

Sacred Profanity: Decoding the Lily in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel*

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Abstract

It would be all too easy to dismiss Dante Gabriel Rossetti's flowers as frivolous nosegays if it were not for their proliferation, compositional relevance and contextual symbolism. This paper argues that flowers, rather than merely scenting Rossetti's work, contribute to its intrinsic structure, profundity and thematic substance. By comparing Rossetti's poetic and visual depictions of just one flower, the lily, in *The Blessed Damozel* (1847-81) with relevant entries in Reverend Hilderic Friend's *Flowers and Flower Lore* (1883) it seeks to stimulate an increasingly fruitful examination of the significance of floral symbolism in Rossetti's oeuvre.

A lesson in each flower
A story in each tree and bower
In every herb on which we tread
Are written words, which rightly read
Will lead us from earth's fragrant sod
To hope, and holiness to God.¹

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) was the creator of 'beautiful women with floral adjuncts' according to his brother William.² He cites 'the gentlemen who commissioned or purchased the pictures' as being 'chiefly responsible', implying that flowers were supplementary to Rossetti's aesthetic vision.³ This contention supports critics denigrating Rossetti's output as a confusion of irrelevant, unrelated notions⁴ and offers an explanation for why his style was 'quite out of favour' for much of the twentieth century.⁵ However, given the significance of detail in his work, the plethora of nineteenth-century floral texts, and Rossetti's life-long interest in legend and myth,⁶ it is remarkable that a more comprehensive examination of the significance of floral symbolism in his work is still to be achieved.⁷

By comparing entries in Reverend Hilderic Friend's two-volume floral compendium, *Flowers and Flower Lore* (1883) with Rossetti's use of the lily in *The Blessed Damozel*, this paper uncovers the documented Victorian understanding of symbolism associated with the flower. It will ask if and how this knowledge contributes to a deeper appreciation of Rossetti's creative output and considers the wider implications of these revelations.

¹ Reverend Hilderic Friend, *Flowers and Flower-Lore I* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein, 1883), p. 139.

² William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family Letters I* (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), p. 203.

³ W. M. Rossetti, *DGR. His Family Letters*, p. 203.

⁴ See Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London: Methuen, [1947] 1961), p. 77; Percy Bate, *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters, Their Associates and Successors*, 4th edition (London: Bell and Sons, [1899] 1910), p. 43; W.W. Robson, 'Pre-Raphaelite Poetry', *Dickens to Hardy, Pelican Guide to English Literature VI*, ed. by Boris Ford (London, 1958), p. 358.

⁵ Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Painter and Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), Epilogue, p. 529.

⁶ See Jerome McGann, 'Rossetti's Significant Details', *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 7 (1969), pp. 41-54; and Alicia Craig Faxon, 'The Pre-Raphaelites and the Mythic Image: Iconographies of Woman', *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp.77-89 (p.77).

⁷ Notable floral symbolism contributors include Debra Mancoff and Sarah Phelps Smith.

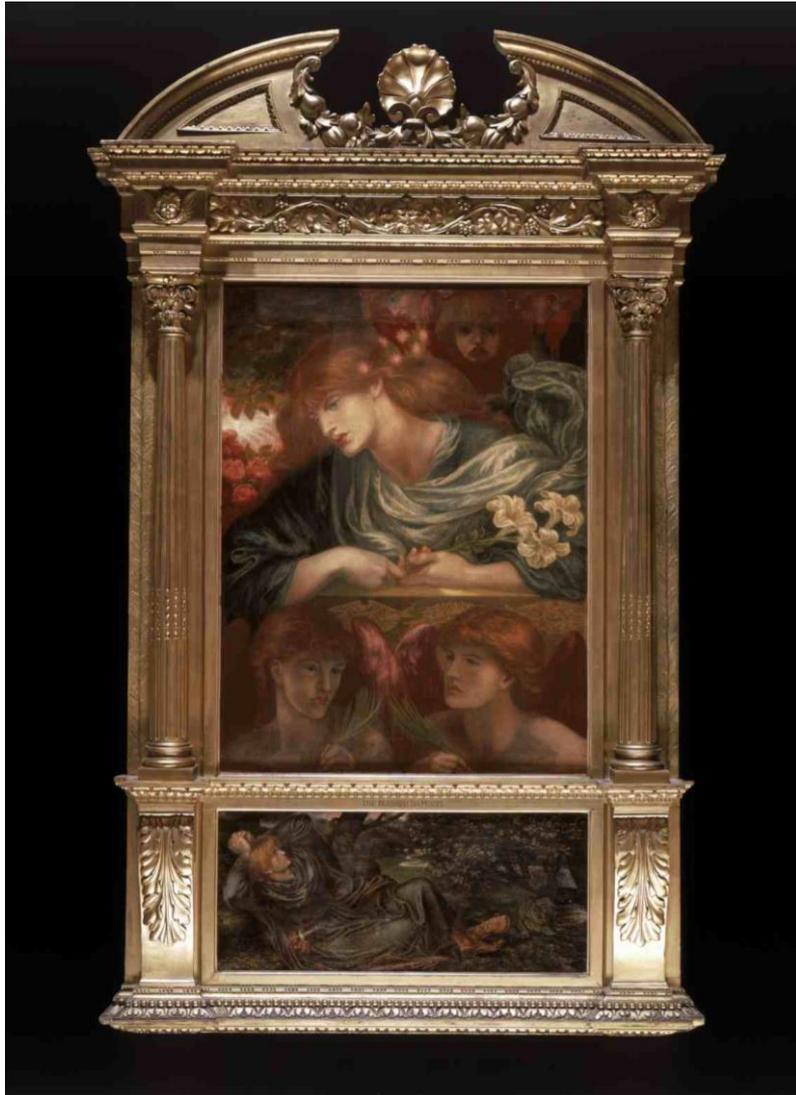


Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel*, 1875-81.
Oil on canvas, 110.5 x 82.5 cm, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight
Courtesy National Museums Liverpool.

The Blessed Damozel is not one but at least eight incarnations of the imparadised female, expressed through three surviving poems and at least five pictures. Continually approaching his work with 'a fresh eye',⁸ the blessed damozel occupied Rossetti for much of his life, first appearing in a poem written before 12 May 1847⁹ and published with amendments in *The Germ* in February 1850. It was completed shortly before his death.¹⁰ In 1875, nearly thirty years after his first poetic composition, Rossetti created not one but two large-scale paintings of the subject: one commissioned by Glaswegian William Graham in 1871 and a second painted speculatively for Liverpool ship owner, F. R. Leyland, purchased in late January 1881 (Figure 1).¹¹

Although these paintings and Rossetti's poems possess 'essentially independent identities' due to the time span between their creation,¹² the depiction of the lily in both

⁸ William E. Fredeman (ed.), *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 6, The Last Decade 1873-1882, I, 1873-74* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), letter from D. G. Rossetti to Samuel Mendel, Wednesday 2 April 1873, p. 111.

⁹ Today exists only in an 1855 memorial reconstruction.

¹⁰ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems. A new edition* (London: Ellis and White, 1881).

¹¹ J. B. Bullen, Rossetti, *Painter & Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), p. 74.

¹² Bullen, p. 242.

principal pictures is faithful to the poetry and is remarkably consistent.¹³ Other related works include a black and red chalk drawing created for Graham in 1873¹⁴ and another to persuade Leyland to part with his money, described as 'one of the best things I ever did – more a picture than a drawing'.¹⁵ Rossetti completed a fifth work in 1874, which he referred to as his 'gilded picture', best known today as *Sancta Lilies*.¹⁶

During Rossetti's lifetime, floral lexicography was popular throughout Europe, the Americas and particularly widespread in England following the translation of Charlotte de la Tour's *Le Langage des Fleurs* (1834).¹⁷ As well as recording sacred and profane interpretations of the natural world for posterity, the art of floriography encoded meaning through flower choice and combination, colour, size, position, health, time of growth and period of decline.¹⁸ Bede (circa 672-735 CE) is credited with being among the first to promote the lily as a fitting symbol for the Madonna: 'the pure white petals signifying her spotless body; the golden anthers within typifying her soul, sparking divine light'.¹⁹ Instituted by Pope Urban VI (c.1318-89) the lily became synonymous with the Feast of the Visitation commemorating the journey taken by Mary to visit Elizabeth, her expectant cousin.²⁰ Friend highlights that 'in almost every case, where representation of the event is made, white lilies stand by the Virgin's side, three mystic flowers crowning their three stems',²¹ their number presumably relating to the Holy Trinity. Rossetti demonstrates his knowledge of this association in *The Girlhood of the Mary Virgin* (1848-9) and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1849-50).

One cannot be certain, however, that Rossetti ever owned a Victorian *flora symbolica* text, for although there are fifty unidentified volumes catalogued among his belongings, his library inventory does not list a specific floral title.²² Emblematic floral codes were nevertheless commonplace in medieval and early modern literature, both of which held significant interest for Rossetti.²³ Indeed, he refers to a seventeenth-century text, John Gerard's *The herball or Generall historie of plantes* (1633),²⁴ Shakespearean metaphor and Chaucerian symbolism when researching the snowdrop,²⁵ and he shared an intimate understanding of the 'simple chastity of nature' with other Pre-Raphaelites.²⁶ He was particularly sentient of the anthropomorphic quality of flowers, describing how, for example, the peach fruit 'resembled the human heart' and its leaf the tongue in one of his favourite crayon drawings, *Silence* (1870).²⁷

¹³ Compare <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/299805> with <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/exhibitions/rossetti/works/latework/blesseddamazonel.aspx> [accessed 13 March 2015].

¹⁴ www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s2444a.rap.html, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London [accessed 1 February 2015].

¹⁵ Fredeman, letter from D. G. Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, Wednesday, 28 May 1873, now in the private collection of Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber.

¹⁶ Fredeman, letter from D. G. Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, Thursday 20 August 1874, p. 526.

¹⁷ Molly Engelhardt, 'The Language of Flowers in the Victorian Knowledge Age', *Victoriographies* Vol. 3, No. 2 (2013), pp. 136-160 (p. 137).

¹⁸ Debra N. Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica. Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (Munich and London: Prestel, 2003), p. 7.

¹⁹ Friend, p. 152.

²⁰ Luke 1:39-56.

²¹ Friend, p. 153.

²² T. G. Wharton, Dante G. Rossetti, *Deceased ... Catalogue Of The Household & Decorative Furniture [&c.] ... Which Will Be Sold By Auction [...]* Martin & Co, 28 Mar 2012.

²³ Engelhardt, p. 137.

²⁴ Marcus Woodward (ed.), *Gerard's herball, The Essence thereof from the edition of TH. Johnson, 1636* (London: Spring Books [1927] 1964).

²⁵ William E. Fredeman (ed.), *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 9, The Last Decade, 1873-1882, IV, 1880-1882*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), Letter from D. G. Rossetti to Jane Morris, pp. 61-2.

²⁶ F. G. Stephens, 'The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art', *The Germ: Thoughts Towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art: Being a Facsimile Reprint of the Literary Organ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, ed. by

W. M. Rossetti, (London: E. Stock, 1850), February, p. 62.

²⁷ John Bryson (ed.), *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris. Their Correspondence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 71.

Indeed, along with *The Blessed Damozel* where the white lily, the purest of all species demands one's attention, flowers are highlighted in many of Rossetti's mature paintings.²⁸ Despite John Rothenstein's assertion that Rossetti had 'neither the inclination, nor [...] the capacity'²⁹ to imitate nature, floral emblems are often either central to, or create an indisputable focus within, Rossetti's composition. In *Bocca Baciata* (1859), for instance, the marigold transforms into the voluminous hair of his subject, and in *Lady Lilith* (1867) a profusion of roses emulates the sensual movement of the woman's hair as it falls from the comb. When painting *Venus Verticordia* (1864-8) he 'lost infinite time looking for honeysuckles' and admitted that his long search for the perfect species had 'left him penniless'.³⁰ Should further evidence of Rossetti's floral empathy be required, one has only to compare Rossetti's painting of *The Blessed Damozel* with Edward Burne-Jones's interpretation.³¹ Burne-Jones (1833-1898) chooses to present his damozel *sine lilia*, Rossetti, in contrast, positions three gaping lilies centrally, to the right of the canvas, disrupting the work's largely symmetrical composition and immediately focusing attention on the white and gold floral bouquet. Obviously more than accessories to the profusion of 'rich stuffs and jewels'³² supposedly dominating Rossetti's paintings, lilies suggestively mirror the angle of the sword hilt in the predella below. This subversive visual relationship is surely deliberate, being evocative of male and female anatomy and the fertility of the sexual act.

Intimate physical connectivity is also explored in Rossetti's poetry, although when the lily first appears, it does so with deceptive innocence for: 'She had three lilies in her hand'.³³ Although this iambic tetrameter appears to be solely descriptive, an understanding of flower lore is revelatory. The white lily or Lady-Lily³⁴ (*lilium candidum*) is one of several flowers especially devoted to and representative of the Virgin, being naturally symbolic of purity and beauty.³⁵ Before the lily became a sacred Christian symbol, however, its identity was decidedly profane being first associated with ancient Norse, Greek and Roman deities; Freyja, Hera/Juno and Venus:

The ancients believed plants to be under the rule of certain deities, and when the great goddess has laid a powerful hold upon men's minds, and her name has become associated with many common objects, she could only be banished from men's thoughts by transferring what had been sacred to her to the Virgin Mary.³⁶

This syncretism is particularly pertinent when lilies make their second appearance in the poem, again unchanged in all versions: 'And the lilies lay as if asleep/Along her bended arm'.³⁷ The lily may be sacredly pure but according to ancient myth, it also embodies its less chaste alter ego: Juno's rose. According to legend, Jupiter placed his illegitimate child into the arms of Juno, his wife, as she lay sleeping. When the child had taken his fill, some of the goddess' milk was spilt as he withdrew from her breast. This precious milk is thought to have formed the Milky Way in the heavens and the rose of Juno, or lily, on earth.³⁸ For Rossetti the poet, the lily paradoxically engenders both the sanctity of the maidenhead and the fecundity of copulation. But for Rossetti the artist and widower, it must surely have evoked the poignant memory of his distraught wife, Lizzie, cradling their phantom stillborn child.

²⁸ Friend, p. 152.

²⁹ John Rothenstein, *An Introduction to English Painting* (London & New York: Tauris Parke, [1933] 2001), p. 12.

³⁰ W. M. Rossetti, *Rossetti Papers 1862-70* (London: Sands & Company, 1903), letter to Ford Madox Brown, 11 August 1864, p. 61.

³¹ <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/298024> [accessed 13 March 2015].

³² Bate, p. 44.

³³ W. M. Rossetti (ed.), *The Germ: Thoughts Towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art: Being a Facsimile Reprint of the Literary Organ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: E. Stock, 1850), February, p. 80, 1:5.

³⁴ Friend, p. 6.

³⁵ Friend, p. 102.

³⁶ Friend, p. 82.

³⁷ *The Germ*, 9:5-6.

³⁸ Friend, p. 95.

The loss of 'the spirit child of the blessed damozel'³⁹ in 1861 was an ill omen that haunted Rossetti for the rest of his life, rendered all the more painful by the subsequent demise of his wife and second unborn child.⁴⁰ This conflation of expectant pleasure with tremulous foreboding is reflected in both principal paintings where lilies emerge from beneath the damozel's diaphanous veil: its spectral presence threatening the delicate exposed blooms. Beauty is tinged with apprehension as Rossetti deftly creates a vacillating field of attraction and repulsion, the drawing in and the pushing away, so typical of his *modus operandi*.

Nonetheless, the lily, in its natural eternal fragility, offers some hope of life beyond the grave thanks to the floral ideology of Marian apotheosis. According to flower lore when apostles visited Mary's grave three days after her interment, they discovered it open and filled with roses and lilies: for centuries emblems of mother and son.⁴¹ Resurrection and reunification are, it seems, theoretically possible: a theme explicated throughout *The Blessed Damozel*. Yet, this ethereal supernatural potential, though removed from earth, seems to be grounded within the physical realm:

She had three lilies in her hand
And the stars in her hair were seven.

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
For service meetly [*sic*] worn.⁴²

Rossetti attributes the 'wrought' adjective to the lily, alluding to its nature as 'worked' or cultivated on earth in contrast to the wild, unblemished rose, gifted by the heavenly Virgin. This demarcation tends to suggest that the sacred lily becomes sullied by man's profane touch, reflecting the paradoxical tension between the Desired and the Desiring in the depiction of *The Blessed Damozel*. Further insight from Friend points to the intimate relationship enjoyed by the lily as king of the garden and the rose as queen: they grow in the same soil but possess quite different traits, the lily in this case being the more dominant.⁴³ This quality is embodied within the holy maiden who possesses a physical potency so strong that she transmutes the inanimate boundary separating her from her lover. In the paintings, her presence dominates the composition, towering over the diminutive figure in the predella. Like the lily, she is the more assertive bloom:

And still she bowed herself and stooped
Out of the circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she leaned on warm,
And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.⁴⁴

Rossetti's lilies, meanwhile, visually evocative of the carnal delights in store, lie 'as if asleep', in anticipation of their (sexual) awakening. This simile is crucial, for the lily is simultaneously dormant and about to stir; unconsciously conscious, possessing an abundance of potential.

³⁹ Frances Winwar, *Poor Splendid Wings* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1933), p. 214.

⁴⁰ Lucinda Hawksley, *Lizzie Siddal. The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel* (London: Carlton, 2004), p. 196.

⁴¹ Friend, pp. 151-52.

⁴² *The Germ*, 1:5-6 & 2:1-4.

⁴³ Friend, p. 212.

⁴⁴ *The Germ*, 9:1-6.

Symbolising the fusion of Madonna and sexualised woman, this image of the damozel is the antithesis of Rossetti's *Sancta Liliās*, one of his first blessed damozel paintings.⁴⁵ Although Rossetti himself described the flowers in his gilded picture as 'lilies',⁴⁶ and the catalogue for the memorial exhibition of his works at the *Burlington Fine Arts Club* (1883) listed them as such,⁴⁷ they are, in fact, yellow irises.⁴⁸

Contrary to popular opinion the lily and the iris belong to separate genera (*liliaceae* and *iridaceae* respectively) and are botanically fields apart. Rossetti, so fastidious about flowers, is unlikely to have misidentified the bloom for he appears to be well-acquainted with the iris: in 1854, while writing to Ford Madox Brown, he recounts how he had recently drawn Lizzie's head 'with iris stuck in her dear hair'.⁴⁹ He may, therefore, have been referring to the lilies in his poetry rather than the flowers painted on his canvas. Conversely, Friend proffers another possible explanation: the iris, the fleur-de-luce from classical mythology, is also known as the fleur-de-lys: literally flower of the lily. Rossetti is likely to have known about this interdependence and may have been experimenting with the allusion of the golden lily flower. What is clear is that Rossetti's iconography in the Byzantine-inspired *Sancta Liliās* is definitively more sacred than profane and the iris is symbolically more appropriate. According to Friend's flower lore, the spontaneous blossoming of irises emblazoned with the *Ave Maria* on a grave of a devoted servant was a sign that earthly supplication could be heard in heaven.⁵⁰ When Rossetti painted the iris in Lizzie's hair it had been during 'one of the happiest times of his life'⁵¹ and *Sancta Liliās* may well be a reflection of an idealised memory of that time. Reflecting the enduring connection between the imparadised lover and her earthly paramour this iris-wielding damozel certainly has more in common with Rossetti's retiring Dantean heroine, Beatrice, than the sexually provocative lily-bearer, appearing in the later versions for Graham and Leyland. The reason for this may be as pragmatic as it is figurative.

Rossetti was an artist with an eye for business and demonstrated 'a lack of interest' in painting anything unprofitable.⁵² Having promised the picture to Charles Augustus Howell, when Howell failed to 'stump up' the money, Rossetti sold *Sancta Liliās* to the Cowper Temples.⁵³ The golden iris, as well as being metaphorically sympathetic to its context, perfectly complements the gilded background, avoiding the necessity to define the body and thus facilitating swifter commercial success.

But herein lies the dilemma, because although arguing that Rossetti's flowers are critical to both his aesthetic expression and to his profitability, he is not so much concerned with floral minutiae per se but rather with how they combine to evoke sensation. Jerome McGann describes this phenomenon as Rossetti showing 'the sublime value of enduring human affections ... of man's infinite capacity for sensational response'.⁵⁴ It is as if Rossetti is seeking to dissolve the limits of finality and challenge the annihilation of not only the spirit but the body, too. In doing so he suggests that endless spiritual unity does not necessitate the erosion of sexual feeling while also significantly rejecting the profane expression of sexual pleasure. He aims instead to purify the 'meanness' and 'repugnance' of the 'degradation' of sensuality.⁵⁵ For Rossetti, the sacred and the profane are intimate bedfellows: chromatically not black and white but fifty or more shades of grey.

⁴⁵ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-sancta-liliās-n02440> [accessed 13 March 2015].

⁴⁶ Fredeman, letter from D. G. Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, p. 526.

⁴⁷ <https://archive.org/details/picturesdrawing00tebbgoog> [accessed 1 March 2015].

⁴⁸ Tate <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-sancta-liliās-n02440/text-summary> [accessed 28 February 2015].

⁴⁹ Hawksley, p. 83.

⁵⁰ Friend, pp. 104-5.

⁵¹ Hawksley, p. 83.

⁵² Henry Campbell, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Three Papers read to the Rossetti Society of Birchington* (Birchington: Beresford, 1993), paper 2, p. 16.

⁵³ Fredeman, letter from D. G. Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, p. 530.

⁵⁴ McGann, p. 41.

⁵⁵ *The Germ*, Stephens, p. 63.

Any meaningful decoding of the lily has to acknowledge that Rossetti used flowers to embellish his work with attractive motifs the discerning could interpret. Ever conscious of his artistic whoredom,⁵⁶ dependent upon the 'whims and fancies' of his audience, he wrote poetry and painted pictures for financial gain when *flora symbolica* and floriography were predominant and profitable cultural trends. In communion with Nature herself, Rossetti subversively deploys lilies to manipulate two extremes - the sacred and the profane - blurring their essence and fusing them into one *sacrane* paradox. This ludic code, although decodable by digesting floral lore such as Hilderic Friend's, remains ultimately impenetrable because its fluctuating allusion is amorphous and enigmatically elusive. The lily is simultaneously representative of the Mother of God and a woman pregnant with potential; a devotional icon and a lover; a *puer aeternus* and a child no more; heavenly and yet earth-bound; dead, yet very much alive; gone but forever present. Conversely, Rossetti's lily, 'lying as if asleep', proclaims that human sexuality, like the flower, is not a meaningless, trivial adjunct but a sacred blossoming of the Divine itself, as ephemeral and fragile as it is inscrutable.

⁵⁶ 'I have often said that to be an artist is just the same thing as to be a whore, as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of individuals is concerned,' Fredeman, letter from D. G. Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 20 August 1874, p. 527.

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Oil on canvas, 110.5 x 82.5 cm (predella: 36.2 x 82.5 cm), Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Wirral

The Blessed Damozel (1873)

Black and red chalk on pale green paper, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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Black and red chalk, the private collection of Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber

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Oil on canvas, support: 48.3 x 45.7 cm, frame: 81.9 x 80.1 x 8.8 mm, Tate, London

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Oil on panel, 32.1 x 27 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Oil on canvas on panel, 72.4 x 41.9 cm, Tate, London

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