

‘That mirror gave back all her loveliness’: Female Beauty and Power in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘Lady Lilith’ and Christina Rossetti’s ‘In an Artist’s Studio’

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***Abstract:** The focus of this article will be the construction of female beauty in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s painting *Lady Lilith* (1867) and Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘*In an Artist’s Studio*’, written in 1856 but unpublished during her lifetime. Traditionally a demonic figure in Judaic lore, Dante Gabriel’s *Lilith* is represented as an embodiment of destructive power and acts as a reflection of Dante Gabriel’s psychological interior as well as the collective reactions of his male contemporaries to the emergence of the ‘New Woman’. With an acute awareness of her brother’s complex relationship with female bodily beauty on both a personal and a creative level, Christina Rossetti’s poem directly addresses this power dynamic between the beautiful female model and the male artist, with the model being used as a vehicle onto which the artist can project his own internal fantasies. Both works demonstrate an artistic process in which female characters can be seen as mirrors that reflect the desires of the male artist.*

In Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith* (Figure 1), a woman gazes at her own reflection in a small hand-mirror whilst combing her abundant mass of golden hair, her loose white dress slipping to reveal a suggestive curve of bare shoulder. This woman is Lilith, known in traditional Jewish lore as the notorious first wife of Adam and the ultimate paradigm of the *femme fatale* figure. Accordingly, Dante Gabriel’s *Lilith* is beautiful and formidable in equal measure, an embodiment of power that is both seductive and destructive. However, there is a secondary layer of power to be considered and that is the creative power of Dante Gabriel to utilise *Lilith* as a reflection of both his own internal conflicts and the collective psychological attitudes of his contemporaries towards women. The layers of power at play in this painting are thrown into sharper focus when considered

alongside Christina Rossetti's poem *In an Artist's Studio*, written in 1856 but not published until after her death. Christina would have been acutely aware of her brother's complicated relationship with female beauty in his personal life, as well as from an artistic perspective; consequently her poem is a direct interrogation of the power dynamics between male artists and their female subjects, recognising that women are often used as vehicles for the artist to project his own internal fantasies.



Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1867. Watercolour, 51.3 x 44 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

According to Talmudic legend, Lilith was formed from the same clay that was used to create Adam and therefore she considered herself his equal. She consequently rejected the role of passivity and subservience that was expected of her, departing the Garden of Eden in a rage. Having been promptly replaced by the more compliant Eve, Lilith then exists as a demonic incarnation of female subversive power, inflicting vengeance through the seduction of men and the murder of (primarily male) infants. She is not only the first woman but is also representative of unbridled female

autonomy, and so it is highly significant that she is depicted as the archetypal ‘monster woman’. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss Lilith in their work on the characterisation of women in the nineteenth-century literary imagination, proposing that male authors and artists would construct female characters as one of two extremes – angel or monster – to combat what they perceived as the innate inconstancy of women; specifically, the monster woman is an ‘embodiment of the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained place’.¹ By defiantly refusing a life of obedience, Lilith is similarly locked into the monstrous role of beautiful seductress and child-killer – in other words, if she will not behave like an ‘angel’, she must be a monster.

Dante Gabriel’s *Lady Lilith* adheres to this portrayal of Lilith as a malevolent presence, with bodily beauty becoming the main source of Lilith’s destructive power, emphasised by the hand-mirror, the boudoir-like setting and the focus on her flowing golden hair. Hair is a particularly significant aspect of Lilith’s characterisation in this painting in that the act of combing can be seen as a form of sexual invitation. Elizabeth Gitter explains that female hair was heavily fetishized during the Victorian period, with abundant or luxuriant hair often linked to sexual promiscuity and entrapment; ‘hair was a weapon, web, or trap, a glittering symbolic fusion of the sexual lust and the lust for power that she embodied’.² Such deadly connotations of hair are highlighted in the poem that Dante Gabriel produced to accompany the painting, fittingly entitled *Body’s Beauty*, in which he equates Lilith’s ‘enchanted’ hair with ‘the first gold’ and describes the way that she ‘draws men to watch the bright web she can weave, / till heart and body and life are in its hold’.³ Commodified as gold and possessing an almost supernatural quality, the attraction of Lilith’s hair and her overt display of combing it is shown here to be an integral part of her process of seduction. Dante Gabriel offers a conception of female beauty as inherently tempting and potentially malign; Lilith’s porcelain skin,

¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p.28.

² Elizabeth G. Gitter, ‘The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 99.5 (1984), 936-54 (p.943).

³ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Body’s Beauty’ in *The Pre-Raphaelites: From Rossetti to Ruskin*, ed. by Dinah Roe (London: Penguin, 2010), pp.125-126 (pp. 4-7).

the provocative looseness of her white dress and the mass of white roses in the background create an atmosphere that is paradoxically both cold and inviting.

This tension between beauty and danger is likely born from the complexity of Dante Gabriel's personal relationships with women at this time. Despite his longstanding devotion and eventual marriage to Elizabeth (Lizzie) Siddal, he had for many years been engaged in an affair with the painting's model, Fanny Cornforth, which continued intermittently until his death. This would have been a considerable source of guilt for Dante Gabriel as Lizzie was often in extremely poor health throughout their relationship and died suddenly from a laudanum overdose in 1862, a loss that haunted him for the rest of his life. Matters were also complicated by his powerful feelings for Jane Morris, the wife of his friend William Morris. Contact with Jane had been limited for some time since she had moved to Kent with William, however his intense preoccupation with her was renewed when the couple moved back to central London in 1865. As a result, *Lady Lilith* can be seen as an expression of libidinal activity, encapsulating the tension between Dante Gabriel's obsession with Jane and increasingly persistent memories of Lizzie.⁴ This psychological conflict is effectively encapsulated in the selection of flowers that surround Lilith – the flowers are beautiful, yet they possess subtly threatening qualities. The mass of white roses fills the space behind Lilith in a manner that increases the claustrophobic composition of the scene, which is already dominated by Lilith and the paraphernalia of beauty. A poisonous foxglove is visible on her dressing table, associating the process of female beautification with lethality, whilst the red poppy in the bottom corner acts a sinister symbol of sleep and drowsiness, as well as a clear reference to Lizzie's laudanum overdose. In combination, the floral imagery signifies an overwhelming sense of sexual desire but also acknowledges the latent dangers of fulfilling it, both of which are embodied by the character of Lilith and also by Fanny herself, whose presence in Dante Gabriel's life evoked desire and guilt in equal measure.

⁴ J.B. Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), p.185.

The flowers also contribute to a conflation of interior and exterior in Lilith's boudoir, as the natural world blends with the indoor furnishings to create a highly ambiguous setting that is neither inside nor outside. The large mirror on the dressing table strangely reflects a woodland scene, behaving more like a window than a reflective surface. This serves to situate Lilith within a setting that is very much dual in nature (much like Lilith herself), a space that is simultaneously public and private. This partly establishes a voyeuristic perspective for the viewer by allowing them an intimate insight into a private female space, whilst also emphasising Lilith's awareness of herself as a sexual object in this scenario. Her own gaze is fixed on admiring her own beauty in the hand-mirror, however the performative nature of the hair combing implies that she is aware of the gaze of an observer. Significantly, the object of her attention - her own reflected beauty - is tantalisingly hidden from the viewer; Dante Gabriel suggested that this was an imperative aspect of Lilith's insidiously tempting nature, as she gazes at herself in the glass 'with that self-absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle'.⁵

This fascination is tempered by a pervasive dread of the sexual power exerted by Lilith, a dread that Virginia Allen argues was a reflection of the wider anxieties of Dante Gabriel's male audience. When considered against the contextual backdrop of the Women's Emancipation Movement and the increasing controversy over family planning during this decade, Allen postulates that Lilith 'represents the New Woman, free of male control, scourge of the patriarchal Victorian family'.⁶ Her proclivity for murdering both men and babies can certainly be aligned with a rejection of the traditional familial roles that were typically expected of Victorian women. This is notable as Dante Gabriel was frequently drawn to women that did not adhere to Victorian notions of sexual propriety and often pursued relationships of a highly unconventional nature. Thus the ambiguous setting and Lilith's hand mirror both take on new interpretative meanings when considered in light of Allen's

⁵ Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Thomas Gordon Hake, 21 April 1870, in *The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Vol 2: 1861-1870*, ed. by Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198778073.book.1>>

⁶ Virginia M. Allen, "'One Strangling Golden Hair': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lady Lilith" *The Art Bulletin* 66.2 (1984), pp. 285-94 (p.286).

work; the fusion of the interior and the exterior world can signify the changing lifestyle of the New Woman in that she is no longer merely confined to designated 'female' spaces. Likewise, Lilith's firm focus on her own face can be viewed as an autoerotic act of self-discovery, in which a woman 'sees' herself truthfully and confronts her own capacity for autonomy and sexual power. Lilith – the first woman, the monster woman, the new woman – is both ancient and modern simultaneously and therefore is a highly effective visual embodiment of the internal conflicts of Dante Gabriel, as well as the collective attitudes of his generation towards female sexual power.

Undoubtedly conscious of her brother's complex artistic relationship with women, Christina Rossetti's poem *In an Artist's Studio* penetrates to the heart of the power dynamics between the female model and the male artist with piercing clarity. The poem describes the process through which female characters are created and moulded in accordance with the internal fantasies of the artist:

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel — every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more or less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.⁷

⁷ Christina Rossetti, 'In An Artist's Studio' in *The Pre-Raphaelites: From Rossetti to Ruskin*, ed. by Dinah Roe, (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 182-183.

Christina depicts an artistic process in which the female subject of a painting is a mirror that reflects the interior state of the artist, a process which is demonstrably visible in Dante Gabriel's representation of Lilith. While Lilith ponders her own reflection, she herself acts as a mirror that reflects Dante Gabriel's complicated emotions about Fanny, Lizzie and Jane, the women hidden behind the canvas.

Christina's choice to begin the poem with the word 'one' is particularly striking as it brings the individuality of the female model to the forefront – the model is a real woman, not just a character, a real woman 'hidden' behind the character that she has temporarily assumed. These characters are all highly idealised women, more in line with the archetypal 'angel' woman as opposed to the 'monster' woman characterisation ascribed to Lilith. Christina asserts that these women are entirely illusory, mere projections of the internal desires and conflicts of the artist; just as *Lady Lilith* incorporates the conflicting attitudes of fascination and anxiety surrounding powerful women, the female characters in this poem are embodiments of the idealised woman that haunts the male imagination. This constant striving to capture an unobtainable illusory ideal in canvas form is portrayed as destructive and unhealthy for both parties, with the artist feeding on the face of the model for creative sustenance. The identity of the model herself is obliterated as a result of this process; she stares back at the artist with 'true, kind eyes', yet Christina reveals that she is really 'wan with waiting' and 'sorrow dim'. Terry Spaise situates this section of the poem within the wider context of Victorian attitudes towards women: 'It is a clear example of her awareness of and dissatisfaction with how her gender was viewed by Victorian men in general, and how women were expected to repress their own emotions and more lively personalities if they wished to gain male approval'.⁸ This idea of repressing, or warping, female identity is central to Christina's critique of the type of artistic process undertaken by her brother and some of his Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries; the

⁸ Terry L. Spaise, 'Not "As She Fulfills His Dreams" but "As She Is": The Feminist Voice of Christina Rossetti', *Rocky Mountain Review (Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association)* 51.1 (1997), pp. 53-68 (p.59).

woman in her poem is not presented 'as she is, but as she fills his dreams', a real woman transposed with male conceptions of what a woman should - or indeed shouldn't - be.

If this figure of the male artist is intended to represent Dante Gabriel and his contemporaries, then this introduces an intriguing reading of the levels of scrutiny and differing types of 'gaze' at play in the poem. The concept of artistic scrutiny is particularly pertinent to Christina's own creative life due to the input she received from her brothers; they would often advise her not to deviate too far from accepted societal values in her work, particularly when her ideas opposed the feminine ideal. On one such occasion, Dante Gabriel vehemently protested against Christina's 1864 poem *The Lowest Room* on the basis that it was infected with 'falsetto masculinity'.⁹ While Christina was grateful for their guidance and often revised her work in accordance with their advice, she occasionally began to reject their suggested modifications as her own authorial confidence grew. It is notable then that the male artist in the poem is subject to the scrutiny of both Christina and the reader; she offers a distinctly negative judgement on the relationship between the artist and his model, as well as the process of creating female characters. While the model and the characters that she embodies are essentially objectified by the artist's gaze, the artist himself does not escape the critical gaze of Christina and her readers. Indeed, there is a sense in which the artist is the object of his own gaze also; by comparing the canvas to a mirror, there is an implicit suggestion that the artist is gazing at a reflection of himself, in much the same way as Lilith reflects the internal conflicts of Dante Gabriel and his generation with regards to women.

In what is perhaps the most egregious attempt to control Christina's creative image, her brother William Michael Rossetti went to great lengths to ensure that her unpublished poetry was edited to conform to an idealised narrative of her life and work. Roger Peattie explores William's involvement in the literary and biographical response to Christina's death in great detail, with such practices as 'bold conjectural emendations, retitling, and regularization of metre [...] and truncation, rearrange-

⁹ Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Faber Finds, 2012), p.113.

ment, and the invention of titles' being implemented seemingly without any misgivings.¹⁰ With William keen to excise any vestiges of the radical from her letters and poetry, these posthumous revisions at times extended to the complete suppression of certain works. The efforts of her brothers to redefine her literary legacy to such an extent can be seen as synonymous with the artist's construction of his female characters, but with one fortunate difference: unlike the nameless model of her poem, Christina possesses a voice of her own. Despite William's attempts to mould her words in adherence with the image of her that he wished to convey, Christina's unedited thoughts about the social and political status of women, and the nature of their relationships with men, contribute to an understanding of who Christina was – not as a character constructed by her brothers but 'as she is'.

Both of the works discussed reveal a significant degree of insight into the artistic treatment of female beauty and power; where *In an Artist's Studio* directly interrogates the process by which female characters are created as vessels for the psychological conflicts and fantasies of the artist, *Lady Lilith* can be seen as a product of this process. The metaphor of the mirror is central to all of the themes that have been explored throughout these works – as Christina's canvases are mirrors 'that gave back all her loveliness', the model herself is a mirror that reflects the desires of the artist. Lilith, as modelled by Fanny Cornforth, is an equally 'reflective' character in that she is a manifestation of Dante Gabriel's complex personal relationships as well as wider Victorian sensibilities towards female sexuality. Perhaps this image of a woman in front of a mirror is so ubiquitous throughout art and literature because it represents that which causes fear and fascination in equal measure – the moment in which a woman becomes cognisant of her own beauty and power. Through the hand mirror, Lilith is not just indulging in her own beauty but is also viewing her true reflection, a reflection that remains hidden from the viewer and is visible only to herself. It is this true reflection that Christina acknowledges in her poem, the real woman concealed within the false reflections of the angelic and the monstrous – she can be found 'hidden just behind those screens'.

¹⁰ Roger Peattie, 'William Michael Rossetti and the Making of Christina Rossetti's Reputation' in *Haunted Texts: Studies in Pre-Raphaelitism*, ed. by David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), pp. 71-90 (p.86).

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