruskin, adding, with his sudden scratch of perception, 'which is what she is to him.' She was tall, for that time, and slender, with small regular features, a stately neck, blue eyes and a mass of reddish, coppery hair. Her complexion was clear, her colour a shade too high and ominously suggesting delicate health. A surviving daguerreotype shows a somewhat drawn and even acid expression which may have been due to physical pain. She was passive.

Here, Gaunt emphasises the unlikely beauty of Siddal, her red, coppery hair, her pale, sickly complexion, and her slim figure. Siddal was different, a trait sought after by the Pre-Raphaelites, as her uniqueness and anti-Victorian beauty is what made her special and worthy of being the vessel for their fantasy.

Quietly and still the 'poor wretch' lay in that bath in her embroidered dress, without protest, while the lamp that had been put underneath went out and the water grew icily cold. Inertly she sat for long hours looking into the fire. This passivity helped to bring them together. She trailed slowly towards him, a melancholy doll, set in sluggish motion by the virile, expansive gestures of the warm Latin. His roar of laughter elicited from her a wan smile, his jests provoked a faint answering shade of humour, his ardour the ghost of passion. In the same contrary fashion he loved her because she was so little responsive. No one knew what she was thinking of or if she thought at all. She was that double enigma of Victorian England, a woman of the refined small middle class. She had, of this class, the habit of 'keeping herself to herself' which deepened into an unfathomable reserve on being introduced into a clever and freakish group of artists. Hers was the stoic dignity of those accustomed to scrape the last farthing together in order not to be a day behind with the rent; to economise words lest an unguarded expression should betray the refinement assiduously sought.

Gaunt, delicately and expressively, describes Siddal's infamous passivity, which can explain why Rossetti must have decided to select Siddal, the perfect victim for his ego and control. She was, to him, a void to place his intention upon, an empty soul he could manipulate, an existence he could claim for his own. The mysteriousness of her true character was exploited, as she was shy and kept "herself to herself."

The discipline of the Kent Road where she lived in prim, clean poverty with her mother and father (an optician and cutler from Sheffield) gave her the inscrutability of a sphinx. It aroused in him (Rossetti) a spirit, an inspiration of conjecture. In her mournful beauty,

her natural silence, her frigid apathy, she was like a statue to be warmed into life, into which he could project, with that dangerous power of his, thought, emotion and even genius.¹³²

Siddal, to Rossetti, represented the perfect mirror, her perceived passivity and his egotistical eccentricity in need of placement in another being for self-confirmation and input of fantasy, aligned just right; she was the perfect victim. A passive coquette, she was reflective of his own desire. In 1856, Christina Rossetti, sister of Rossetti, wrote a poem about his obsession with Siddal, *In An Artist's Studio*, explaining how Rossetti was willfully ignorant to the real Lizzie, neglectful and belittling, as it would shatter his romanticism of her:

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel—every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more or 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 wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.¹³³

In 1856, Rossetti's love for Siddal subsided as he developed a relationship with Annie Miller, another Pre-Raphaelite model. Rossetti's emotional and physical neglect of Siddal is discussed at great length in scholarly discussion, citing him to have been the most prominent source of despair and isolation in her short life. They were entwined for most of their time because of their involvement in the brotherhood,¹³⁴ but when they were apart, considering

¹³²Gaunt, 28.

¹³³Christina Georgina Rossetti, *New Poems by Christina Rossetti: Hitherto Unpublished or Uncollected* (United Kingdom: Macmillan and Company, 1896), 114.

¹³⁴Sharon Kong, "Smitten by the Casual Glance of a Pair of Sparking Eyes," *Voces Novae* Vol 4, No 1 (2013), 28.

Rossetti isolated her so much that she had just scraps of a life outside of him, she fell into depression and lonesomeness. This isolation, his strategy to keep his Beatrice all to himself, hid her from external perception, further allowing his projections to realize within her. He refused to see her as she was, holding onto a dream of who he desired her to be, instead of attempting to become acquainted with the woman herself. She was unheard and unconsidered, left to be merely an echo of a voice and the shadow of a being in Rossetti's wandering eyes.

For a while after the affair with Miller, Siddal's whereabouts were unheard of, until her frenzied family alerted John Ruskin about Siddal's extreme illness. Rossetti, once notified, rushed her to Hastings to nurse her back to health, and that is when they married. She became pregnant, birthed a stillborn child, and fell into a deep depression, dying of an overdose nine months later on laudanum,¹³⁵ the very same opioid she was prescribed for the pneumonia she caught when posing for Millais' *Ophelia*. She had been laying in a cold bath with oil lamps beneath her for warmth, and when they went out, she remained silent and passive, and Millais was too distracted by his painting to notice.¹³⁶ This drug was prescribed to her not only for pneumonia, but for her lifelong mental health issues and various illnesses, and remained in her life as a fatal addiction.¹³⁷ Medics and scholars still mull over Lizzie's mysterious illnesses, debating if they included tuberculosis, anorexia, bulimia, and others.¹³⁸ Tuberculosis as an option has been argued against, since her symptoms from it would have eventually proven to be fatal. This did not happen; her symptoms came and went intermittently, many times subsiding as response to the long-awaited, withheld attention from Rossetti, further proof of the isolation and

¹³⁵Laurel Bradley, Elizabeth Siddal: Drawn into the Pre-Raphaelite Circle, *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* Vol. 18, No. 2, (1992), 141.

¹³⁶Hawksley, 43.

¹³⁷Hawksley, 70-73.

¹³⁸Hawksley, 69.

emotional abuse he inflicted on her.¹³⁹ After her passing, Rossetti buried her with all of his poetry, only to regret it seven years later and dig her back up to retrieve them for publishing.¹⁴⁰ Just like the tale of Dante and Beatrice, once Siddal had died, “she was no longer his troublesome, flawed wife. Instead she became a beatified beauty, who would never grow old, like Beatrice.”¹⁴¹

Rossetti claimed Siddal as his living fantasy, his “stunner,” a term he coined to describe the most beautiful, ethereal women.¹⁴² Rossetti’s male savior-complex is evident from the beginning of their acquaintance, considering that in biographies of his, Siddal is characterized as being from a “slum,” and contrasted greatly against Rossetti’s higher class. However, this is wildly exaggerated, as Hatton Garden, home of the Siddals, was most definitely not a slum when they lived there.¹⁴³ Both Siddal and Rossetti came from similar environments, as well, as both families had financial struggles to the same degree.¹⁴⁴ Rossetti had also advised Siddal to change her name from “Siddall” to “Siddal,” as he believed the latter looked more aesthetically pleasing.¹⁴⁵

Siddal was not the only woman pushed to alter her image or creativity for Rossetti; his poet sister, Christina, had her works edited enormously by Rossetti, including *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862) and *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* (1866), as even she could not escape from the isolating perception that was Rossetti’s idealized femininity.

¹³⁹Hawksley, 69-70.

¹⁴⁰Bradley, 142.

¹⁴¹Hawksley, 28.

¹⁴²Hawksley, 4.

¹⁴³Hawksley, 10.

¹⁴⁴Hawksley, 9.

¹⁴⁵Hawksley, 32.

These revisions – deletions of stanzas, changes of titles – may make it much more difficult to extract Christina’s individual voice as response to her male-supremacist environment. Correspondence between the siblings shows disagreement over the edits and how Christina “forcefully argued over others.”¹⁴⁶ He shifted titles originally emphasizing detail, subject, and vibrant personality to broad, objective ones, stripping Christina’s individual character and original intent from her own words. These included titles such as “A Peep at the Goblins” becoming “Goblin Market” and “A Yawn” becoming “At Home.” Complexity and intent was removed and blatant, unopinionated objectivity was introduced falsely as the feminine perspective.¹⁴⁷ As mentioned before when exploring the *femme fatale*’s double role as subject and object, here, too, Rossetti perceives his sister’s feminine perspective less as human subject, and more of object even in her very own poetry. Alison Chapman, in *Defining the Feminine Subject: D. G. Rossetti’s Manuscript Revisions to Christina Rossetti’s Poetry*, discusses the seeming ownership of and entitlement to femininity of the Pre-Raphaelite men, and the personas they wish to impose onto their female counterparts. The woman is subordinated to masculine creativity, reformed and remodeled to his own interpretation of what femininity should be.¹⁴⁸

With her voice tainted publicly by the overshadowing of her brother, Christina’s authenticity and personality has been subdued into the male idealization of feminine intent. The mirrors he has forcefully placed onto the faces of the women he claimed to adore only strengthened his delusion of superiority and fantasy, as each time he looked at these faces, he saw just as he wished, willfully never seeing the truth behind them. His adoration of women was conditional, for it had to serve him somehow. As author Eben E. Bass says, “It is no wonder that

¹⁴⁶Alison Chapman, “Defining the Feminine Subject: D. G. Rossetti’s Manuscript Revisions to Christina Rossetti’s Poetry,” *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 35, No. 2 (Summer, 1997), 152.

¹⁴⁷Chapman, 148.

¹⁴⁸Chapman, 139-142.

his works are filled with mirrored images of himself looking back at himself. Rossetti was a supreme egoist, revealing empathic powers very late in life only. He was concerned with la condition humaine only insofar as he himself represented it.”¹⁴⁹

8. Conclusion and Final Argument:

The Pre-Raphaelites’ rebellious nature sought to rearrange the female subject ever so particularly that one could easily forget the true meaning behind their choices. To someone who removes the art from the artist, it becomes quite easy to forget to be mindful of the societal norms the *femme fragile*, the fallen woman, and the *femme fatale* originated from, and the fact that these “revolutionaries” were still men – Victorian men. These modern methods of portraying the female subject, regardless of the seemingly overt contrast to traditional Victorian portrayal, were just another angry, fearful, male-supremacist response to the rising “woman question.” The woman destroyed by love, the *femme fragile*, represented a male fantasy of desperation, male-centred melancholia, and excessive emotion, often never specified or interacted with constructively. The mere depiction of emotion, alone, was enough to fulfill the Pre-Raphaelite fantasy, as unpacking the emotion’s origins, complexities, and specifications to the individual female subject removed her from the artist’s projection of fantasy. The fallen woman stood as a symbol of the social ruin that followed the sinful female subject, often a picture of the reality she faced in the Victorian era. Although her unjust ruin is evident in the picture, painting her as shameful, pathetic, and deserving of pity, her means of salvation still comes from the man, making the picture yet another symbol of male-supremacy. The erotic fantasy that the *femme fatale* originates from, transforming the female subject into object, also removes agency, ability to consent, and humanity from the woman, and again, symbolises male-supremacy and

¹⁴⁹Eben Bass, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Poet and Painter* New York (Peter Lang, 1990), 195.

entitlement. Flowing, loose garments, eerie facial features, emotive portrayals, androgynous bodies, and anti-Victorian depictions, although rebellious, do not negate the fact that these men painted because of entitlement, not sympathy. In addition to this, their abusive treatment towards their muses, models, and wives further pushes this claim, and proves extreme ignorance to the realistic female subject. Rossetti and his followers were after a fantasy, and diluted the female subjects in their lives and in their paintings ever so greatly that not only did they suffer tremendously, but their legacies and meanings beyond the male-centered ideal have been overshadowed and neglected. In a self-driven attempt to chase the pain and spirituality of tragedy and romance, the Pre-Raphaelites disregarded any form of humanity in the women they claimed to adore. Adoration was conditional, and remained as long as the fantasy was being fulfilled, for the reminder of independent humanity would shatter their narcissistic, factitious reality.