Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Complexities of Gender

Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołdys

Abstract This paper proposes to explore the mode in which Dante Gabriel Rossetti's fatal woman figure subverts traditional Victorian gender categories. The analysis is based on three poems, i.e. "Soul's Beauty", "Body's Beauty" and "Astarte Syriaca". Additionally, the paintings "Sybilla Palmifera" and "Lady Lilith", the visual equivalents of "Soul's Beauty" and "Body's Beauty", as well as the picture accompanying "Astarte Syriaca" will also be discussed. Within the 19th century theories of normative masculinity and femininity certain stable features were attached to the conceptions of male and female roles. As a result, 'separate spheres' debate became a standard notion for a discussion of gender issues in the 19th century texts. Thus, femininity was conceived of as emotionality, home, withdrawal from scenes of public life and lack of self-interest, in contrast to public activity, desire for power, and emotional reserve associated with manliness. Rossetti's treatment of these categories calls for a special awareness, as he seems to upset this traditional perception, figuring his *femme fatale* character in possession of features associated with manliness rather than femininity, and yet making her an object of male desire. In this way, his fatal woman is both seen as a male fantasy and a threatening agent. What follows is an equally subversive presentation of men who, instead of maintaining manly reserve and controlling their sexual drives, 'fall into' desire, an act which unequivocally questions their manliness.

M. Łuczyńska-Hołdys (✉)
Warsaw University, Warsaw, Poland
e-mail: m.holdys@uw.edu.pl

J. Fabiszak et al. (eds.), *Crossroads in Literature and Culture,* Second Language Learning and Teaching, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-642-21994-8_8,

© Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg 2013

1 Introduction: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and 19th Century Conceptions of Gender

This paper proposes to explore the mode in which Dante Gabriel Rossetti's fatal woman figure subverts traditional Victorian gender categories. Within the 19th century theories of normative masculinity and femininity certain stable features were attached to the conceptions of male and female roles. As a result, 'separate spheres' debate became a standard notion for a discussion of gender issues in 19th century texts. Thus, femininity was cast in such terms as emotionality, homely existence, withdrawal from scenes of public life and lack of self-interest and self-gratification, in contrast to public activity, desire for power, and emotional reserve associated with manliness.

Anderson (1993, p. 38) in her book *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces* describes the link between the issue of self-control and agency, understood as active shaping of one's character and life and the issues of gender. Through her analysis of the writings of John Stuart Mill, particularly his seminal *On the Subjection of Women*, she shows that femininity in the Victorian period was seen as divorced from a resilient agency, and rather cast into terms of greater susceptibility, malleability and artificiality. Hence, femininity may be seen as a negative foil on which men exhibit their independence, reserve and control.

Manly reserve and calmness seems to be of paramount importance, truly a touchstone in the Victorian construction of gender. Sussman's (1995, p. 13) comments are revealing here:

> For nineteenth-century men, manhood was conceived as an unstable equilibrium of barely controlled energy that may collapse back into the inchoate flood or fire that limns the innate energy of maleness, into the gender-specific mental pathology that the Victorians saw as male hysteria or male madness. For the Victorians manhood is not an essence, but a plot, a condition whose achievement and whose maintenance forms a narrative over time.

It may not be entirely coincidental that femininity for some Victorians was a plot as well, and that it needed to be struggled for in exactly the same way. We can find in Victorian writings specific warnings against particular innate female vices: vanity, caprice, self-indulgence, indolence. Sarah Stickney Ellis (1839, p. 40) thus addresses women in her *The Women of England, Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits:*

> It is necessary for women to lay aside all her natural caprice, her love of self-indulgence, her vanity, her indolence—in short, her very self—and assuming a new nature, which nothing else than watchfulness and prayer can enable her constantly to maintain, to spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs.

Female innate *very self* is thus opposed to the assumed one; the latter needs to be maintained with effort and prayer lest the woman lapses into her natural vices. However, this effort is crucial to meet the demands of femininity as socially constructed: officially, the only woman worthy of worship was a monument of

selflessness, with no existence beyond the loving influence she exuded as daughter, wife, and mother. (Auerbach 1982, p. 185)

Similarly, Sussman (1995, p. 25) defines Victorian manliness as "a hard-won achievement, a continuous process of maintaining a perilous psychic balance characterised by regulation of potentially destructive male energy". Masculine self must control itself, as much as man must actively influence his surrounding circumstances. Unrestrained desires and impulses pose a serious threat to male identity and autonomy. John Stuart Mill writes in *On Liberty:* "One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character" (1869, p. 108)

In the light of the quoted passages, then, it seems that Dante Gabriel Rossetti in his construction of male and female characters subverts the normative Victorian categories of gender. In poems and paintings concerned with a female type that may be understood as a fatal woman figure he represents all-powerful, self-indulgent, indolent, capricious, active and controlling female and a weak, passive, emotional male, yielding to his impulses and not actively striving to overcome or control his desires. Rossetti's fatal women as well as submissive men exhibit sensibilities which cast them as deeply unwomanly/unmanly.

1.1 Three Sonnets: Three Goddesses

Reading the sonnets "Body's Beauty", "Soul's Beauty" and "Astarte Syriaca" the reader notices primary characteristics of all three women to be power, independence and certain indifference, as if they were fully emotion-resilient. The sonnets feature, respectively, Beauty Incarnate, enthroned and enshrined, Lady Lilith, threatening demon-enchantress and Syrian Venus, a powerful goddess. All three can be seen as unpredictable, hence capricious, looking for self-gratification and most definitely active agents of their own, as well as their admirers', fate. Their worshippers, in turn, become awe-struck, mute, devoid of both decisiveness and agency.

1.2 Sybilla Palmifera or Soul's Beauty: Is This Goddess Alive?

In "Soul's Beauty" the reader is presented with a vision of Beauty Incarnate—sitting on the throne, mysterious and inaccessible. The quasi-religious elements are easily noticeable—her dwelling place is a shrine, guarded by all-combining opposites—life and death, terror and mystery, and the awe that she invokes in the speaker is clearly a mixture of aesthetic and sensual admiration. The universality of the experience—encounter with absolute, ideal beauty—is stressed by invoking another, apart from the lyrical I, witness of the scene who is directly addressed in such phrases as 'The sky and sea bent on thee' (l.5), and in the sestet, 'Thy voice

and hand shake still—long known to thee' (l.10). Through this device the reader directly participates in the aesthetic experience, feels awe as a result of meeting the lady's gaze (l.3). By direct apostrophe to the implied (male) reader in the sestet, he becomes one of those who pursue the image of the ideal beauty, in whose praise his hand and voice tremble.

Looking at the verbs used in this sonnet one notices that they all conspire to express the power of the enthroned goddess as much as powerlessness on the part of the enchanted male. Thus, her eyes can *draw* the spectator to one law which she dictates (of her worship), her gaze *strikes* awe and makes the viewer 'the allotted bondman of her palm and wreath'. In the praise of her beauty the viewer's hand *shakes still*, oxymoronically enacting his lack of stability and control in the face of the woman. Furthermore, hers is the power to bend sky and sea over the spectator and make them meet—although the syntax of these verses is deliberately obscure—creating a horizon line, the never ending emblem of eternity, a merge of the human and temporal (sea) and the divine and eternal (sky), a place which is never to be reached yet tantalisingly tempts the traveller.[1]

The notion of this everlasting pursuit is another example of unequal power distribution within the sonnet—those who remain under the spell of the goddess's gaze join in the flight, submissive, following her day by day. The adverbs of manner accompanying the description of the flight—'passionately' and 'irretrievably' stress the fact that the viewers/followers are deeply emotionally involved, they have fallen into desire. Having given into their emotional and sensual side, their manly reserve is utterly crashed or melted. The power of the goddess is further rendered in the concept of the vain nature of their flight—the ideal is not ever to be caught. This concept is strengthened by the attributes of the woman revealed to us only in line 10—flying hair and fluttering hem—the synecdoches suggesting instability, temporal presence and impalpable, perhaps capricious nature. The elaborate phonemic device: an alliteration of 'fluttering', 'flying', 'flight' and 'follow' all combine into a mental picture of elusiveness and intangibility; a viewer is compulsively drawn to follow the capricious, fluttering and evasive personification of the ideal. Starting his pursuit, he simultaneously admits the lady's dominance and his own submission.

Rossetti's sonnets, however, are far from unambiguous. Even in the case of "Soul's Beauty" there are elements which subvert one stable interpretation. As Pollock (1990, p. 145) notices, shrines are places traditionally connected with the deceased—in which case Lady Beauty can be seen as dead, but commemorated and thus far less threatening. Secondly, in the octave of the sonnet agency falters due to the overuse of the verb 'draw'. While the lady's eyes draw the spectator to her power, it is the spectator who 'draws the gaze in' 'as simply as his breath'. Since the breath connotes the breath of life, it can denote complete absorption of

[1] The importance of the horizon symbol as a meeting place of heaven and earth is thoroughly elaborated by Stephen Spector's essay entitled "Love, unity and desire in the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti".

the goddess's life. Is the Lady Beauty, the beauty of the soul, too threatening alive? Or is it a projection of the speaker's desire to usurp her power?

The painting "Sybilla Palmifera", which Rossetti meant as a companion piece to "Soul's Beauty", comes as a surprise when compared with the sonnet. First and foremost, it is unusually static, one of those paintings of women which William Rossetti called "female heads with floral adjuncts" (Hough 2007, p. 41). The only allusion to flight and movement can be detected in the butterflies painted on the right, which are not literally present in the poem, yet there is a connection to be made between the flutter of their wings and the fluttering hem of the goddess's dress. The painting primarily impresses through its sensual elements—colours and textures. Thus, we have the silky fabric of the dress and velvety touch of the roses contrasted with stony, cold fireplace and marble-like complexion of the woman. Further, the unnatural paleness of her skin acutely clashes with deep red of her dress and auburn hair. While seeming to show the all-powerful Ideal Beauty, the painting implies in fact something visibly different. If in the sonnet she was the goddess, awesome, sublime and alluringly threatening, whose presence sufficed to make the spectator's voice and hand tremble, in the picture these qualities disappear. The viewers see the unnaturally regular, characteristically withdrawn face of Alexa Wilding, with virtually no forehead at all (Pollock 1990, p. 132). The gaze which was meant to strike awe is completely devoid of life and energy, strikingly absent. This is an aesthetic image of beauty enshrined, dead but commemorated, robbed of power and influence. As Sussman (1995, p. 168) states in his *Victorian Masculinities*, Rossetti's post-Brotherhood portraits of women represent not the models but the erotic power of the male gaze; the female body becomes a screen onto which he projects sexualised male desire. In this way Rossetti's painting pictorially articulates a deep anxiety over gender issues: the threat of female power becomes tamed and domesticated.

1.3 Lady Lilith: The Femme Fatale or an Independent Woman?

"Body's beauty" and "Lady Lilith" figure prominently a more unequivocal personification of the *femme fatale*, at the same time highlighting a tension between threat and desire. The central idea of sonnet 78—"Body's Beauty"—is the enchantment, the spell which Lady Lilith casts on men. In Hebrew mythology she was believed to be Adam's first wife, who refused to submit to Adam and left heaven for the region of the air, next entering the relationship with the devil. Already in her mythological realm Lilith connotes desire for power, independence, refusal of submission, active agency, and decisiveness in pursuing her aims. In short, she is far from what the Victorians deemed feminine. Yet, the way Rossetti renders her in his sonnet, she is both alluringly desirable and extremely threatening. What is more, it becomes evident that her desirability is precisely conditioned by the danger she poses. The sonnet is built around one central concept—Lilith's golden hair, which acts both as a fetish and a direct threat. Becoming the

woman's irresistible allure, it can be fatal, as it leads to total submission of the person on whom the spell is cast, and directly to his death by strangling (l.14). It is further linked to the idea of a web, or net, which she weaves, to ensnare her admirers in. The motif of weaving is fully and ironically orchestrated, covertly alluding to the Victorian concept of female education. Weaving and needlework were the most appropriate occupation for young girls, and we can detect this idea in innumerable Victorian literary and cultural works—from Alfred Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" to Elisabeth Gaskell's *Ruth.* Lady Lilith, although also involved in weaving, produces a curious embroidery—with dead insect—like men entangled in her golden web of hair. The sonnet enacts this idea verbally, through alliterative play on such words as 'spell', 'snare', 'soft sleep' and 'sweet kisses', where the abundance of hissing sounds pervert the two last positive ideas into ominous concepts, reverberating of serpent—like deception and poison. Under Lady Lilith's spell the observers become tranced, and in this trance they are summoned to come nearer and nearer, until they are ensnared in the golden web and lost forever. The image of an admirer in the trance further emphasises how much devoid of agency Rossetti's lovers are. Pensive and passive, they cannot do anything but watch the goddess pulling them towards her embrace, a promise of love and imminent death. The sonnet is powered by overt misogyny, finding outlet in intense fascination and equally intense fear.

Lilith in both the poem and the picture is presented looking into the mirror. In the text this idea is conveyed by the phrase 'subtly of herself contemplative' (l.6), while in the painting she reposes on the armchair, with the mirror in one of her hands, and a hairbrush in the other. The aesthetic impression of the painting relies on the impact of the woman's hair, long, bushy, auburn web. As Lilith draws men to watch this bright net, so are the viewers drawn to watch the auburn storm of hair in the picture (again, the verb 'to draw' from line 8 of the sonnet is an example of exquisite verbal play). While representations of women with mirrors usually denoted vanity and moral criticism (however, hypocritical) of this vice (Berger 1972, p. 51), we can see how Rossetti's seemingly vain, bodily beauty turns this concept upside down. I would like to suggest that this poem yields very well to the feminist reading 'against the grain', in which Lilith, instead of being the deadly *femme fatale*, can be regained for more positive reading. In this reading her look into the mirror stops connoting mere vanity, and starts to mean self-assurance and independence. She is the woman sure of herself, self-confident in her esteem, who does not rely on other spectators of herself for opinion and judgement. Meeting eyes not with the male spectator of the picture but with herself, yet probably conscious that she is being looked at, her body language seems to convey indifference and lack of interest. She embodies all the calmness and the emotional reserve which was traditionally attributed to truly manly men, thus subverting social constructions of gender. Interestingly, there is another mirror in the picture—in the upper left corner of the painting. This mirror, formally speaking, functions as a window, and it reflects a garden, which is not present in the enclosed room. As McGann (2000, p. 18) suggests, "it is as if the mirror presented a memory of the Edenic garden which Lilith fled". Lilith sits with her back towards

this mirror/window, symbolically spurning the paradise in which she would have to admit Adam's dominance and her own submission. Moreover, it further suggests events which happened in garden of paradise—temptation, meeting the serpent, and, consequently, the fall of man. In this reading, however, Lilith *becomes* the serpent, the agent of temptation and fall, threatening the world of male dominance with her hissing sounds, a mass of wavy, serpent-like hair, and her independence.

In line with the feminist reading, Allen (1984) in her article "One Strangling Golden Hair" makes a suggestive link between Lady Lilith and the emerging figure of the New Woman. She mentions periodicals such as *Aetheneum*, *Tinsley's Magazine* and *Saturday Review*, which Rossetti is believed to have read, and which engaged in scathing criticism and ridicule of the New Woman Movement, and claims that Rossetti's Lilith may be seen as embodying the common attitude to the Woman Question in mid-Victorian period. Seen in this way, Lilith's seeming independence may be read as threatening to male viewers. An enlightening comment made by the same scholar regards the fact that mythical Lilith is believed to be a direct threat to children. Interestingly, in the debate surrounding the New Woman Movement one of the strong critical arguments against women's suffrage was that it led to limitation of the childbirth and that independent, educated women were unable to nurse their children (Allen 1984). Thus, Lady Lilith epitomises a threat, not only to male readers themselves, but also to the respected Victorian institution of family. As much as she is feared, however, she is desired with just the same intensity. What is more, probably the desire the gentlemen felt encountering independent women like Lilith was powered and intensified precisely by the threat she embodied. She became the *other,* unknown, unpredictable, fascinating, the exact opposite of domesticated, tamed Victorian wives and mothers.

1.4 Astarte Syriaca's Unstable Gender

Let us move now to the final, third poem-painting combination, "Astarte Syriaca". Similarly as in the case of "Soul's Beauty", the reader needs to brace himself for a breathtaking encounter with a goddess, whose imperial presence dominates both the sonnet and the picture. Astarte Syriaca is the Syrian-Babilonian goddess of love, fertility, and war, identified with the planet Venus (Kopaliński 2001, p. 411). Definitely not confined to the feminine domestic sphere, Astarte is a woman of action and power. The word 'mystery' which opens and closes the sonnet seems to be an echo and a summary of the previous poetic encounters, and points out at ambiguity, elusiveness, and incomprehensibility of the feminine ideal. As the other fatal women, she is definitely beyond ethical judgement. Her atemporal, universal, infinite nature is stressed even further when she is described standing 'betwixt' the sun and the moon. In this way her affinity with the cosmic spheres is spelled out. Additionally, being situated between the archetypal contraries of day and night, heaven and earth, male and female element, gold and silver, light and darkness, she seems to embody

both—which is particularly visible in the picture—and in this way she abolishes the traditional dichotomies. In the poem she is both the bliss and the fright, the virgin and the whore, exerting power and uttering the promise, since the Syrian Venus Queen was frequently associated with sacred prostitution (Kopaliński 2001, p. 411), *hieros gamos.* In her girdle we see the "boon of bliss" where "heaven and earth commune" (l.4–5). Terror and mystery, and fascination, the destruction and inspiration, all are mingled in the perspective of the encounter with this ineffable goddess, who, in the sestet of the sonnet, is specifically called 'Love'.

The gender of this 'love', however, seems deliberately unsettling. While in the poem her neck is figured as an "inclining flower-stem" (l.6), connoting fragility, meekness and willingness (double meaning of 'inclining' being both 'leaning' and 'willing'), her lips are "love-freighted" and her eyes "absolute" (l.7). The "love-freighted" lips, metaphorically carrying the promise of "freight" of love can easily be changed into "love-frightened" or, more in tune with the whole poem, "frightening" lips. Her "absolute" eyes exert power, weaning' "the pulse of hearts to the spheres dominant tune," (l.8) spelling out dominance and the demand of submission.

It is sufficient to look at the painting "Astarte Syriaca" to be convinced about ambiguous gender of Rossetti's Syrian Venus. The picture featuring demonic, unsettling, troubling Jane Morris became one of the better known paintings by Rossetti. It was commissioned by Clarence Edmund Fry for the highest amount of money Rossetti ever received for any of his paintings. The whole foreground of the picture is dominated by the figure of Astarte, presented at the same time as a demonic goddess and a personification of desire. Full lips, translucent skin, dark, long, wavy hair became a trademark of Rossetti's women painted in the later period of his life. In the picture, Astarte's gaze focuses with great intensity on the viewer, staring boldly back at the person who dares to admire her as a work of art. This look is unsettling, resonates of resentment, provokes confrontation. Positioned "betwixt the sun and moon" (l.1), she is painted distinctly differently than both Sybilla Palmifera or Lady Lilith. Astarte is not exuding delicate, evanescent femininity, even with a premonition of danger. On the contrary, she is exuding power, dominance and strength, and her body, although her skin is still pale and almost transparent, has lost a lot of its traditional female charm. In fact, her right arm seems to belong to a man rather than a woman. Similar conclusion can be made about her thick although long neck and muscular shoulders. She is literally positioned between the sun and the moon—between a male and female element, becoming—like some of Blake's figures—almost androgynous. Hugeness of the canvas and of the woman suggest both temptation and intimidation, unambiguously emphasising the threatening element of female beauty (Riede 1992a, p. 160). Such treatment may be symptomatic of what Herbert Sussman (1995, p. 78) calls "characteristically early Victorian practice of displacing a threatening male sexuality onto the female Other". The painting did not meet with feminist acclaim: During the Woman's Suffrage demonstration in Manchester in 1913, rioting women stormed the art gallery and threw rocks at Astarte Syriaca (Allen 1984, p. 293). The response of the critics, in turn, has been extremely contradictory, from treating the work as a masterpiece to writing it off as an aesthetic failure.

2 Conclusion

In this paper I hope to have demonstrated that Rossetti's poems and paintings of the *femme fatale* are furrowed with complex issues of gender and difference. Interestingly, they record multiplicity of divergent attitudes. It is as if Rossetti was speaking different voices, at times misogynistic, a moment later subverting and criticising normative approaches to male and female roles. In all the texts, however, he himself constructs an artificial and highly abstract model of femininity. The woman is always scrutinised and stylised from the male perspective, and usually it happens at the cost of obliterating any individuality, even if some of Rossetti's women seem to acquire a life of their own and boldly stand against conventional readings. As Christina Rossetti wrote in one of her poems: "One face looks out from all his canvasses./Not as she is, but as she fills his dream" (2000, p. 1586*)*.

References

Allen, V. M. 1984. One strangling golden hair: D. G. Rossetti's Lady Lilith. *The art bulettin* Vol.66, No.2 285-294.

Anderson, A. 1993. *Tainted souls and painted faces. The rhetoric of fallenness in Victorian culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Auerbach, N.1982. *The woman and the demon.* Massachusets and London: Harvard University Press.

Berger, J. 1972. *Ways of seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin Books.

Hough, G. 2007. *Last romantics.* London: Methuen.

Kopaliński, W. 2001. *Słownik symboli.* Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm.

McGann, J. 2000. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the game that must be lost.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Mill, J.S. 1869. *On liberty.* London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer.

Pollock, G. 1990. *Vision and difference. Femininity, feminism and the histories of art.* London and New York: Routledge.

Riede, D. 1992 (A) *Dante Gabriel Rossetti revisited.* New York: Twayne Publishers.

Riede, D.(ed) 1992. *Critical essays on Dante Gabriel Rossetti.* New York: G.K. Hall & Co.

Rossetti, D.G. 2008. *The complete writings and pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. A Hypermedia Archive, ed. J. McGann. http://www.rossettiarchive.org/index.html. Accessed 3.04.2010.

Rossetti, Ch. 2000. "In the artist studio" In *The Norton anthology of English literature. The Victorian age.* Seventh Edition, Volume 2B, ed. M.H.Abrams, 2000. London: Norton and Company, 1586.

Spector, S. 1992. Love, unity and desire in the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In *Critical essays on Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* ed. D. Riede, 89-112. New York: G.K. Hall & Co.

Stickney Ellis, S. 1839. *The women of England, their social duties and domestic habits.* New York: D. Appleton.

Sussman, H. 1995. *Victorian masculinities. Manhood and masculine poetics in early Victorian literature and art.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.