

## IX

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**‘Crossing borders of representation’: Intersections of race, class and gender in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘Jenny’ and William Holman Hunt’s *The Afterglow in Egypt***

This paper considers the intersection of issues of race, class and gender in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘Jenny’ and William Holman Hunt’s *The Afterglow in Egypt*. Specifically, the intersection of class and gender, as exemplified by the prostitute Jenny, is analysed in Rossetti’s work, whilst the intersection of race and gender, focussing on the lone Eastern female figure on which the Hunt work is centred, is likewise contemplated. In closing, the intersecting representations in these two works are compared and contrasted with reference to the role and representation of the female in the Victorian period.

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The intersectional approach, as evolving from intersectionality, is a disciplinary ‘border-crossing’ concept produced through feminist theorising ... about the social relations of power.<sup>1</sup>

Race, class and gender were once deemed separate issues for members of both dominant and subordinate groups; the problem with an approach that sections issues in this manner being that, whilst perhaps allowing in-depth consideration of a certain issue, it tends to homogenise the effect of the issue in its conclusion. Mainstream feminist theory has traditionally been unable, and often unwilling, to ‘grapple with the complexity of multiple identity categories,’ instead tending to ‘parcel out race and class in order to talk about a universal woman.’<sup>2</sup> However, the last few decades of social scholarship, and feminist criticism in particular, have seen a greater appreciation for an intersectional approach, whereby an understanding of the intersection of these issues—as well the likes of nation, age, culture, and sexual orientation—is deemed integral to appreciating individuals’ positions in the social world.<sup>3</sup> Although feminist scholars have made great strides in taking an intersectional approach to feminist literary analysis and art criticism, such an approach is—particularly in Britain—by no means mainstream, with the result being that the intersection of race, class and gender remains unconsidered or barely touched upon in a number of English works. The focus of this essay will be on analysing such

<sup>1</sup> Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz, *Intersectional Approach*, (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill 2009), p. 7 <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=475159>> [Accessed on 15 February 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Berger & Guidroz, ‘Intersectional Approach’, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

intersections in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem 'Jenny' (1881) and William Holman Hunt's painting *The Afterglow in Egypt* (1863), two Pre-Raphaelite works for which previous criticism appears to be somewhat lacking in in-depth consideration of the intersection of the issues raised by these works and of the consequent reflection of feminine realities in the period.

Lazy laughing languid Jenny,  
Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea (1-2)<sup>4</sup>

At the outset Rossetti's protagonist introduces Jenny as a fallen woman, a prostitute, casting her as both subject and object of his internal monologue on 'the consequences of woman's fall from virtue.'<sup>5</sup> Yet, though 'Jenny' absolutely focuses on female sexual deviance, it is not merely a stereotypical reiteration of the fallen woman trope. Jenny—blue-eyed, golden haired, and undressed in 'silk ungirdled and unlac'd' (48)—is typically fetishized, lusted after, and used for sexual gratification, but she is simultaneously judged, berated, and ridiculed for her sexual deviance.<sup>6</sup> She suffers the 'hatefulness of man | Who spares not to end what he began' (83-84). By recognising this double standard, the poem concerns itself with the 'personal and moral consequences of sexual sin'<sup>7</sup> for men as well as women and illustrates the 'widespread and growing interest at this time in the plight of the fallen woman.'<sup>8</sup> I deem an intersectional approach to the poem's treatment of the latter, specifically the plight of the prostitute, to be particularly relevant.

Jenny is the quintessential Victorian prostitute—embodying all that that entails. She is more than a sexually deviant fallen woman; she is a working class girl, albeit on the fringes of that class. Judith Walkowitz asserts that prostitutes in nineteenth-century Britain were in fact not 'rootless social outcasts but poor working women trying to survive' and that 'there is little to distinguish these women from the large body of poor women who had to eke out a precarious living in the urban job market.'<sup>9</sup> Regardless of whether Rossetti meant for the poem to exemplify gender and class discrimination, by virtue of Jenny being a prostitute in Victorian England, she is contextually subject to the realities of women of her profession. A close reading of the poem reveals that, both overtly and implicitly, Rossetti does in fact touch on the specific plight of the working class prostitute, thus—whether advertently or inadvertently—raising the intersecting issues of gender and class discrimination.

<sup>4</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Jenny' in *Poems*, (Ellis & White: London 1881).

<sup>5</sup> D.M.R. Bentley, "'Ah, Poor Jenny's Case": Rossetti and the Fallen Woman/Flower', in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Winter 1980/81), University of Toronto Press, p.178 <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:5184/article/513731/pdf>> [Accessed: 20 February 2017].

<sup>6</sup> 'Where envy's voice at virtue's pitch | Mocks you because your gown is rich; And from the pale girl's dumb rebuke' (71-73); 'And from the wise unchildish elf, To schoolmate lesser than himself Pointing you out, what thing you are:- Yes, from the daily jeer and jar' (77-80) – Rossetti, 'Jenny'.

<sup>7</sup> Bentley, 'Rossetti and the Fallen Woman/Flower', p.178.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.181.

<sup>9</sup> Judith R Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian society: women, class, and the state*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1980), pp.9, 15 <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00983.0001.001>> [Accessed: 24 February 2017].

Scholarship on 'Jenny' is curiously lacking in explicit focus on the intersection of gender and class discrimination as exemplified by the prostitute, but in my reading of the poem a strong class contrast is drawn between Jenny and the protagonist in particular.<sup>10</sup> The protagonist is markedly middle class by his intellectualism and affluence—he is a scholar, a reader (22-23) and he lays 'among [her] golden hair | These golden coins' (40, 42). Jenny's lack of intellectual endeavour, her lack of books, could be read as purely sexist commentary on her as a woman—'a natural phenomenon lacking consciousness'<sup>11</sup>—and if one considers the protagonist's comments on his cousin Nell who, while more respectable and 'the girl [he is] proudest of' (191), is nonetheless unintellectual, frivolous, and 'mere a woman in her ways' (187), such an interpretation may seem just. However, an exclusively feminist reading of 'Jenny' is reductive. In the section in which the protagonist ruminates on what Jenny may dream about, 'rich wares' and to be '[a]pparelled beyond parallel' (357-365), he is at last able to see Jenny 'as she really is—a prostitute with the dreams of a prostitute.'<sup>12</sup> Jenny epitomises the Victorian stereotype of the working class: she does not dream of a higher, spiritual or intellectual, pursuit. She is single-mindedly preoccupied with money, 'fond of a guinea' (2), with a purse as the 'lodestar of [her] reverie' (20-21). And she, or some aspect of her, is twice referred to as 'lazy' (1, 97).<sup>13</sup> She is not merely a sexual deviant in the form of a prostitute—she is a poor, greedy, uneducated, unaspiring, degraded woman.

Walkowitz argues that, as exemplified by the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, the prostitute was 'an object of class guilt as well as fear, a powerful symbol of sexual and economic exploitation under industrial capitalism' and that the acts reflect '[a] view of the social underclass as degraded and powerless, yet potentially threatening and disloyal.'<sup>14</sup> With her 'wealth of loosened hair' (47), 'lifted silken skirt' (145), and 'shameful knowledge' (265), Jenny is undoubtedly an object of lust and a symbol of sexual deviance. However, as already touched on, the protagonist elicits sympathy for '[p]oor shameful Jenny' (18), 'so fall'n' (207) by thinking of how she has been exploited by man 'who, having used her at his will, | Thrusts [her] aside' (87-87). He goes further, passionately lamenting in general terms man's fall from grace through this degradation, 'What has man done here? How atone, | Great God, for this which man has done?' (241-242), and thereby touching on the systematic exploitation that Walkowitz refers to.

<sup>10</sup> This class contrast between prostitute and male client may not entirely reflect the reality of prostitution in the Victorian period. Whilst, as a 'Haymarket whore', as opposed to a prostitute on the cheaper East End, Jenny would have serviced middle class clients, 'a substantial majority of prostitutes catered to a working-class clientele.' - Walkowitz, 'Prostitution and Victorian society', p.23.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel A. Harris, 'D.G. Rossetti's 'Jenny': Sex, Money, and the Interior Monologue', in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Summer 1984), West Virginia University Press, p.203 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002987>> [Accessed: 18 February 2017].

<sup>12</sup> Bentley, 'Rossetti and the Fallen Woman/Flower', p.192.

<sup>13</sup> The term 'lazy' may perhaps be interpreted to be 'lazing' as opposed to 'unwilling to work', but through the image of Jenny created in the poem as a whole, and the fact that she ultimately does not earn the coins the protagonist bestows upon her, the latter may rather be connoted.

<sup>14</sup> Walkowitz, 'Prostitution and Victorian society', p.4.

Rossetti's protagonist's focus on the role of industrial capitalism in all this agrees with the reality of the day. In the stanza about the sickening death of the lilies of the field (100-110), symbolising the loss of purity for the 'lily' Jenny, the transformation from 'field' to 'garden'<sup>15</sup> potentially creates a 'paradigm for the urbanisation which was one of the major reasons for the rise of prostitution in industrial England.'<sup>16</sup> The protagonist also literally points to the effect, or at least the outcome, of migrating to London on the innocent, rural youth Jenny, who would 'wonder' (132) about the city as a child, but, as a young prostitute, 'know[s] the city now (135).' As a victim of the exploitative consequence of industrialisation, Jenny, a working class prostitute, signifies the loss of an ideal— not only a feminine ideal, but a pastoral ideal of the rural working class as well.

The comparison the protagonist makes between Jenny and his cousin Nell is also significant in showing class division. Nell is 'so pure' (207), compared to Jenny who is 'so fall'n' (207); as a woman, Nell elicits pride, whereas Jenny elicits shame. This contrast between the 'ideal' and the 'debased' is not merely one of rural versus industrialised though—that is, it is not necessarily a suggestion that, had Jenny chosen differently and not been drawn to the city, she might have ended up a Nell instead—, it is a contrast of class and an indication of 'the central role of money and class in shaping individual histories.'<sup>17</sup> Nell, presumably middle class or at least able to marry into the middle class to obtain the family of her 'fair tree' (211), 'may use marriage to save herself from the economic necessities that compel Jenny to sell herself.'<sup>18</sup>

A final aspect of the class discrimination experienced by Jenny that may be considered pertains to Walkowitz' statement on the view of the social underclass as 'degraded and powerless,' yet potentially 'threatening and disloyal.' Bryan Rivers performs an interesting study on the possible origins of Rossetti's specific choice of name for his prostitute, identifying 'jenny' or 'ginny' to be contemporary slang used by London thieves for a housebreaking tool, and thus suggesting that Rossetti is symbolically associating Jenny with her threatening male equivalent, the common Victorian thief.<sup>19</sup> Whilst such an interpretation may be somewhat farfetched, and prostitution in the Victorian era tended to be autonomous and largely organised by the women themselves without significant male influence, whether thieves or pimps, a number of East End prostitutes were forced to cohabit with thieves and were part of a professional criminal underworld, and even when this was not the case, a general view of prostitutes as being in cahoots with thieves pervaded.<sup>20</sup> Rossetti does not explicitly paint Jenny with this brush, but he would have been aware of this view of prostitutes when writing her, and—by the protagonist's assertion that Jenny does not care for him, or anyone else, rather merely for a 'purse'—at the very least indeed presents her as being 'disloyal.'

<sup>15</sup> 'lilies of the field' (100) to 'its new lord the garden hath' (106) – Reference to the 'new lord' is furthermore significant here because it again points to the culpability of man.

<sup>16</sup> Bentley, 'Rossetti and the Fallen Woman/Flower', p.187.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, 'D.G. Rossetti's 'Jenny': Sex, Money, and the Interior Monologue', p.210.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Bryan Rivers, 'Rossetti's 'Jenny'', in *Explicator*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Winter 2005), Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, p.82.

<sup>20</sup> Walkowitz, 'Prostitution and Victorian society', p.25.

A consideration of the intersection between class and gender discrimination in 'Jenny' would of course necessitate more thorough reflection on the gender aspects of the text than I have provided thus far. As it is beyond the scope of this discussion to give further consideration to Jenny as fallen woman, ruined flower, and sexually deviant female in general, and my thesis as stated at the outset of this paper holds that such a general, homogenising feminist focus tends to be problematic and reductive, I would like to conclude my consideration of intersectionality in the poem by very briefly focussing specifically on gender discrimination and the prostitute. Insofar as the prostitute as a specific type of sexually deviant female is concerned, when Rossetti's protagonist identifies Jenny as a prostitute, 'he designates her sexuality a commodity having a specific value.'<sup>21</sup> Prostitution literally objectifies and commodifies the female body, and with the man being the buyer and the woman being the seller, this creates a certain sense of male entitlement and ownership of the female. This in turn generates an imbalance of sexual power and, in a societal context, further exploits a section of the already subjugated working class—poor women. In 'Jenny', the imbalance of sexual power between the protagonist and the prostitute is exemplified by Jenny being asleep and silent for the entirety of the poem. Jenny does not represent herself, she is solely what the protagonist perceives of her; she cannot respond to his internal monologue on her thoughts, dreams, motivations, and attributes nor to his moral judgment of her. As a prostitute, she does not have a valid social existence, and thus does not need to be represented poetically, save as a 'figure (trope, icon) in the man's imagination.'<sup>22</sup> The protagonist goes so far as to proclaim that, due to the commodification of her sexuality and her sexual deviance, she is no longer a woman, but rather merely an object of male lust: 'looking long at you, | The woman almost fades from view. | A cipher of man's changeless sum | Of lust, past, present, and to come, | Is left' (276-280).

The negation of the personhood of the prostitute through male lust is specifically tied to her commodification, though such objectification is not couched solely in her sexuality being 'for sale', nor is it, obviously, exclusively the plight of the prostitute. Another archetypal example of the intersectional representation of the female form and the 'female as object' can be seen in Hunt's *The Afterglow in Egypt* (Figure 1).<sup>23</sup> In his criticism of the painting, Ernest Chesneau summarises the image the title may conjure in the viewer's mind before the painting is viewed:

*The Afterglow in Egypt!* What would one naturally expect from such a title? An extensive eastern landscape, subsiding into shadowy twilight, whilst overhead the pale sky is lighted by the last gleams of the setting sun, which has just sunk below the horizon.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Harris, 'D.G. Rossetti's 'Jenny': Sex, Money, and the Interior Monologue', p.205.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.200.

<sup>23</sup> The reproduction included in this paper is a second version of *The Afterglow in Egypt*.

<sup>24</sup> Ernest Chesneau, *English Painting*, (Parkstone Press International: New York, NY 2013), p.180 <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=1337402>> [Accessed on 24 February 2017].



Figure 1 - William Holman Hunt, *The Afterglow in Egypt* (1863), Oil on Canvas, 82 x 37 cm.  
Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford.

Instead, the viewer is confronted by the arresting gaze and figure of an Eastern female, with the Egyptian landscape minimally visible in the background. The work is overtly 'Orientalist' in nature. Briefly, based on Edward Said's work,<sup>25</sup> the particular aspect of Orientalism I find prevalent in 'Afterglow' is the feminisation of the East as 'other' and conquerable, much as the man conquers the prostitute, by the West. The choice of the female subject is highly relevant in this respect. In general, the image speaks of prosperity; the female figure is opulently dressed, the land seems fertile, the calf on the foreground is well fed, a fantasy of colonial plenty is created.<sup>26</sup> However, the fact that the gatekeeper of this land, the only object barring the Western male viewer from entering the landscape, is a sexualised Eastern female, represents inferiority and begs conquest—an exemplification of imperialist ideology. Hunt's

<sup>25</sup> Edward Said, 'Introduction', in *Orientalism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London 1978), pp.1-28.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, CA 2012), p.132.

presentation of the female figure in this work is strong yet sensuous and exotic and the work is unequivocally charged with sexual desire. I fail to appreciate Chesneau's interpretation of the female figure's complexion as 'dull', her face as 'severe [and] pale' and her eyes as 'dull, black ... frigid and lustreless as a lifeless coal.'<sup>27</sup> Rather, her complexion is rich, exotic, her skin glowing; her eyes are large, her face open and sensuous, her lips rosy; and her figure, draped in a loose-fitting gown with a section of her chest visible, is voluptuous. In response to criticism such as Chesneau's that the title and the female figure depicted represent 'Egypt, deposed from the splendour of her ancient civilisation,'<sup>28</sup> Hunt in fact insisted that the title came from his choice of the hour, which best captured the glow of his Eastern female subject.<sup>29</sup> If she, an object of Western male desire, represents the afterglow in Egypt, the rhetoric of colonial possession and domination is implicit. Furthermore, a Bedouin woman (unlike the Islamic Arabs, unveiled and willing to model),<sup>30</sup> serving as a symbol for the Eastern woman and the East in general, is somewhat suggestive. The 'unveiling of the Eastern woman' may specifically be seen an allegory for the unveiling of, and intrusion into, the East by the West.<sup>31</sup>

The intersection of race and gender in the symbolism of this female figure is clear and simple—as a native of the East, her race represents the East, whilst as a woman, her sexuality represents the possibility for ownership and conquest of the East. Insofar as the reality for a woman such as this in the period is concerned, in her comprehensive work on the use of female figures in monuments and the allegory of the female form, Marina Warner asserts that the presence of female symbolism does not guarantee the uplifting of women as a group or as individuals.<sup>32</sup> In a misreading of Warner, Jan Marsh, referring specifically to *The Afterglow in Egypt*, further argues that 'the use of female allegory cannot be analysed as bearing any rational relation to the actual position of women in society at a specific period.'<sup>33</sup> The problem with such a definitive assertion—that there is no relation whatsoever between the symbolic or allegorical representation of the female in a literary text or work of art and the position of women in a certain society at a specific period—is that it ignores the societal underpinnings of the dominant ideologies that may inform such symbolic or allegorical representations. In particular, such a view disregards the race and gender issues that inform Western representation of the 'Oriental Female'<sup>34</sup> and ultimately creates the colonising overtones in a work such as 'Afterglow.' Warner's point is that

<sup>27</sup> Chesneau, 'English Painting', pp.180, 182.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite women: images of femininity in pre-Raphaelite art*, (Phoenix Illustrated – Orion Publishing Group: London 1987), p.125.

<sup>30</sup> Barringer, 'Reading the Pre-Raphaelites', p.132.

<sup>31</sup> Mohja Kahf argues that 'the harem and its symbolic extension, the veil, constitute the supreme silencing mechanism' and that, 'within Orientalist representations, the veil conjures both eroticism and oppression' -eliciting the desire to unveil, gaze upon and penetrate, whilst simultaneously being purported as a symbol of oppression – *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (University of Texas Press: Austin, TX 1999), pp.4-5, 162.

<sup>32</sup> Marina Warner, *Monuments & Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London 1979), p.xx.

<sup>33</sup> Marsh, 'Pre-Raphaelite women', p.123.

<sup>34</sup> For example, the unveiling and fetishisation of Eastern women by the West, or the objectification of women in the West that informs Western male representation of the female in general.

‘a symbolised female presence both gives and takes value and meaning in relation to actual women,’<sup>35</sup> but that an approach to the interpretation of such symbolism should not be homogenous and reductive.

In conclusion, a final comparison and contrast can be drawn between Rossetti’s ‘Jenny’ and Hunt’s *The Afterglow in Egypt*. Both works present intersecting identities and ideologies pertaining to race, class and gender through the depiction of the female form. However, while Rossetti attempts to engage with the social relations of power he addresses—albeit, perhaps due to not wanting to be seen as a reformer with no plan, not entirely without resorting to apathy about certain ideological issues—Hunt merely upholds the dominant ideology in his work. The primary preoccupation of this paper has been to show the importance and value of taking an intersectional approach in the analysis of representations of the female in the Victorian period.<sup>36</sup> Holistic analysis of the intersections inherent to such representations will not only continue to improve our understanding of the actual view and position of women in society at a specific period, but may also improve our scholarship on the realities of the intersecting groups that these women formed part of.

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<sup>35</sup> Warner, ‘Monuments & Maidens’, p.xx.

<sup>36</sup> I in no way mean to put this paper forth as an exhaustive or conclusive analysis of the intersections in the works discussed; due to the constraints of the paper, I have not at all touched on other intersectional aspects of representation that may be present in these works, particularly such as nation, culture and class in the Hunt work.

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