

MIRRORS OF THE SOUL: REFLECTIONS OF SEXUAL IDENTITY IN DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S 'HAND AND SOUL' AND *WOMAN COMBING HER HAIR*

Travis Piper

Abstract: As an artist and man Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) was mesmerized by women, focusing consistently on female images and identity throughout his career. The unique visages of his muses, models, and lovers can be found throughout his painting and poetry. The following article will consider two distinct pieces from Rossetti's oeuvre which exemplify his foundational interest in sexual identity and desire. His 1849 short story 'Hand and Soul' shall be shown to have informed the composition of his 1864 watercolor *Woman combing her hair* as an act of narcissism.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's influence in both painting and poetry has been immense. His artistic ability to evoke aspects of both sensuality and sexuality among his female subjects remains an accomplishment both complex and seminal in the eyes of critics. John Holmes has written of the highly original ways that Rossetti established 'the framework within which sexual identities have been defined ever since',¹ while according to J. B. Bullen, the composition of his later work created a 'developmental syntax for psycho-sexuality'.² The genesis of Rossetti's fixation on sexuality and identity came early in his career when he became interested in gothic traditions, especially paranormal events, *doppelgängers*, and mirroring.³ In fact, many of his most notable works, from the late 1840s onward, evoke narcissism. As such, both 'Hand and Soul' and *Woman combing her hair* exemplify male constructions of female identity.

The story of Narcissus is familiar to many. In Ovid's retelling, upon realizing the true identity of his lover's image in the water, Narcissus exclaims: "Tis I in thee — I love myself — the flame arises in my breast and burns my heart — what shall I do? Shall I at once implore? Or should I linger till my love is sought? [...] Oh, I am tortured by a strange desire unknown to me before".⁴ Unable to reconcile auto-eroticism with the need for physical partnership, Narcissus pines away, eventually suffering death and transformation into the contorted flower that today bears his name. Drawing from this myth, Martin Danahay has written that 'masculinity in the Victorian period was characteristically represented by a swerve into the feminine, the male viewer projecting repressed aspects of his own identity onto the woman'.⁵ Although Rossetti did paint many pictures of men, most notably King Arthur and Dante Alighieri, they are always portrayed in relation to women and femininity, either as men surrounding women or as masculinity cast

¹ As quoted by J. B. Bullen in *Rossetti: Painter & Poet*, (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2011), p. 258. Original source: John Holmes, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Late Victorian Sonnet Sequence: Sexuality, Belief and the Self* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 9.

² Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter & Poet*, p. 258.

³ See some of Rossetti's many visual interpretations of Edgar Allan Poe's work, especially 'The Raven' and 'Ulalume'. His most notable piece involving *doppelgängers* is his 1864 watercolor, *How They Met Themselves*. This painting clearly expresses Rossetti's interest not only in doubling but also in displaced identities.

⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Brookes More, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidMetamorphoses3.html> [accessed 15 November 2013], Book 3, 435.

⁵ Martin A. Danahay, 'Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation', *Victorian Poetry*, 32.1 (Spring, 1994), p. 39.

upon women as a form of narcissism. The female subjects in some of Rossetti's most striking paintings, such as *Fazio's Mistress*, *Fair Rosamund*, *The Blue Bower*, and *Boca Baciata*, exemplify the latter, as they all possess overtly masculine features. Interestingly, all of the aforementioned paintings were modeled by Fanny Cornforth, Rossetti's long-time muse and lover. Cornforth's muscular neck, powerful shoulders, and protruding jaw are featured in many of Rossetti's most intimate, erotic portrayals.

Rossetti's representations of sexuality are made yet more intricate by his frequent use of mirrors. J. B. Bullen has suggested that the mirror, both literal and figurative, is routinely used for the purpose of revealing or constructing identity: 'the glass can reflect back the image of the self, or it can show the other in the self.'⁶ Rossetti's paintings and poems that include mirrors can be shown to reflect the creator's complex search for desire and identity in the form of narcissistic love. As Danahay writes, 'women's supposed narcissism held a powerful attraction for Victorian men who [...] could represent them in displaced form through images of women looking into



Figure 1: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Fair Rosamund* (1861)⁷

mirrors'.⁸ His three *toilette* pictures portraying Cornforth, *Fazio's Mistress*, *Lady Lilith*, and *Woman combing her hair*, all illustrate this complex interplay between sexual identity and mirrors.⁹ Within

⁶ J. B. Bullen, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Mirror of Masculine Desire', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 21.3 (1999), p. 331.

⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Fair Rosamund* (1861) < <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/img/s128.nmw.jpg> > [accessed 29 November 2013]

⁸ Danahay, 'Mirrors of Masculine Desire', p. 40.

⁹ *Lady Lilith* was originally modeled by Cornforth, but her body was subsequently superimposed with Alexa Wilding's face probably at the request of the painting's owner, Frederick Leyland. The request for a visage more

these pieces we find an implicit longing, or, as Wendy Lesser has written, a ‘desire to *be* the other as well as to view her, and at the same time an acknowledgment of irrevocable separation’ [her italics].¹⁰ According to Lesser, all post-Freudian work on narcissism and mirroring can be attributed to this notion of the two selves: ‘the one experiencing and the other watching, the one inside and the other somehow more external’.¹¹

There may be no greater nineteenth-century expression of this motif than in Rossetti’s ‘Hand and Soul’, an artist’s manifesto outlining the philosophical approach to art and aesthetics to which Rossetti himself prescribed.¹² In it, Chiaro, a fictional Renaissance painter, is discouraged by his inability to find truly inspirational art. Despite his success and fame, he is concerned that all of his work has been done for the wrong reasons; what he had taken for reverence had really been ‘no more than the worship of beauty’. Following his realization, Chiaro ‘sets a watch upon his soul’ and reluctantly commits thereafter to create art only concerned with moral greatness.¹³ It is at this time that he has a vision in which a beautiful woman appears before him and speaks, not ‘from her mouth or in his ears; but distinctly between them. “I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee. See me, and know me as I am [...] Seek thine own conscience (not thy mind’s conscience, but thine heart’s), and all shall approve and suffice.”’¹⁴ As he listens he kneels to the floor in a state of spiritual awe, realizing the profundity of his experience. Chiaro, it seems, has undergone a spiritual transformation in which faith has been converted to love. Her final request to him, leaving his side, is to ‘paint me thus, as I am, to know me [...] so shall thy soul stand before thee always, and perplex thee no more.’ Chiaro’s soul, as David Riede suggests, is ‘in some mysterious way both within and without’¹⁵, an outward manifestation of interiority transposed onto the female form. Chiaro’s experience echoes the spiritual manifestation of the speaker’s soul in E. A. Poe’s ‘To -- -- --. Ulalume: A Ballad’, one of the gothic texts which Rossetti illustrated in 1848. Here Rossetti aligns the man’s soul with his beloved Psyche kneeling at his feet, while their doubles look out from behind them.

Subsequently, Chiaro obtains an entirely new approach to his work, a true, inspirational method originating from his very soul. The nineteenth-century narrator of ‘Hand and Soul’ explains that while in Florence in 1847 he stumbled upon the very same painting that Chiaro made of his soul. Regarding it, he writes, ‘the most absorbing wonder of it was its literality [...] it was not a thing to be seen of men.’ The suggestion that transformative art could come not from religious iconography but from personal experience — beauty rather than faith — is made clear in this statement. While the narrator’s sense of awe upon viewing the picture further develops the mysterious nature of the image’s duality, for the depiction of another’s inner being in fleshly form remains an experience both profound and uncanny. For issue no. 4 of *The Germ*, Rossetti prepared an illustration for the story which featured Chiaro at his easel with a young woman,

‘dangerous’ and ‘fearful’ suggests an important personal impetus for Rossetti to make the change, as Cornforth’s face embodied his narcissistic projections. See J.B. Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter & Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2011), p. 185.

¹⁰ Wendy Lesser, *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women through Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 10.

¹¹ Lesser, *His Other Half*, p. 14.

¹² Jan Marsh describes the story as ‘the clearest expression of ‘the principles in Art of the PRB [Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood]’’. See Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 69.

¹³ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Hand and Soul’, *The Germ*, 1.1 (Aylott and Jones, 1850).

<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/ap4.g415.1.1.rad.html> [accessed 15 November 2013], p. 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁵ David G. Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 36.

both of their faces reflected in a mirror as they collaboratively wield the brush in creation of her likeness.¹⁶

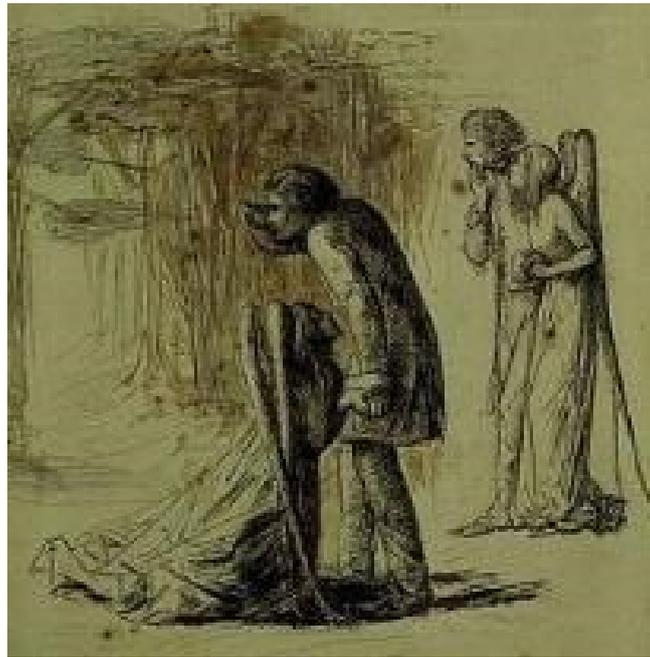


Figure 2: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ulalume* (1847)¹⁷

Todd Williams has made some interesting connections between Rossetti's use of mirrors and Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, another prominent post-Freudian account of the formation of identity. Lacan describes a period when an infant, upon first seeing his reflection, assumes an image of the other (his reflection) as the one true self but one that is ultimately unrealizable.¹⁸ For both Freud and Lacan, 'the sense of being a separate worthy person in the world [...] is thus intimately connected with a sense of "being watched", of having one's life supervised by a self-within-the-self.'¹⁹ Rossetti's portraits of women may be shown to possess both sexual ambiguity and the problematized displacement of identity indicated in Lacan's theory: the divided self, made manifest between artist and art. As an outward manifestation of Chiaro's soul, the woman's identity remains imbedded in his own, both a mechanism of his imagination and a component of his physiology. The artist's interpretation of femininity remains crucial to her identity; the union of his hand and soul, as it were, suggests an aesthetic purity and wholeness harkening back to Eve's constituent union with Adam.²⁰ In J. Hillis Miller's article on Rossetti's double work of art, he suggests: "God in speculation looks at himself in the mirror of the world, having engendered his material counterpart, the creation, by way of his mirror image, the Son [...] Man, then, in imitation of God, as God's mimic or mime, looks in the mirror and sees a

¹⁶ As explained by Jan Marsh, the illustration was destroyed by Rossetti prior to publication. See Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 72.

¹⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ulalume* (c. 1848) <<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ulalume-Rosetti.jpg>> [accessed 5 December 2013]

¹⁸ Todd Williams, 'Reading Rossetti's THE MIRROR through Lacan's Mirror Stage (Kutztown University: Heldref Publications, 2008)

¹⁹ Lesser, *His Other Half*, p. 14.

²⁰ This suggestion is based on Genesis 2:22-23 wherein God creates Eve, the first woman, from one of Adam's ribs. Following this Adam states, 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' See the King James Version, Genesis 2:23.

sister-image there that does not fit him.”²¹ Despite Hillis Miller’s notion of the incomplete female, it is in this way that Chiaro justifies the legitimacy of his art. If ‘Hand and Soul’ is to be read as a manifesto of Rossetti’s career, it lends great value to the interpretation of his later female portraits, their implicit masculinity a reflection of Rossetti’s artistic identity.

Of the three women who dominated Rossetti’s artistic life: his wife, Elizabeth Siddal; Fanny Cornforth; and Jane Morris, it is Cornforth’s influence that is of most interest to this study, for her unusually masculine appearance is central to many of Rossetti’s most erotic pictures and most clearly illustrates Rossetti’s narcissistic projections. Upon their first meeting Rossetti described her as possessing an ‘interesting face and jolly hair and engaging disposition’.²² However, as compared to the thin, striking features of his other models, especially Siddal, Cornforth was a very different sort of model. According to Rossetti’s biographer Jan Marsh, ‘of all those who had loved Gabriel, in his times of most need Fanny proved the most faithful, if not the wisest.’²³ There is no doubt of the esteem in which Rossetti held Cornforth.



Figure 3: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Elizabeth Siddal, The Return of Tibullus to Delia* (c. 1855)²⁴

Their long-standing, affectionate relationship may help us understand *Woman combing her hair* as a narcissistic expression of art, in which Rossetti’s artistic depictions of Cornforth reveal his desire for her in the form of transposed self-love. Although Rossetti was certainly not alone in his interest of the woman’s *toilette* scene — there are numerous nineteenth-century paintings of the same title and many similar Renaissance compositions — the perspective of this picture is quite unique.²⁵ In this picture the anonymous woman, modeled by Cornforth, stares deeply into her

²¹ J. Hillis Miller, ‘The Mirror’s Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Double Work of Art’, *Victorian Poetry*, 29.4 (Winter, 1991), p. 344.

²² Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 202.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

²⁴ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Elizabeth Siddal, The Return of Tibullus to Delia* (c. 1855)

<<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s62d.rap.html>> [accessed 29 November 2013]

²⁵ For other prominent nineteenth-century examples of the woman’s *toilette* scene see French Impressionists Pierre-Auguste Renoir and especially Edgar Degas, whose preoccupation with the scene resulted in dozens of drawings and paintings, mostly nudes, bearing similar titles.

mirror, which is also the viewer. We do not see her as she herself does. We, as mirrors all do, consume her true identity, while projecting back to her the inverted image of her reflection: our own creation of identity. In this way the masculine construction of femininity remains at the center of the picture, affording Rossetti a ‘vehicle of psychological and artistic self-expression’. As in his other toilette scenes, Rossetti presents an image in which the viewer is ‘irrevocably implicated in the act of contemplating beauty’.²⁶ Of the many signifiers of intimacy found in both *Woman combing her hair* and ‘Hand and Soul’, the women’s hair and eyes remain the most significant. In this painting Cornforth’s pensive stare evokes a distinct closeness reminiscent of that between Chiaro and his soul, where he ‘felt her to be as much with him as his breath’ and the ‘first thoughts he had ever known were given him as at first from her eyes’.²⁷ Cornforth’s abundant, unpinned red locks indicate an erotic, highly personal scene, one which, from a nineteenth-century perspective, feels voyeuristic. While Chiaro at one point is enshrouded in the great ‘golden veil’ of his soul’s hair ‘through which he beheld his dreams’ and later is described weeping into her hair which covered his face.²⁸ Since the description of his soul’s wild hair and



Figure 4: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Woman combing her hair* (1864) watercolor²⁹

‘austere gaze’ comes from the artist’s unconscious desires, then, because of the unique positioning of the mirror, we may also see *Woman combing her hair* as a narcissistic manifestation

²⁶ Julian Treuherz, Elizabeth Prettejohn, and Edwin Becker, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2003), p. 76.

²⁷ Rossetti, ‘Hand and Soul’, p. 29.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Woman Combing Her Hair* (1864), watercolor, <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s174.rap.html>> [accessed 31 December 2013]

of beauty. In both cases Rossetti's depictions of the most intimate forms of beauty stem from masculine projections.

Titian's *Woman with a Mirror* (c.1513–15) is a painting which 'echoes through all of Rossetti's toilette scenes' and thus must be discussed for its influence upon Rossetti's *Woman combing her hair*.³⁰ In terms of composition there is certain congruity in the placement of the oval mirror above both models' left shoulders. However, the most significant departure in composition is found in their gazes. In the Titian, the woman looks on to a second mirror above her right arm, ostensibly reflecting the back of her head. In this way her gaze neglects the viewer; we are meant to look on her classical beauty directly. While in Rossetti's composition, we see Cornforth's visage as a reflection of our own design. This argument may be further strengthened by the conflicting masculinity found in Rossetti's picture. Titian's model, a woman heretofore unidentified, is marginally robust, but possesses a classically beautiful face. While juxtaposed, Rossetti's depiction of Cornforth's face, although certainly erotic, appears mannish in its muscularity and prominence of features. In conjunction with the mirror, the result of these differences wholly distorts the construction of sexual identity in Rossetti's painting. By aligning the mirror with the viewers' perspective, Rossetti has altered the model's identity, leaving viewers responsible for defining feminine beauty. Although it is certainly beyond the scope of this study to assess Rossetti's sexual desires, it is plausible to suggest that the effects and distortions of mirrors may express his own inner-desires.



Figure 5: Titian, *Woman with a Mirror* (c. 1515)³¹

Mark Pendergrast has aptly stated that 'mirrors are meaningless until someone looks into them [...] a history of the mirror is really the history of looking, and what we perceive in these

³⁰ Treuherz, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 188.

³¹ Titian, *Woman with a mirror* (c. 1513-15)

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tiziano,_donna_allo_specchio,_1515_ca._01.JPG> [accessed 3 January 2014]

magical surfaces can tell us a great deal about ourselves.³² We know that Rossetti was throughout his life terribly shy of exhibiting his work.³³ His reluctance to make public his unique, intimate portrayals of beauty may suggest his own anxieties about beauty and sexuality, while the transposition of masculinity onto his female subjects exposes a greater insight into the complexities of his own largely obscured identity and sexuality. Insofar as mirrored reflections afford a unique perspective of our identity and narcissistic desires, we may see 'Hand and Soul' and *Woman combing her hair* together as a window into the complicated sexuality and aesthetic vision of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

³² Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror: a History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic Books, 2004, p. ix.

³³ Marsh notes the prevalence of these concerns throughout Rossetti's life. As early as 1859 he was essentially through with displaying his work in public galleries, considering them 'all a mistake, to which he would not again succumb'. See Marsh, *Rossetti*, p. 101.

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