

The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood: Model Heroines of Literature

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Abstract

The group of subversive male artists who banded together in 1848 as the secretive Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) opposed the constraints on painting taught by London's Royal Academy of Arts. Led by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais, the PRB introduced a new style and relied heavily on symbolism to enhance meaning, often reinforcing the status and proper behaviors of women in scenes drawn from Literature and modern life. This paper focuses on some of the female models appearing in paintings by the PRB including Fanny Cornforth, Emma Watkins, Elizabeth Siddal, Annie Miller, and Jane Morris - who were each transformed into heroines from Arthurian legends, Italian poetry, Shakespearean plots, and Grimm fairytales. The Pre-Raphaelites defied conventional ideas on art and beauty and chose statuesque female models who challenged stringent Victorian standards of idealization. They shared a similar affinity for models with strong jaws, long necks, and striking features, who were generally uneducated and of the labor class. Although their models' unconventional "type" was startling to the expectations of Victorian art patrons, rather than imbue these women with an empowered, assertive presence, the PRB eschewed individual personalities. Instead, they were portrayed in roles that reinforced the traditional patriarchal definition of femininity, as subjugated, frail, and weak creatures. The Pre-Raphaelite woman might seem more robust and self-confident than the British ideal, but she was still expected to be docile, compliant, and obedient. For the PRB, vulnerability and passivity were equated with beauty.

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Introduction

In 1848, the same year as the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, a group of seven subversive young male artists banded together in London as the secretive Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood or PRB. This close, sometimes quarrelsome assemblage opposed the deep-rooted, out-of-date customs and constrained parameters of the Royal Academy of Art where they met as students. The PRB sought to make a mark on the city's then contemporary art scene which they felt was uninspired and banal. Led by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (then age twenty) who was later described as "the planet round which we all revolved,"¹ together with William Holman Hunt (then age twenty-one) and John Everett Millais (then age nineteen), the new subjects and style introduced by the PRB roiled the status quo of British art, especially their creation of a new ideal of femininity. Yet, this modern-minded alliance did not concern themselves with forwarding equal rights for women. Instead, they perpetuated male stereotypes of women.

Despite their technically-adept prettiness, most Pre-Raphaelite artworks are about two things: sexual objectification and classism, and this becomes evident through a review of their paintings and scrutiny of the complex relationships between the painters and their muses, a cadre of working-class models recruited by the PRB including Fanny Cornforth (1835-1909), Emma Watkins (unknown), Elizabeth Eleanor "Lizzie" Siddal (1834-1862), Annie Miller (1835-1925), and Jane Burden Morris (1839-1914). For these women, association with these formidable artists offered a sense of worth, the possibility for upward mobility, and certainly advanced their places in society. However, the artists did not focus on the real-life situations of these women; they did not illustrate their humble origins and they eschewed their individual personalities. Instead, they painted them as specific feminine "types" or as possessing certain attributes ascribed to womanliness in all its guises – from subservient to seductive. Scrutiny of the unquestionably accepted gender and class practices of a nineteenth-century society that promoted patriarchal privilege may help explain some of today's twenty-first century gender issues which have ignited the #MeToo Movement. A fresh focus on the class and gender-specific predicaments and limitations that faced these women, may finally give them the value and the voice they were then denied, but as individuals have been entitled to all along. The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood, as these models are sometimes known, will no longer be silenced.

The Pre-Raphaelite Ideal

This high-spirited triumvirate of newly-emerging artists were influenced by, among other things, the writings and lectures of the venerable John Ruskin (1819-1900). Following his directive to be truthful to nature, the audacious PRB studied nature for aesthetic inspiration, and even went so far as to jointly declare a new, more *natural* ideal of feminine beauty. For guidance, as their name pronounced, they turned to the straight-forward approach and stylistic naivety they admired in late-Medieval and early-Renaissance Flemish and Italian painting created *before* the high Renaissance art of Raphael (1483-1520). Forming strong notions of what a *natural* woman should look like, they disdained the traditional Victorian tenets of beauty, yet in regard to expectations of proper female behavior, they embraced the standards of the time.

In their promotion of a new ideal, they shared an affinity for women who possessed a combination of "strange and puissant physical loveliness with depth and remoteness of gaze."² The artists pursued statuesque models with strikingly handsome features with strong jaws, elongated necks, expressive eyes, pouting lips, and thick hair – beauties referred to by the poet Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909) and Dante

¹ Val Prinsep quoted in Jan Marsh, *Insights, The Pre-Raphaelite Circle* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2005), 25.

² FWH Meyers, "Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty," *Cornhill Magazine* (February 1883), 220 quoted in Suzanne Fagence Cooper, *Pre-Raphaelite Art in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003), 112.

Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) as “stunners.”³ The PRB woman might seem more robust and self-confident than the dainty British ideal, but rather than imbue their stunner with assertive empowerment, they still expected her to be docile and submissive. For the Pre-Raphaelites, vulnerability and passivity continued to be equated with desirable beauty.

The lives of the artists and their models were complicated. In their behavior and the art they produced, these men evinced the deeply entrenched and readily excused attitudes of Victorian gentlemen towards women. Their models were predominately uneducated and of the labor class and were often cast in roles that underlined the conventional patriarchal definition of women as subjugated, diffident creatures. And their paintings bolstered the gendered roles of obedient wife, demur sister, and virginal daughter. They celebrated piety and sacrifice while highlighting the consequences of fallen virtue, without offering mercy or hope for redemption. Ironically, the painters’ actual models (an occupation of dubious repute) were from poor and working-class backgrounds; they were barmaids, shop girls, and prostitutes who became their mistresses, spouses, and housekeepers.

The PRB posed their models in a variety of scenes of everyday life or in illustrations drawn from literature, especially favoring Romantic stories and tales such as Arthurian legends, Italian poetry, Greek mythology, Biblical scripture, and Shakespearean plots. They presented the women as chaste damsels in distress, dangerous *femme fatales*, or honorable heroines, yet in whatever role she played, the PRB woman maintained a passive nature, wore an unfocused expression, and resided within a constricted space. From the start, and continuing as a recurring motif, the Pre-Raphaelites simultaneously elevated these women as worthy of attention, yet their own prejudices and misogynistic tendencies repeatedly shine through their work. They singled out these women as physical exemplars of beauty, while also undermining their value as individuals.

The Sexualized Stunner

In the painting by William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), *Il Dolce Far Niente* (fig. 1), meaning “sweet idleness,” the model Annie Miller as an unidentified female figure occupies a well-appointed interior and absentmindedly glances into the distance beyond the viewer. Devoid of narrative, the painting appears to simply admire a docile woman unburdened by any responsibilities, challenges, or concerns. Any specific historical context or didactic content is replaced by expressions of femininity extenuated by the inclusion of symbolic objects, colors, and patterns. This idle beauty with luxuriant, loose hair is dressed in an exotic costume and sits with her head tilted and hands entwined on an ornate, inlaid foreign-looking chair with her back to a wall on which a convex mirror hangs. The mirror enhances the complexity of the painting and expands the viewer’s sense of space as it reflects and reinforces the safety of the domestic sphere warmed by a glowing fire.

Holman Hunt was inspired by the series of “stunners” painted by Rossetti beginning in the 1860s. Referred to by the artist as “visions of carnal loveliness,”⁴ paintings such as *Bocca Baciata*, (*Lips That Have Been Kissed*) (fig. 2), were created to be looked at and adored in adherence to the modern-day edict of “beauty for beauty’s sake” first championed by the nineteenth-century French philosopher Victor Cousin. Rossetti placed his tame stunners within cramped chambers, caught at quiet, sometimes intimate moments. Often absorbed in thought, they braid their masses of tangled hair or admire themselves in looking glasses. These women, who radiate a sexuality that is eminently desirable are “both dressed, yet undressed.”⁵ They remain unaware of, or possibly purposely ignore the viewer, as though meeting the admirer’s gaze would confirm their own sexual objectification.

Rossetti’s *Bocca Baciata* originates from a lewd story by the fourteenth-century Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) about a woman with many lovers, but whose “much-kissed mouth” never

³ The term “stunner” was a slang term for an exceptionally pretty girl. See Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), 10 and 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵ J. B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 130.

seems spoiled. Here, the recently kissed beauty holds a marigold, plucked from the wall of flowers behind her. Marigolds are symbols of regret and sorrow – the very feelings she is projecting in the painting – and the message conveyed here is one of male fantasy of allure and eternal purity.

The painting relates to the real-life story of its model. Fanny Cornforth, whose real name may have been Sarah Cox, was the voluptuous daughter of a blacksmith. She was also unabashedly crude and believed to have been a prostitute known for her ability to crack nuts with her teeth.⁶ She and Rossetti probably met in the Strand in 1856 when she was twenty and he was twenty-eight. Often disparaged by those close to Rossetti, she was unwavering in her loyalty to him to the end and may have been the artist's truest female friend.⁷

Fanny appears again as the self-absorbed *Aurelia (Fazio's Mistress)* (fig. 3), inspired by the fourteenth-century Italian poet Fazio degli Uberti (1326-1360). Many PRB paintings were exhibited with excerpts of text, and the following words that accompanied *Aurelia* emphasize her loveliness and the feelings Fazio possessed for his mistress:

*I look at the crisp golden-threaded hair
Whereof, to thrall my heart,
Love twists a net
... I look at the amorous beautiful mouth
... I look at her white easy neck, so well
From shoulders and from bosom lifted out*

Aurelia and the other indolent stunners portrayed by Rossetti and the PRB have been labeled by historian J. B. Bullen as “sexualized women.” Bullen explains that the stunners are fascinating sexual beings, but unlike the “fallen woman” who had engaged in carnal activity outside of marriage or as an adulteress, the “sexualized woman's” purity is assumed.⁸ Perhaps this would not be the case if she were to make eye contact with the viewer, thereby undermining the male gaze and destabilizing the power dynamics.

The Fallen Woman

Concerns and judgements of a girl's fallen virtue were at the forefront of the collective anxieties of the nineteenth-century public and were regularly addressed by Victorian novelists, poets, social critics, and in the early works of the PRB.⁹ This taboo subject was taken on by Holman Hunt in his 1853 *The Awakening Conscience* (fig. 4). Born in London, Holman Hunt came from an unremarkable family. His father was a warehouse manager, and the future artist worked as an office clerk prior to enrolling into the Royal Academy Schools in 1844, which possibility improved his social status. This painting reflects his own observations, like those of his peers, that the industrial revolution was causing societal upheaval and igniting angst about expected moral behavior and one's shifting position in the modern era.

Awakening Conscience offers a glimpse of a mid-nineteenth century “love nest” or *maison de convenance*. The woman's status as a mistress is confirmed by her lack of a wedding ring. This kind of terraced-house is common in St. John's Wood, a charming residential neighborhood in the Westminster Borough section of northwest London, then with a reputation as a good place to secure one's mistress. Nestled within the safety of the home he has provided for her, the gentleman takes his paramour onto his lap and begins to play Thomas Moore's ballad, *Oft in the Silly Night*, on the brand-new, upright piano, in a parlor over-filled with factory-produced commodities, which the Pre-Raphaelites disapproved of. A twenty-first century viewer may look upon the scene with its antique furnishings as charming. However,

⁶ Tom Caine, 1908 quoted in Jan Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* (London: Quartet Books, Ltd., 1992), 83.

⁷ Robert Upstone. *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream: Paintings & Drawings from the TATE Collection* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 24.

⁸ Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, 130.

⁹ For more information on the Victorian culture and social concerns see Sophia Andreas, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 33.

the PRB objected to what they viewed as gaudy, modern-day trappings, and part of Holman Hunt's aim was to criticize these newly-manufactured items and use them to underscore the tawdry nature of this arrangement of male convenience.

Holman Hunt evidently was blind to the irony of his emphasis on the dangers of promiscuity since in reality, the model Annie Miller was being "kept" by the artist himself. Annie, who was an uneducated barmaid from the slums of Chelsea, met Holman Hunt in 1850 when she was fifteen. She possessed, like Fanny and all their models, the prerequisite features of the Pre-Raphaelite woman. Miller became his girlfriend and later his fiancée, although they never married. In a manner similar to the story of *Pygmalion* (on which *My Fair Lady* was based), and to *this* painting itself, the artist provided Annie with lessons on speech, dress, and manners, hoping to educate her and elevate her status so that she would become suitable to be his wife.

Like other paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, *Awakening Conscience*, was considered radical at the time of its creation because it rejected the conventional subject matter and style favored by the Academy. Its exacting detail and smooth, glass-like surface shows the strong impact that a small, early fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting had on the young PRB painters. Jan van Eyck's (ca. 1395-1441) *Arnolfini Portrait* (fig. 5), created in 1434, was rendered with sharp precision and jewel-like colors, and first went on view at London's National Gallery in 1843. As students of the Royal Academy, which then shared spaces with the National Gallery, occupying its East Wing, the PRB had the chance to spend a great deal of time with this pivotal painting which would prove to have a transformative impact on their art. As a result, they learned and mastered new ideas and techniques far different from the Academic "grand style" set forth by the leading British eighteenth-century artist and founding member of the Royal Academy Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), whom they dubbed "Sir Slosh-ua" for his loose brushwork and what they believed to be his sentimental, insipid tone.

Ignited by the startling elements they discovered in van Eyck, the Pre-Raphaelites created artworks of pure color painted directly on a white ground, a great departure from the traditional method of laying down a dark, dull under-ground. Doing so made their colors stunningly bright. Additionally, drawing on van Eyck's symbolic imagery and their own connection with engaging narrative content long popular in British story-telling "problem" or "conversation" pictures, the PRB filled their glossy-surfaced canvases with an abundance of symbolic messages rendered in intricate detail, frequently imposing mood and inner feeling on their subjects while also delivering commentary on moral behavior, most often communicating the double-standard prevalent in the Victorian era between male and female conduct.

London society at that time viewed prostitution as a great evil threatening to undermine its moral base and social order, and Holman Hunt and others of the PRB employed a heavy use of symbolism to emphasize the risks of urban modernity on a woman's position and reputation. In *Awakening Conscience*, the gilded clock sitting atop the piano encased in a glass dome, together with the skein of yarn discarded in a tangled mess on the floor, denotes her entrapment while the ubiquitous house cat batting at a broken-winged bird on the carpet next to the gentleman's cast-off glove underscores that she is a kept woman, who can easily be discarded. According to the Tate Gallery, art critic and champion of the PRB, John Ruskin "wrote to the *Times* on 25 May 1854, 'the very hem of the poor girl's dress, at which the painter has labored so closely, thread by thread, has story in it, if we think how soon its pure whiteness may be soiled with dust and rain, her outcast feet failing in the street.'"¹⁰

In addition to mimicking van Eyck's use of a proliferation of symbols to enhance meaning, Rossetti, Holman Hunt, and Millais were also quite attentive to the Flemish Master's inclusion of a convex mirror on the room's back wall and how its reflection further develops the meaning of the painting while magnifying the scene. The real and distorted realities reproduced in the mirror show what could not otherwise be seen by the viewer, and the mirror's introduction of a new kind of psychological drama into the composition appealed to these youthful artists' tradition-shattering ambitions.

¹⁰ TATE Gallery. "William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*," accessed February 14, 2018. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hunt-the-awakening-conscience-t02075>.

Although in this case the artist used a flat mirror, convex mirrors are included as decorative objects in several Pre-Raphaelite paintings. The gilt-framed mirror on the wall behind the couple in *Awakening Conscience* reveals that she is looking out a window into a garden on a sunny day at the moment she realizes her corruption. To a Christian audience, the sunlight might suggest the “light of God,” however despite a hint of hope for salvation as daylight falls on the carpeted floor in the painting’s foreground, the sad truth is that her situation is hopeless. Where could she go if she were to leave her lover and provider? Once her virtue is gone, her chances for redemption and survival are slim.

Consequences of Moral Decisions

Holman Hunt’s painting *The Hireling Shepherd* (fig. 6) features Emma Watkins as his model. Emma was a country lass that Holman Hunt met while he and John Everett Millais were painting *en plein air* near Ewell in Surrey. Emma followed Holman Hunt to London to work as an artists’ model but soon returned home. Little else is known about her.

In this pastoral painting, Emma is flirting with a hired laborer. Although a scene of “modern” times, evident by the fact that the couple are dressed as young, rustic country folk might have appeared then, there are underlying references to both a quote which was exhibited along with the painting from Act 3, Scene 6 of William Shakespeare’s (1564-1616) *King Lear* about a shepherd who neglects his duties, and to the new testament Bible verses John 10:11-15. Not only does the painting admonish the viewer about bad behavior, it was also ostensibly meant as warning to rural clergy to be “good shepherds” by providing moral guidance to their flock of worshippers, and not to be tempted by the tantalizing flesh of country girls.¹¹

The Hireling Shepherd is charged with religious imagery that would not have been lost on a superstitious nineteenth-century Christian audience including: a lamb covered in a red scarf, fallen apples, the lost flock of sheep, poppies, bare feet near water, and a death-head moth. Each of these are reminders that bad behavior leads to bad consequences.

When this and other of the PRB paintings were first shown at the Royal Academy, art critics were somewhat confounded with the uncouth subject matter and by the introduction of a new version of female beauty, and initially labeled these stunners as graceless, unpleasant, “ludicrous,” and “repulsive.”¹² Holman Hunt’s ruddy-checked Emma Watkins was referred to in one print review as a fiery-skinned “sunburnt slut,”¹³ a multi-edged insult commenting on her loose morals, crude behavior, and lowly peasant status.

Devoted Sacrifice & Obedience

Turning from temptation to sacrifice, *Isabella* (fig. 7), based on a fourteenth-century Italian story of doomed love, is one of the earliest PRB paintings by John Everett Millais (1829-1896), who at the age of eleven was the youngest student ever admitted into the Royal Academy.¹⁴ Born in Southampton, Millais was the son of a wealthy gentleman. In 1855, he married Effie Chalmers Ruskin soon after her unhappy 1848 marriage to John Ruskin had been annulled and she modeled for a few of his paintings, as did her younger sister. Despite his youthful rebellion against it some fifty years later, in 1896 the last year of his life, Millais became the President of the Royal Academy.

Isabella illustrates a scene from an 1818 poem by John Keats (1795-1821) inspired by *Decameron* by the Italian Boccaccio. A tragic tale set in the class-conscious society of the early Renaissance, Millais presents Isabella, her brothers, their apprentice Lorenzo who offers her a blood orange, and other members of their noble family seated around a dinner table. Although the model for the heroine is not known with certainty, she may be Mary Hodgkinson, the artist’s sister-in-law. Some of the other diners have been identified as fellow Pre-Raphaelites Rossetti and Walter Deverell.¹⁵

¹¹ Terri Hardin, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Inspiration for the Past* (New York: Todtri Productions, Ltd., 1996), 46.

¹² *The Times, London*, “Exhibition of the Royal Academy,” Issue 21104, May 1, 1852, 8.

¹³ Susan Casteras quoted in Andres, *The Pre-Raphaelite Art of the Victorian Novel*, 26.

¹⁴ This was one of three PRB works exhibited in 1849 at the Royal Academy exhibition. The others being Holman Hunt’s *Rienzi* and Rossetti’s *The Girlhood of Virgin Mary*. See Hardin, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

Millais' *Isabella* is notable not only for the focus on a refined, dutiful young woman who has no agency over her life, but also for its contrast between good and evil with highly-charged erotic messages that reveal the intense dissatisfaction of her brothers who have arranged Isabella's marriage to an older, wealthy man. The brothers' anger is clear as they witness the tenderness that the apprentice shows toward their sister. Their solution for ending this nascent courtship is to order Lorenzo's murder.

The painting is rife with symbolic messages: in addition to the ominous orange fruit foreshadowing the lover's death, a hawk sits atop a chair picking at a dove's white feather, violent scenes from the Bible and mythology decorate the majolica dinner plates, and a pile of spilled salt all foretell of the spilling of her young lover's blood.¹⁶ Likewise, one brother kicks a dog as he grips a nut-cracker that casts a phallic shadow on the tabletop, while the placement of his other hand, cupped to catch the falling pieces of nuts, suggests the act of masturbation,¹⁷ perhaps implying that his needs and desires supplant those of his sister.

Lost Love & Abandonment

Reinforcing the submissive role of women who had little charge over their lives and futures, the rejected woman is subject for Millais' *Mariana* (fig. 8). When exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1851, the painting was accompanied by a verse from an Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) poem which was inspired by a play-within-a-play in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* in which Mariana is jilted by her fiancé Angelo after her dowry is lost in a shipwreck.¹⁸

Even though the model is unidentified, it may be Elizabeth Siddal in the guise of Mariana pining for her lost love. Heightening her isolation and separation from society, Mariana is sheltered within the safety, protection, and virtual imprisonment of the walled fortress, described by Shakespeare as a "moated grange." Modestly garbed from head to toe in a sumptuous blue velvet dress, a color associated with divinity and purity, the richly-textured gown with its jeweled girdle belt hanging low on Mariana's waist serves to accentuate her figure. Nearly immobilized by the confines of the stool and table, the forlorn Mariana rises from her needlepoint and stretches her weary back allowing the viewer to admire her feminine curves. Her gaze falls on the decorative stain-glass window which separates the abandoned woman from the outside world. Its design illustrates the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, and shows the Archangel Gabriel delivering a message of gravidity that Mariana herself will never receive, further reinforcing the cruelty of her circumstance.¹⁹

The only interior connections to the exterior realm are a field mouse that scampers across the floorboards and the autumn leaves that inspire her embroidery and underscore the passing of the seasons. The withered leaves fall discarded and scattered haphazardly over the floor, just as she has been discarded and forgotten. The weary Mariana is caught between stasis and mobility, between activity and seclusion, between life and death; even within the very design of the painting's composition, she is trapped between the sunlit yet wrinkled, white linen tablecloth on the left of the canvas and the darkened, gloomy interior on the right.

Mariana's goodness and morality are symbolically suggested by the snowdrops that appear in the heraldic decoration of the stain-glass window and reinforced through the flickering candle hanging above the *prie-dieu* shrine-like display of a small triptych altarpiece, censer, silver casket, and crucifix. However,

¹⁶ The omen of spilt salt comes a description of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* by German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. See TATE Gallery. Carol Jacobi, "Sugar, Salt and Curdled Milk: Millais and the Synthetic Subject," accessed April 1, 2018. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/18/sugar-salt-and-curdled-milk-millais-and-the-synthetic-subject>.

¹⁷ This is the first painting exhibited to include the initials "PRB" as though carved in the bench on which Isabella sits. At the time the meaning was still secretive and perhaps to mislead the public from its true meaning, some in their circle were suggesting that the initials meant "penis rather better." See *ibid*.

¹⁸ In Act 3, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, the disguised Duke tells Isabella the story of Angelo's rejected fiancée, Mariana. See "The moated grange," Crossref-it.info, accessed March 24, 2018. <http://crossref-it.info/textguide/Measure-for-Measure/3/154>.

¹⁹ Millais borrowed the design from stain glass windows in the Chapel of Merton College, Oxford. See Upstone, *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, 44.

the bed in the distant interior and the physical strain of her awkward pose and jutting arms indicate her unrequited desire. As Pre-Raphaelite scholar Suzanne Fagence Cooper notes, “Millais sympathizes with her predicament, but also encourages us to enjoy looking at her constrained sexual energy.”²⁰ She is sexually frustrated, anxious, and hopeless after five years of abandonment and solitude.

Like many of the women in the PRB’s bourgeois real life and as subjects in their paintings, Mariana may yearn for a transformation of her circumstances, but she has no ability to affect change herself, no hope for marriage, and only the promise of a dismal future; so, she stoically and obediently accepts her fate and silently longs for death. This is further suggested by the design that appears in the window above the coat of arms bearing the motto, “*In coelo quies*” which translates to mean “*In heaven there is rest*” and by the painting’s accompanying excerpt of Tennyson’s poem:

*She only said, ‘My life is dreary,
He cometh not,’ she said;
She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!’*

Beauty & Solace in Death

Probably the best known of the Pre-Raphaelite women is Elizabeth Siddal, a red-haired beauty, who appears as the tragic heroine from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in Millais’ *Ophelia* (fig. 9). Siddal, whose father ran a cutlery business in Central London, was reportedly working in a milliner’s shop in Cranborne Alley off Leicester Square when she was first asked to model by Walter Howell Deverell, an artist within the Pre-Raphaelite circle. She went on to pose for some of the other artists of the group, before becoming the student, lover and in 1860, the wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Admired for her delicate ladylike manner, heavily-lidded eyes, and swan-like neck Siddal also painted, drew, and composed poetry.

As the Bard wrote and Millais painted, the maiden Ophelia, rejected, broken hearted, and driven mad by Hamlet, sang her final words as she slipped into the stream to her death, or perhaps she fell from a broken willow branch as Shakespeare’s Queen Gertrude suggested. Here, *Ophelia* clutches a bouquet of flowers and herbs. Understanding that the PRB were driven by the desire to carefully study and accurately depict nature, the fact that this collection of flowers, painted from direct observation, do not bloom at the same time of year reveals their overpowering preference for symbolic aestheticism and idealization over reality. Apparently, the unseasonable combination of daffodils and dog roses, was specifically criticized by Tennyson,²¹ and the almost microscopic attention to the natural elements and textures drew the derisive attention of the art critic for the *London Times* as well, who described the rejected, unstable heroine as succumbing to death in a “weedy ditch.”²²

The meticulous depiction of plants including the fallen willow tree, nettles, daisies, violets, cornflowers, and forget-me-nots all fuel a sense of innocence, forsaken love, suffering, and death. Furthering her wretched ending, a careful observer of light and shadow may note what appears to be a skull, as a *memento mori*, hidden among the shrubbery along the creek’s far bank. From all accounts, Siddal herself was generally frail and nearly died as a result of the many hours spent floating in a tub to depict the drowning and sorrowful death of Ophelia. These brushes with death seem to foretell Siddal’s early demise at age thirty-two from an apparent suicide.

The marriage between Elizabeth Siddal and Rossetti was not ideal. He was a well-known womanizer and his pursuit of other women, coupled with a still-born daughter in 1861, may have led to Siddal’s addiction and death from an overdose of laudanum, a form of opium which was freely available and commonly used as a tranquilizer and pain killer at that time.²³ Painted posthumously after her death,

²⁰ Cooper, *Pre-Raphaelite Art*, 74.

²¹ Marsh, *Insights, The Pre-Raphaelite Circle*, 77.

²² *The Times, London*, “Exhibition of the Royal Academy,” May 1, 1852, 8.

²³ W.M. Rossetti, “Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall,” *Burlington Magazine* (May 1903), 273 tells that Elizabeth changed the spelling of her last name to “Siddal” quoted in Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 16.

Rossetti paid homage to Siddal as the haunting *Beata Beatrix* (*Blessed Beatrice*) (fig. 10). In the painting, Elizabeth as Beatrice is, according to a poem composed by the artist's sister Christina Rossetti, depicted not exactly as she was, but "as she fills his dreams."²⁴

The choice of Beatrice as subject is poignant. Rossetti's father was an Italian scholar and Professor at King's College, London, and he named his son for the late-Middle Ages Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). As an artist and poet himself, Rossetti felt an affinity to Dante and further saw a parallel between the love lives and losses of both the artist and his namesake as told in *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*), which was motivation for the painting. In it, Beatrice appears on the cusp of death as a dove drops a poppy into her open hands, alluding to Siddal's death by laudanum. The Tate Gallery describes how "the shadowy figure of Dante looks across at Love, portrayed as an angel and holding in her palm the flickering flame of Beatrice's life. In the distance the Ponte Vecchio signifies the city of Florence, the setting for Dante's story.... Beatrice's death, which occurred at nine o'clock on 9th June 1290 is foreseen in the sundial which casts its shadow over the number nine."²⁵

Of all the Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti was the most philandering, and perhaps the most arrogant. He showed a strange lack of sensitivity when in October 1869, seven years after her death, he exhumed Siddal's body, buried in London's Highgate Cemetery, to retrieve his collection of unpublished poems including one entitled *On the Vita Nuova of Dante*. He published these poems the following year. After the exhumation, Rossetti wrote to Swinburne, "Had it been possible to her, I should have found the book upon my pillow the night she was buried; and could she have opened the grave no other hand would have been needed."²⁶ It is telling that the artist seems to lay blame on the deceased Elizabeth's inability to act, and that her inaction caused him inconvenience, maybe even sadness. It seems as though Rossetti had convinced himself that the exhumation was not a selfish, disrespectful, and unsettling deed, but instead that he had actually brought peace to Siddal's restless spirit by allowing her to give back to him what was rightfully his.

In 1858, two years before marrying Siddal, Rossetti met Fanny Cornforth, who became his primary model and mistress for the next decade. In 1862, Elizabeth Siddal died. In 1865, Rossetti met Alexa Wilding, a shy dressmaker who modeled for several of his works, while Fanny stayed on as his housekeeper. Alexa was soon displaced by Rossetti's new muse, the dark-haired, olive-skinned Jane Burden Morris.

Beguiling Temptresses

Like countless men of their time, the Pre-Raphaelites seemed to revel in the sexual tension created by simultaneously delighting in debauchery and also being repulsed by the immorality of such vulgarity. In their work, they painted women as aloof stunners, innocent virgins, or unobtainable vixens, and such paintings epitomize the Madonna / Harlot complex wherein women as sexual beings are judged to be either virtuous or vile, with no middle ground.

This is especially clear in later works by Rossetti that feature Jane Morris as his model, a woman described by Swinburne as projecting "the imperial trouble of beauty."²⁷ The seventeen-year-old's striking features drew the attention of Rossetti and another member of the PRB, Edward Burne-Jones, when they were commissioned to paint murals decorating the dome in what was then Oxford University's Union Society's debating chamber, known today as the Oxford Union Library. Jane was a girl from the "upper" working class when she married William Morris in 1859, the same year she met Rossetti. However, she became Rossetti's lover and model for several of his paintings, whose subjects do little to hide his lustful

²⁴ Poem by Christina Rossetti originally published in *In an Artist's Studio*, 1856. See Cooper, *Pre-Raphaelite Art*, 122.

²⁵ "Dante Gabrielle Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*," Tate Gallery, accessed July 18, 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-beata-beatrix-n01279>.

²⁶ Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 244.

²⁷ Frank Milner, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Pre-Raphaelite Paintings & Drawings in Merseyside Collections* (Manchester, UK: The National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, The Bluecoat Press, 1998), 83.

desire for her. The alluring, raven-haired Jane, of whom writer Henry James declared was “a wonder,” had the mesmerizing ability to project both innocent beauty and erotic temptress at once in the roles Rossetti chose for her to portray.²⁸

For instance, in the guise of the curious, weak-willed yet enigmatically enchanting and viraginous Pandora (fig. 11) from mythology, Morris stands before a mandorla of flames, bathed in a reddish-golden light that heightens both her passionate and destructive nature as a fearsome *femme fatale*. She is presented by Rossetti as a true siren, simultaneously alluring and threatening. As *Pandora* and as the Greek goddess *Proserpine* (Latin name for Persephone) in another painting (fig. 12), the entrancing Morris faces the painting’s viewer while averting her eyes, as though lost in her own reverie. In a number of compositions, Rossetti paints his mistress as a mystical, foreboding seductress contained within shallow spaces, thus both hampering her movements and sequestering her in safe, protective spheres.

Jane’s somber, sultry expression, and melancholy deportment so impactful as *femme fatale* were far removed from the Victorian “peaches-and-cream” ideal, and yet as a real woman of her era, she lacked independence, and this is made clear by the kinds of cramped, restrictive spaces she inhabits in these paintings. As *Proserpine*, her lack of agency is reinforced by the ivy clinging to the wall behind her, a gendered signifier found in many nineteenth-century British (and American) paintings representing fidelity, entwinement, and dependence. As a plant that needs a support to grow on, ivy is emblematic of a woman’s need to rely on the foundation of men.

Proserpine, the captive goddess who is imprisoned in the underworld for long periods of time, references the sexual tension between Rossetti and Morris, who was in a loveless, cold marriage and is strengthened by the accompanying poem written by Rossetti and carved into the painting’s frame which concludes with the words, “Woe’s me for thee, unhappy *Proserpine*!” The highly passionate relationship between Rossetti and Jane Morris lasted for more than twenty years. All the while, her husband William Morris, leader of the British Arts & Crafts movement was cognizant of their affair. *Proserpine* was actually made while they all were leasing Kelmscott Manor, a the fifteenth-century summer home in Oxfordshire. They returned to the home periodically from 1871 through the summer of 1874, when the acquiescent Morris left the lovers to themselves. The turbulent Rossetti / Morris relationship was entirely in keeping with the complex relations between the Pre-Raphaelites and their models.

Conclusion

Throughout their years painting as members of the PRB, the three main artists of the group Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais employed more than a half-a-dozen models in numerous artworks depicting them in a gamut of roles ranging from ruined women in country garb to heroines dressed in finery as means to both restrict and sanctify womanhood. Yet, in their effort to define femininity and highlight the stature of women at various times and in various forms, the PRB managed to inadvertently depict the psychology of the women who modeled for them. Often these women appear as lost souls. Repeatedly, the PRB models seem dissatisfied, anxious, unfulfilled, or wanting. However, this was of little concern to these artists.

The painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood naturally embodied the patriarchal prejudices of the Victorian era which was ironically named for a powerful woman. They emphasized the sexual disparity of male dominance and female submission, and they objectified their models as icons of their own invention of the female ideal. They misogynistically presented their models as either unsullied and virtuous or seductive and dangerous. The gender bias and social condescension in their perceptions never allowed them to see their models as anything other than members of the lower class and the lesser sex – attractive and appealing, but lacking consequence and value. The artists used their women for various purposes that promoted their art and suited their needs as lovers, companions, and even housekeepers. In their art, female individuality was ignored and instead, the women became mere representations of femininity drawn from male fantasy. The artists seem to have genuinely admired the women for their beauty, however unconventional, yet they never viewed them as equals.

²⁸ Marsh, *Insights*, 87.

“The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood: Model Heroines of Literature”
Melanie Enderle, University of Washington, Lecturer

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Images



Fig. 1 William Holman Hunt, *Il Dolce Far Niente*, 1859-66, retouched 1874-75, Oil on canvas, 39 x 32.5 in (91.1 x 80 cm), Private Collection.



Fig. 2 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Bocca Baciata (Lips That Have Been Kissed)*, 1859, Oil on panel, 12 5/8 x 10 5/8 in (32.1 x 27 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of James Lawrence (1980.261).



Fig. 3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Aurelia (Fazio's Mistress)*, 1863-1873, Oil on mahogany, 17 x 14 ½ in (43.2 x 36.8 cm), Tate Gallery, London, Purchased with assistance from Sir Arthur Du Cros Bt and Sir Otto Beit KCMG through the Art Fund 1916, (N03055). Released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND.

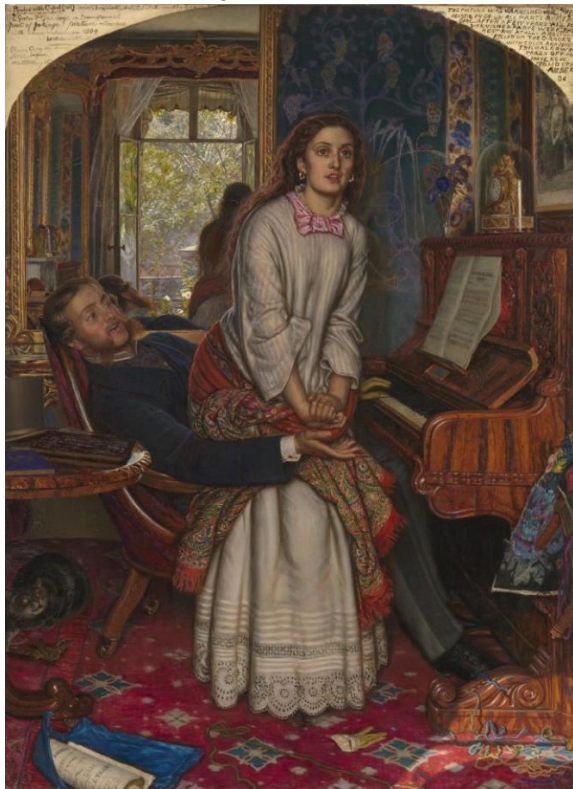


Fig. 4 William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853. Oil on canvas, arched top, 30 x 22 in, (76.2 x 55.9 cm), Tate Gallery, London. Presented by Sir Colin and Lady Anderson through the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1976, (T02075). Released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND.



Fig. 5. Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and his Wife (The Arnolfini Portrait)*, 1434, Oil on oak, 82.2 x 60 cm, The National Gallery London, Bought 1842, (NG 186).



Fig. 6 William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd*, 1851, Oil on canvas, 30 x 42 ½ in (76.4 x 109.5 cm), Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester, (1896.29).



Fig. 7 John Everett Millais, *Isabella (Lorenzo and Isabella)*, 1849, Oil on canvas, 40 x 57 in (103 x 142.8 cm), Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



Fig. 8 John Everett Millais, *Mariana*, 1850-1851. Oil on mahogany, arched top, 23 ½ x 19 ½ in (59.76 x 49.5 cm), Tate Gallery, London. Accepted in lieu of tax and allocated to the Tate Gallery 1999, (T07553). Image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND.



Fig. 9 John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-1852, Oil on canvas, 30 x 44 in (76.2 x 111.8 cm), Tate Gallery, London, Presented by Sir Henry Tate 1894, (N01506). Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND.

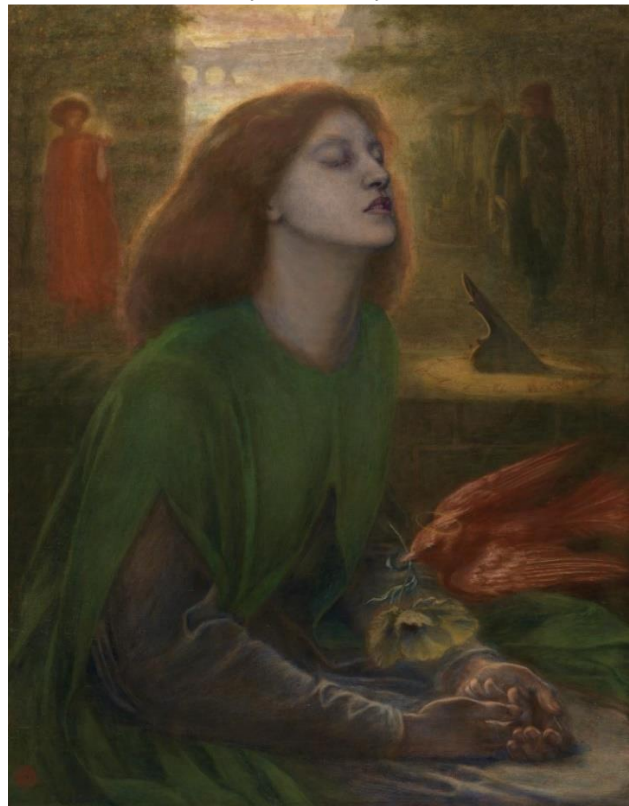


Fig. 10 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*, 1864-70, Oil on canvas, 34 x 26 in (86.4 x 66 cm), Tate Gallery, London, Presented by Georgiana, Baroness Mount-Temple in memory of her husband, Francis, Baron Mount-Temple 1889, (N01279). Image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND.

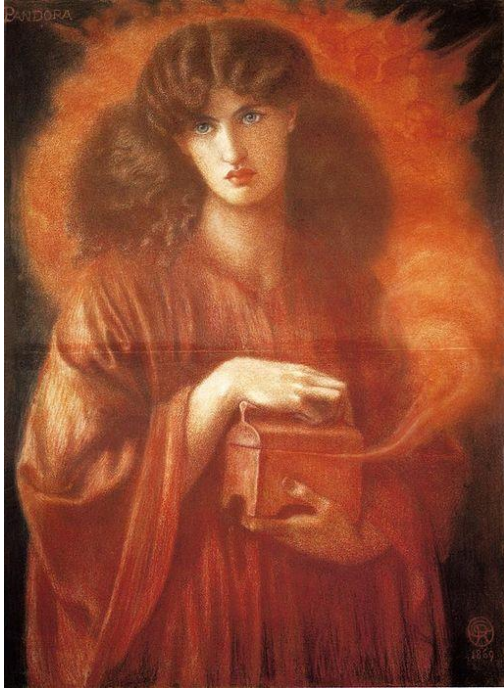


Fig. 11 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Pandora*, 1869, colored chalk on paper, 39 ½ x 28 ½ in (100.7 x 72.7 cm), acquired by 1st Lord Faringdon at an unspecified date, Faringdon Collection, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire.



Fig. 12 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Proserpine*, 1874, Oil on canvas, 49 ¾ x 24 in (125.1 x 61 cm), Tate Gallery, London, Presented by W. Graham Robertson 1940, (N05064). Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND.