

**Covetousness and commodification:  
the eroticised female body and  
cultural representations of death**

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The Victorian cult of mourning meant that the ritual of death became a visual affair, which placed women firmly at its centre. These gendered experiences of mourning and death raise interesting questions about the female body and how it was scrutinised, eroticised, and constructed by men. This article will explore constructions of the eroticised female form and their relationship to death by analysing a fabric bale label for 'Best Black' material which was manufactured by 'Black' Peter Robinson's Mourning House (1860) and the painting *Beata Beatrix* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1864-1870). It will explore what these artefacts from two different mediums of visual culture can tell us about male representations of the female body, and how the form was used to popularise and 'sell' the visual cult of death.

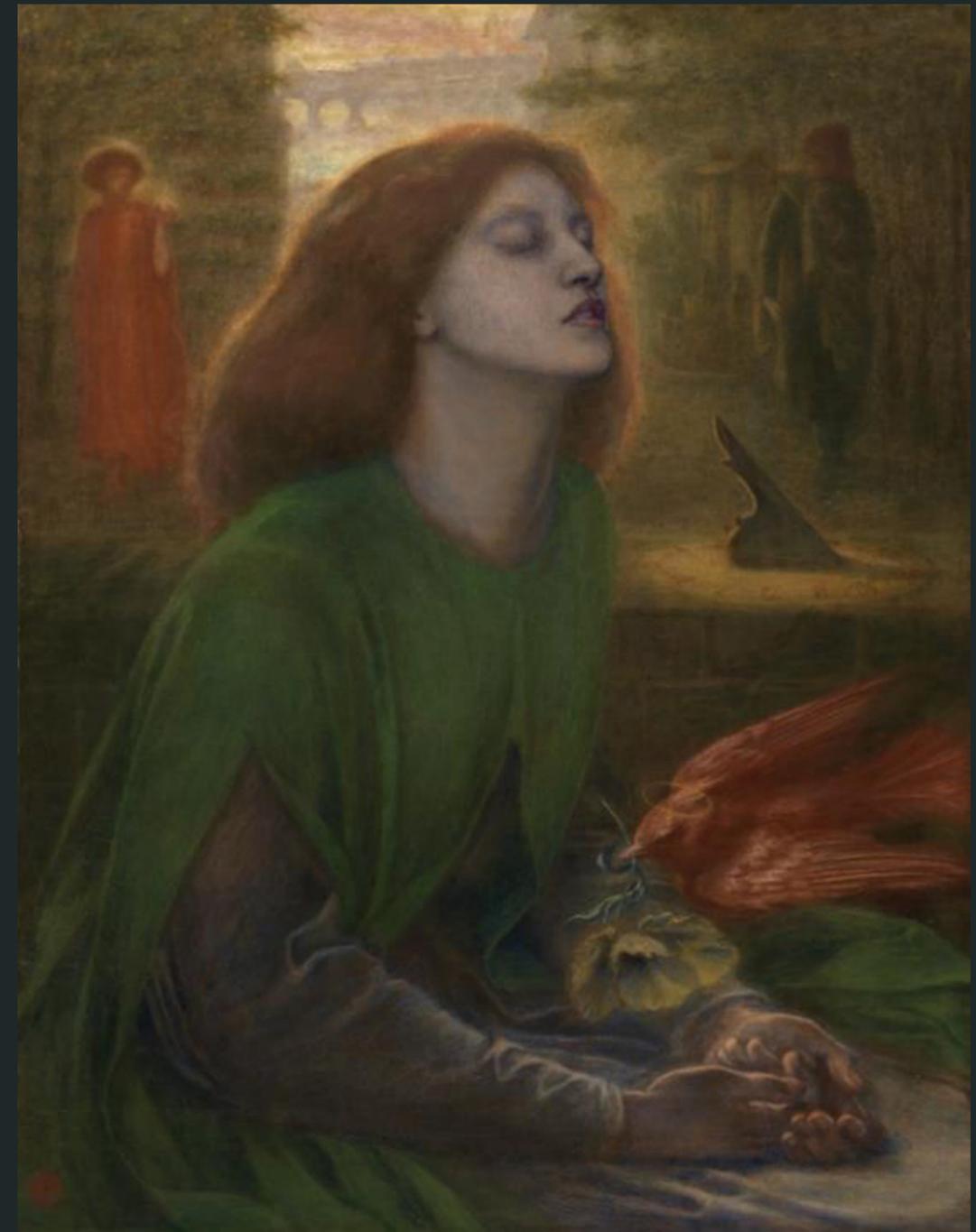


Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*, c. 1864-1870, oil on canvas, 88 cm x 69 cm, Tate Gallery, London. Copyright © Tate Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-beata-beatrix-n01279>

To say that the Victorians created mourning customs and rituals would be fallacious, to say that they popularised these traditions, transforming them into a fashion, or 'cult' would be more accurate. The rise of the print industry and improving literacy levels meant that the relationship with death and mourning became more textual and visual. Poetic elegies and novels featuring scenes of death or dying became more popular, and it became the fashion to send funereal and condolence cards to grieving homes. In this way, death became a part of Victorian popular culture, its new-found visibility opening it up to 'scrutiny and surveillance,'<sup>1</sup> however, the act of dying still took place within the privacy of the home, with death-bed vigils kept by women. While the Victorian cult of mourning was by no means an exclusively female rite, it is impossible to ignore that there were gendered differences when it came to the art of grieving. After all, when one considers the archetypal image of the grieving Victorian, she is female and is covered in swathes of black crape, paramatta and silk, and wearing a veil and gloves. Confined by her widowhood for two years, the widow became a decidedly visual symbol, a 'vessel of grief,'<sup>2</sup> with her 'body serv[ing] as very public signifier and embodiment of her loss.'<sup>3</sup> Her clothes communicated for her as cultural signifiers, eliciting

sympathy and encouraging sensitivity from those she might encounter. The visual reading of the weeds also opened her up to scrutiny and judgement about the stage of her mourning and their monetary worth reflected the value placed on the departed.

At the centre of the female cult of mourning were the giants of mourning-wear – Jay's Mourning House and Peter Robinson's Court and Family Mourning – who capitalised on, and were partly responsible for, the promotion and creation of the fashionable and cultural elements of mourning. 'Black' Peter Robinson's Court and Family Mourning Warehouse offered home visits from their tailors and seamstresses free of charge, to support women at their most emotionally vulnerable. These businesses monopolised mourning fashions, advertising their products and services in catalogues, etiquette books, and magazines, to which middle-class women would be exposed. These companies purposefully placed women at the centre of their promotions, utilising the rise of the textual and visual popularity of death to their advantage, and exploiting the middle-class woman's desire to adhere to fashions and cultural expectations of mourning. They achieved this by advertising their funereal wear and materials as funereal fashions, consolidating the relationship between

women, fashion and mourning. As well as their printed advertisements for mourning fashions, manufacturers capitalised on the relationship between the depth of affection and the depth of one's pockets, through the varying qualities of the black material they provided. The lengths of material were marked by bale labels and the best quality material for mourning-wear was known as 'Best Black.'

Although originally designed to allow visual identification of a specific fabric for non-English speakers thus allowing for ease of trade and export, the bale label also became an additional opportunity for advertising the fabric and its manufacturer: a visual stamp of quality. Peter Robinson's Mourning House followed the tradition of utilising decorative and ornate bale labels, with theirs for 'Best Black,' depicting scenes of grieving women, reinforcing that the Victorian experience of mourning was female and that women were central to popularising the fashionable image of death.<sup>4</sup> The ornate design of the bale label places the widow's body at its heart; the circular stamp of the label supports the grieving widow and her loved one, enclosing them in a 'frame' of support. A bower of trees and flora create a protective canopy above the figure and the deceased, placing the living female form at the centre of the

image. She is depicted leaning wistfully against the sarcophagus, her torso and arms pressed tightly against its exterior, her head resting heavily on her hand while her face turns away from the tomb and towards the world which she must now face. The bottom section of the label unites the natural border of the canopy with a carpet of grass providing the widow with a soft ground on which to grieve. The bold lettering 'Best Black' is printed on a ribbon which snakes its way beneath the widow and the sarcophagus: a physical representation connecting the superior material with prized qualities of feminine dignity, peace and support.

The advertising materials circulated by these male-run businesses demonstrate a clear understanding of the psychology of women. They recognised that for a middle-class woman the concept of the public 'show' of widowhood was of great importance, but they also understood that women enjoyed being seen as fashionable and that many enjoyed the autonomy over their body which shopping for clothes afforded them. In her important study of the history of shopping, Rachel Bowlby explores the relationship between women's vanity and commodification, stating that:

There is an obvious connection

1 Miun Sara Gleeson, 'Feminizing Grief: Victorian Women and the Appropriation of Mourning' (doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri, 2016), p. iii.

2 Ibid. p.30.

3 Ibid. p. 53.

4 The bale label for Peter Robinson's 'Best Black' was produced in sheets, with each individual label, an embossed print measuring 5.8 x 7.6cm. The artefact in question depicts a woman leaning against a sarcophagus in grief. The border of the label is constructed of vines and trees and the product name, 'Best Black,' is printed on a ribbon which forms the lower half of the label. *Bale Label, 'Best Black,'* [Peter Robinson's Court and Family Mourning House], [1860], Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. Accessed through: John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Shelfmark: Label 16 (50a), 20080603/15:48:21\$kg [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:jjohnson:&rft\\_dat=xri:jjohnson:rec:20080603154821kg](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:jjohnson:&rft_dat=xri:jjohnson:rec:20080603154821kg)

between the figure of the narcissistic woman and the fact of women as consumers. “What does a woman want?” is a question to which the makers of marketable products from the earliest years of consumer society have sought to suggest an infinite, variety of answers, appealing to her wish or need to adorn herself as an object of beauty. The dominant ideology of feminine subjectivity in the late nineteenth century perfectly fitted woman to receive the advances of the seductive commodity offering to enhance her womanly attractions.<sup>5</sup>

By controlling and constructing their outward appearance, women reclaimed autonomy over their body in the public sphere, with department stores acting as an extension of the private, providing women with an empowering space to adorn their body. The construction of the female form in advertising material, such as the ‘Best Black’ bale label feeds into this belief, promoting women as having a choice over their public appearance, even in widowhood, shifting the focus from widow back to woman. These culturally acceptable images of the fashionable widow are created by men however and are promoted to women through visual and textual mediums with the sole purpose of making a profit. Peter Robinson’s, bale label reflects the profitable relationship between death

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985) pp. 31–32.

<sup>6</sup> Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 301.

<sup>7</sup> Gleeson, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) p. xiii.

and the female form. The interest that men seem to have in manipulating and profiting from the creation of their desired visual ideal raises challenging questions about the nature of mourning, death, and the female figure. On one hand, the popularity of funereal fashion conceals the woman’s body, ensuring modesty and creating the illusion of privacy, the weeds becoming what Pat Jalland calls, ‘a wall, a cell of refuge,’<sup>6</sup> while on the other, the promotion and aggressive marketing strategies of the male-run mourning warehouses relied on the visibility of the female form to generate profit. As such, the widow’s body becomes a complex site, symbolising the convergence of life and death, reminding those who see them of the proximity of death to their lives but also that the ‘cult of death was one of materiality.’<sup>7</sup>

As such, the widow’s body becomes a ‘living canvas,’ defined by its proximity to death, transforming the female body into art. Elizabeth Bronfen explores this, claiming that both ‘death and femininity are treated as images,’<sup>8</sup> going some way to explain the visual connection that I have introduced between death and the female form in Victorian mourning customs; she continues in this vein stating that, ‘the feminine body as death turns the

woman into an object of sight – the dead feminine body comparable to an exhibited art object.’<sup>9</sup> Bronfen, sees the point of convergence between death and the erotic as *female*; the desire to look, possess or create as decidedly *male*. The combination of the need to create and study the female image in a near-death and therefore erotic state is important to consider when understanding the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

It has been said that Rossetti, alongside Burne-Jones and Millais, ‘projected [his] sense of death as sensual onto the figures of women,’<sup>10</sup> with his art presenting a ‘themes that brought death, revivification, sensuality and inspiration’<sup>11</sup> to the forefront, thereby creating a vision of female beauty that was defined by its proximity to death. For Rossetti, Lizzie Siddall epitomised this beauty – her dazzling red hair, translucent skin, swan-like neck and hooded eyes are legendary – but perhaps what made her the perfect muse was more connected to the ‘sexually macabre,’<sup>12</sup> what Bronfen saw as the male desire to create and possess an image of a woman, whose very appeal was rooted in her fragility

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Lutz, *Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011) p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Bronfen, p. 168.

<sup>15</sup> Bronfen, p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 170.

and sickness: in her proximity to death. Fellow member of the PRB, Ford Madox Brown commented that Lizzie looked, ‘thinner and more death-like and more beautiful and more ragged than ever,’<sup>13</sup> romanticising her fragility, and Rossetti called her a ‘stunner’<sup>14</sup> despite (or perhaps because of) her consumptive illness. For Rossetti, the anguished moments of Lizzie Siddall’s life are what made her beautiful, her ‘liminality between life and death’<sup>15</sup> what made her more desirable, and as she succumbed to illness, addiction and depression, she became the ‘embodiment of unattainable, adored beauty.’<sup>16</sup> To prevent the loss of the image of desire meant to draw her, the perfect image of beauty replacing the real body of Siddall. Her artistic body – a fragile beauty nearing death – has become immortalised as a myth on canvas, created and owned by him.

The male-construction of the female form be it through funereal fashions, or in the role of artist’s muse, converges in the visual spectacle of the female body and its proximity to death. These images, either real or imagined, ‘serve to reinforce women’s status as objects of a gaze that would control, sexually

objectify, and commodify.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Rossetti, one of the most iconic images of Siddall which both 'enshrines and eroticizes [her] death'<sup>18</sup> can be found in the *Beata Beatrix* (1864–1870), a painting which has been called a memorial, a death mask, a resurrection and a tombstone (Figure 1). It is an image where the boundaries between fact and fiction, myth and truth have become blurred, where Lizzie portrayed as the equally ill-fated Beatrice, is held forever in 'the eternal pose of one between life and death,'<sup>19</sup> with her body the focus of Rossetti's commodification and our gratification. The *Beata Beatrix* depicts Dante's Beatrice at the moment of death and Rossetti captures the moment she ascends beyond the world of mortality. His Beatrice is motionless, almost trance-like, emphasised by her closed eyes and emotionless face, however, there is a sense of movement in her physicality which is disquieting. The incline of her head and her body which leans forwards and upwards towards an unknown destination, creates an uneasy juxtaposition between life and death. Rossetti captures the moment when the final breath is taken, not at the exhalation which would indicate death, and this is further emphasised in the way that Beatrice's body merges with the darkened, shadows of the

background – the River Arno and its bridge – which are familiar to her. The earthly features of the world and its inhabitants are indistinct forms, while she exists solidly between the haziness of this world and the mystery of what is to come.

In this way, Beatrice is neither dead nor living, and is a 'wonderful vision of the border-realm which lies between life and death.'<sup>20</sup> Rossetti made his vision of Beatrice's liminality explicit, stating that the painting was, 'not at all intended to represent Death . . . but to render it under the resemblance of a trance, in which Beatrice seated at the balcony overlooking the City is suddenly rapt from Earth to Heaven.'<sup>21</sup> The choice to describe her in a state of rapture, eroticises the moment of Beatrice's demise, objectifying her body as her soul leaves it; her body entirely passive, frozen in time at her most beautiful and vulnerable as we, the voyeurs scrutinise her transition. The body of Beatrice is foregrounded and fills the canvas, her robes of green and purple, 'the colours of hope and sorrow as well as of life and death,'<sup>22</sup> a visual reminder of her existence between two worlds and her body which is the convergence of these states. There is a 'heaviness, even a grayness,

about her face'<sup>23</sup> and she adopts a pose of acceptance, indicated by her hands which are no longer clasped in prayer – her physical body one of willing and passive acceptance.

In her face, however, is all the animation of sexual ecstasy, her heavy-lidded closed eyes, upturned face, and her parted lips indicative of a 'sexually charged rapture where spiritual transcendence and sexual ecstasy are conflated.'<sup>24</sup> The connection between the eroticised female body and death is evident, but where the connection originated is less clear. For Rossetti, 'sex and death become linked moments'<sup>25</sup> and this aligns with what we have seen through the Victorian man's interest in possessing and creating the female form in relation to funereal fashions. The fascination with the female figure, therefore, comes from its proximity to death because this is when the body is most passive and vulnerable, but also most alive, drawing on the idea that, 'eroticism is assenting to life up to the point of death'.<sup>26</sup> In the case of *Beata Beatrix*, the canvas itself becomes a complex site, depicting a moment of absolute freedom and absolute restriction. At the moment of death Beatrice leaves her body, denoting freedom, but in doing so she renders her physical

body at its most vulnerable and it is important that Rossetti chooses this specific moment for his work. Here, the Beatrice of Dante's poem is held forever at her most passively beautiful, but also in an erotically charged state: simultaneously alive and dead. Rossetti's idea of female beauty exists in a fluid state, somewhere between this world and the next, with the lifeless female body the focus of scrutiny and fascination. Macabre as this may seem, the relationship between beauty and death has always been a feminised one, the passive object of the female form is desirable, but their beauty is made more intoxicating by their unattainability in death; the covetous need to own what cannot be possessed is entirely alluring. Bronfen recognises the forbidden allure of the beautiful dead, positing that:

Beauty however, always also includes death's inscription, because it requires the translation (be it fantasy or in reality) of an imperfect, animate body, into a perfect, inanimate image, a dead 'figure' [...] beauty places man's object of sexual desire at a distance, but preserves this object in its status as object. Beauty arouses sexual desire at the same time that it forbids it, because it is intangible.<sup>27</sup>

This theory is encapsulated in *Beata*

17 Emily J. Orlando, 'That I May Not Faint, or Die, or Swoon: Reviving Pre-Raphaelite Women', *Women's Studies*, 38:6 (2009) 611–646 (p. 621).

18 Ibid. p. 621.

19 Bronfen, p. 177.

20 F.G Stephens, review of 'Beata Beatrix', *The Portfolio: An Artistic Portfolio*, 22:47 (1891) 45–47 (p. 45).

21 Gay Daly, *Pre-Raphaelites in Love* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989) p. 94.

22 Stephens, p. 46.

23 Lutz, p. 29.

24 Orlando, p. 623.

25 Lutz, p. 42.

26 Dane Keith Kennedy, *The Highly Civilised Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) p. 220.

27 Bronfen, p. 64.

*Beatrix*. She is the earthly 'dead' figure preserved as a passive object of perfection, her intangibility what makes her desirable. This transformative concept becomes even more complex when we consider it in relation to the painting's famous sitter: Lizzie Siddall.

It is widely accepted that when Lizzie entered the PRB's circle, her name was changed, dropping the 'l' and becoming Siddal, a name that Rossetti felt had more artistic appeal. By surrendering her name, she became reborn as Rossetti's possession and creation, thus Lizzie Siddall ceased to exist. The infamous retrieval of Rossetti's poems from Lizzie's grave seven years after her death and the apocryphal story that follows emphasise his belief that he had ownership over her body, that he had a right to revisit the vision of beauty that he had created.<sup>28</sup> As such there is a blurring of lines between myth and reality when it comes to Lizzie Siddall, where does the woman end, and the artist's creation begin? Lizzie existed somewhere between the two points which is paralleled in *Beata Beatrix*; she is the male-constructed ideal female form – motionless, beautiful, erotic and for sale.

The idea of profiting through the commodification of the female form

in its beautiful but vulnerable state – when near to death – goes some way to connecting the world of art with the traditions of funereal dress and the bale label discussed earlier in this article. My earlier claim that we could see the widow's body as a 'living canvas' is valid when considering the ways in which men construct the female form, commodifying and profiting from them because of their closeness to death, however, the presence of the erotic seems problematic here. The full coverage that the widow's weeds provide promote abstinence rather than eroticism, the Victorian widow is 'literally weighed down in her grief'<sup>29</sup> with her mourning-wear symbolising the loss of her husband and the loss of her purpose, her body in double mourning. The widow publicly mourns her spouse and in doing so mourns the loss of her life, as for many, 'Widowhood was a final destiny, an involuntary commitment to a form of social exile.'<sup>30</sup>

The cultural expectations of gendered mourning practices are also important to consider here. Under the guise of kindness and an understanding of the separate spheres, mourning warehouses such as Peter Robinson's promoted clothes that offered the grieving woman a shield against the world, with even their pictorial bale

labels reminding the widow that 'Best Black' material provides privacy whilst visually communicating their position to the world. The enclosed space of the label indicates Robinson's understanding of the private nature of grief, with the bower and supportive grounding provided by the earth and the product name shielding the widow and providing her with seclusion, as such 'Best Black' material envelops the widow and provides her with the barrier she requires. The visual spectacle of mourning is also evident in the image, the widow in the bale label gazes outwards, connecting her gaze with other widows, reflecting their shared experience, and reminding them of the importance of maintaining the 'show' of mourning. As it was 'women who espoused mourning conventions and tended to be hardest on each other,'<sup>31</sup> the bale label when working in tandem with Peter Robinson's advertisements in fashionable ladies' magazines, communicate that as a mourning warehouse, they understand the personal nature of grief but also the female desire to 'keep up appearances.'

The gender expectations of women as vulnerable and emotional necessitated making the mourning process as easy to adhere to as possible, and the clothes themselves and the companies that provided them were advertised as bearing the burden for the widow so that she was not over-taxed. While there can be little doubt that there were

many widows who valued the privacy afforded to them by the traditions of funereal dress, it is hard to see any altruism in the male-run businesses that provided these clothes. Once again, as seen with the *Beata Beatrix*, we see that men's need to control the image of the female form when at its most passive and vulnerable is present, particularly in relation to death. While the widow is not ascending to death as Beatrice / Lizzie is, they are a visual reminder of their recent bodily contact with death. They are also held in a liminal state because of their proximity to death, the widow's body a signifier of how she ceases to exist as wife, her weeds a mark of the transition of her female form and her lack of earthly purpose. The figure in the bale label indicates just this, she is recognisably female, but she is also no longer just a woman, instead she is in the process of transitioning into widowhood. The widow in the bale label is faceless, her body and role defined by her proximity to death, and by purchasing 'Best Black' the human widow becomes a walking advertisement for Peter Robinsons, she willingly becomes the image depicted in the bale label, popularising the image that male manufacturers have created. If we see the widow's body as being in a state of liminality, paralleling *Beata Beatrix*, then we can also see that the full coverage provided by her widow's weeds does not desexualise her body, in fact it invites scrutiny and as such, the widow becomes an object of desire and

<sup>28</sup> The story relayed is that when Lizzie's coffin-lid was opened, she was well-preserved, radiantly beautiful with her abundant red hair cascading across her shoulder. So surprised were those who participated in the retrieval of Rossetti's book of poetry that they were mesmerised by her beauty, most importantly mesmerised by her beauty in death.

<sup>29</sup> Gleeson, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup> Jalland, p. 231.

<sup>31</sup> Gleeson, p. 12.

eroticism – her body a reminder of her sexuality, and her clothes a tantalising reminder of her unavailability. The veil itself is a reminder of the widow’s sexual experience and it is designed to evoke pity but also judgement at her lack of virginity which is no longer sanctified within marriage. The widow’s veil becomes an enticingly thin ‘veil’ between Bronfen’s perfect and imperfect female form, while her liminality indicates her potential re-entry into the world of marriage and society. In 1855, *The Illustrated Manners Book* expressed the notion that, ‘black is becoming; and young widows, fair, plump, and smiling, with their roguish eyes sparkling under their black veils are very seducing,’<sup>32</sup> emphasising the eroticism associated with the widow’s veiled image and the sexual threat that their body presents.

This article has begun to explore the irrefutable connection between death, the female form and eroticism. In both art and culture, it has examined how the female form is central in creating images of beauty to be coveted and commodified. The widow’s body as a symbol of grief becomes marginalised and marked as other, by the male-constructed fashions which she so rigidly and willingly adheres to. Her willingness to wear the weeds mean that she is complicit in her own objectification and much like Lizzie Siddall, who relinquished her name to embark on her new identity as muse,

she places herself in a liminal space where she can be scrutinised and enjoyed, willingly commodifying her body.

<sup>32</sup> Robert De Valcourt, *The Illustrated Manners Book: a Manual of Good Behavior and Polite Accomplishments* (New York: Leland, Clay & Co., 1855) p. 157.