





# DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND THE ANATOMY OF DESIRE

In a startling new biography of Rossetti, **JB Bullen** reconsiders why he was important

**T**HE GENIUS BEHIND the first Pre-Raphaelite movement, an inspirer of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones and an underestimated poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) is also rightly identified as one of the sources of British aestheticism and a founding figure of European symbolism. But too often he has been treated as either poet or painter, and when I tried to bring the two together in the context of his dramatic life, a remarkable pattern emerged. What has been missed in accounts of this saturnine, anglicized Italian is the vital spring of his work.

In some respects a Romantic, he didn't just intuit the overwhelming importance of sexuality in life, he made it his lodestar in life and art. The result was a sort of epistemology-cum-aesthetic grounded in libido, 50 years ahead of its time – the sort of thing we more readily associate with the post-Darwin, Nietzschean fin-de-siècle than the mid-Victorian period. Unlike Burne-Jones, who became an establishment figure by accommodating his erotic impulses to bourgeois values, Rossetti never abandoned his libidinous aesthetic. A consummate outsider, he ploughed a lonely furrow and was hounded to an early grave by public opprobrium – a role model for later avant-gardes.

Coming midway between William Blake (whom he hugely admired) and Stanley Spencer, whom in some ways he anticipated, Rossetti was born in 1828 into a period of intense prudishness. He was brought up in London with his brother and sisters by his moody Italian father, Gabriele, and his practical, half-Italian Anglican mother, Frances. Unruly by nature, he first expressed his rebellious temperament by escaping from family life into an imaginative world of painting and writing. At the age of 20, he encouraged the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to challenge the conservative values of the Royal Academy. As an independent artist he adopted a bohemian lifestyle, made friends with 'fallen women' and even instructed the virginal Burne-Jones in the ways of Eros by paying



(Left, main image) *Venus Verticordia* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1864–8; (above) *Portrait of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 1853, by William Holman Hunt (1827–1910)

a prostitute to accost him in Regent Street. He was swarthy, unkempt and gipsy-like, but also charismatic and sociable. Outwardly warm and demonstrative, he was liked by men and adored by women. Inwardly, however, his refusal to conform created a strong sense of personal alienation. He inherited a tendency to depression from his father; he was paranoid about criticism, but he remained defiantly firm in his attitudes to sex.

In one sense all of Rossetti's work is an expression of a struggle between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit, between desire and conscience, and between the demands of society and freedom of the spirit. As a child he lived in a realm of kings, knights, ghosts, and legends. When he grew up, instead of turning away from these stories, they came to mean more and more to him. He ransacked the myths of Greece and Rome, the stories of the Middle Ages, and the legends of King Arthur for the expression of human desire. In this way, figures like Venus, Helen of

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Troy, Mary Magdalene, and Isolde came to represent the embodiment of the power of the libido. In his youth this power was called 'love' and it was in the poetry of Dante that he discovered its various shades and strengths. Above all, the character of Beatrice, guiding, gentle and benevolent, embodied the principle of love. So when in 1852 he met the strange redhead Elizabeth Siddal, she became his Beatrice and the couple acted out their nineteenth-century lives in the shadow of the Vita Nuova. Yet even now love for Rossetti was a complex and contradictory emotion, and when Siddal first appeared in a painting in 1852, *Beatrice Meeting Dante at the Marriage Feast*, that tension was apparent. Though the picture is filled with emblems of ripeness and fulfilment connected with the



marriage feast of the title, the principal subject involves discord in love. Beatrice stands at the centre with Dante and his friend Guido Cavalcante to the right. A malicious story about Dante has made her jealous and she refuses to acknowledge his salutation; he, in turn, is startled and hurt. The conflict is expressed in the stark line of the wall that vertically divides the picture, marking their physical and psychological separation.

New realms of desire opened up for Rossetti in the mid-1850s. He was asked to provide some illustrations for a collection of Tennyson's poems, many of which were based on the legends of the Round Table. Going back to the originals, Rossetti discovered forms of desire very different from those in the poetry of Dante. *Le Morte d'Arthur* offered a world where love was complemented by lust, where fidelity and betrayal went hand in hand, and both often led to violence and destruction. The watercolour *Arthur's Tomb* (1855) gathers together some of these themes in a masterpiece of erotic tension. Lancelot violently demands a last kiss from Guenevere above the sculpted image of Arthur in a space so claustrophobic that the figures cannot even stand. The triangular relationship is replicated in the pattern played out between three heads, one demanding, the other fearful and the third silently marmoreal. The drama is deepened by scenes from Arthur's court represented on the side of the sarcophagus. The cemetery in which the meeting takes place is a parodic version of the Garden of Eden, complete with its apple trees, and a snake slithering away in the left-hand corner.

London had provided Rossetti with Beatrice in the early 1850s; in 1857 he discovered Guenevere in Oxford in the form of Jane Burden, an ostler's daughter. Together with Morris, Burne-Jones and some other artist friends, Rossetti had travelled to Oxford to decorate the new Union building. In a chance meeting he came across Jane at a theatre, was instantly struck by her metallic black hair and unusual, strong good looks, and persuaded her to model for the figure of the legendary queen. In the mural *Sir Lancelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael*, she appears as an object of dangerous sexual allure. Her body is temptingly stretched across an apple tree, preventing Lancelot who lies prostrate before her from achieving the highest spiritual goal by entering the chapel of the Holy Grail.

Though he was filled with desire for Jane, Rossetti had his hands tied by his connection with Lizzie Siddal. So, desperate to pin her down, he encouraged Morris to offer marriage then diverted his attention to the easygoing, voluptuous Fanny Cornforth, model and part-time prostitute. Parting with Siddal, his involvement with Fanny produced many richly corporeal paintings. Among these was *Bocca Baciata* (1860) or the 'Kissed Mouth' in which Fanny is dressed as a Renaissance courtesan. He painted it for the friend with whom he was sharing her body, WP Boyce and the title comes from a line in a story by Boccaccio about the endlessly renewable power of human sexuality. The painting works on two levels. On the one hand it is an almost abstract expression of libidinal delight: "gross sensuality of a revolting kind" as Holman Hunt described it. On the other, it was seen by many



*Arthur's Tomb* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1855

contemporaries as a piece of 'subject-less' art with no narrative and no moral closure. Such work had hardly been attempted before and this picture represented a turning point in Rossetti's personal erotic vocabulary. It was also a significant moment in British art, opening the way for new kinds of painting where form took precedence over subject, anticipating the late nineteenth-century cult of aestheticism.

In 1860, Lizzie Siddal came back into Rossetti's life and the couple entered into a reluctant marriage. They attempted domestic regularity, but after a stillborn birth and postnatal depression, disaster struck: Lizzie committed suicide. To cope with his guilt, Rossetti returned to his bachelor existence and threw himself into his work. A series of female studies, beginning with *Bocca Baciata*, all explored the paradoxes and contradictions of sexuality. *The Blue Bower*, *Venus*

## He began a series of female studies, exploring the paradoxes of sexuality

*Verticordia*, *Lilith*, *Monna Vanna* – the women of these paintings were frequently mythological and exotic, but with their luscious red lips, long enervated hands, and soulful, yearning expressions they are not so much portraits as emblems of desire. One model emerges most prominently from among them: Jane Morris. She and William Morris came from Kent to set up business in Queen's Square, London. In the mid-1860s, Rossetti, then living in Chelsea, began to see more and more of them, and to make the most delicate and tender studies of Jane. Out of the passionately coruscating affair that followed came some of Rossetti's most memorable paintings and his most explicit poetry. In a late work, *Astarte Syriaca* (1875), Jane is cast as a figure of primal sexuality, a Syrian Venus that predates the Greek and Roman goddess of love. Rising powerfully out of the darkness in a flimsy dark green dress, she bears down upon the spectator. As the accompanying sonnet suggests, her 'twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon/ of bliss' - her breasts and vagina - while her 'love freighted lips and absolute eyes' exercise a mesmeric control over her subjects. Rossetti's relationship with



*Lady Lilith* (1867) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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Jane also fed into his poetry. His first volume published in 1870 included sonnets containing detailed accounts of their lovemaking, poems celebrating her body, and others recording the intensity of his passion for her. To these were added verse referring to his relationship with Lizzie, and others like *Eden Bower*, *Willowwood* and *Jenny* that explored strange sexual encounters. The collection provoked a violent critical response and Rossetti became known as the painter of alluring women and writer of outspoken, erotic verse. Already feeling guilty about Elizabeth Siddal, and anxious about his adulterous relationship with Jane Morris, the final straw – public opprobrium – created such mental strain that in 1872 he attempted to follow Lizzie to the grave by overdosing on laudanum.

Rossetti never fully recovered from this breakdown. He continued to paint fine pictures, including *Astarte Syriaca* and to write sensitive verse, but his depressive moods became more recurrent and his dependency on drugs and alcohol increased. Jane withdrew to a polite distance, Fanny Cornforth moved back into his house to look after him. But in 1881 he died at the age of 53, old before his time. We can now see that his painting is not a mere gallery of beauties and his poetry a fantastic indulgence. The driving force of his imaginative experience was erotic desire, and the women of both his painting and his poetry were the means through



*Astarte Syriaca* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1877

*Beata Beatrix* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, c.1864–70



which he expressed that desire. Unlike most of his contemporaries he dared to explore the insistent pressures of sexuality, and to link them to spiritual aspiration. At a time when orthodoxies preached repression, he boldly claimed that the demands of the flesh were as important as those of the spirit. In this task the female form dominated and women in all their moods, strong and assertive, submissive and compliant, seductive and voluptuous, became the vehicles for the representation of the erotic life.

In his poetry, too, Rossetti's subject was always women; the courtship of women, the adoration of women, and the loss of women. In his imagination, some of these women became more important than others. Beatrice, Guenevere, Mary Magdalene, and Isolde were what he called "dramatis personae of the soul". In life and art he projected his anxieties, his pleasures, and his needs onto women so that Elizabeth Siddal, Jane Morris and others became for him Beatrice, Guenevere and Isolde. But this was a perilous activity filled with psychological danger. His passion for Jane Morris changed the course of her life and transformed her into a famous icon of Pre-Raphaelite beauty, but his treatment of Elizabeth Siddal, though it made her, too, an emblem of Pre-Raphaelitism, also acted as a catalyst for her suicide.

Critical writing usually divides Rossetti between the poet and the painter. Rarely are the two impulses treated as coming from the same source, and so often the connection between them is overlooked. Yet, I think that the springs of both can be found in his fascination with the working of the libido. Many of his contemporaries, to say nothing of later critics and some scholars, found this exploration of desire unacceptable, and on a number of occasions it was denounced as pornographic. But the demise of his reputation was not caused by scandal. The rise of Impressionism and then Post-Impressionism with its stress on 'significant form' made his work seem irrelevant. Finally it was strangled by the cool abstraction of European modernism and revived only in the 1960s in the form of languid posters for the walls of a new generation of self-styled romantics. With hardly a nude in his oeuvre, the erotic charge of Rossetti's painting was entirely missed. Even now he remains somewhat misunderstood, though one clue to his greatness lies in the title of his most famous sonnet sequence *The House of Life*. Such a house has in it many rooms and Rossetti explored them with unprecedented candour. Some were sensual, others spiritual. But his mission was to transcend the Manichean division that separated flesh and spirit and, through the visionary power of art, reconcile these fundamental elements in human experience. ☺

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*JB Bullen is Professor Emeritus at the University of Reading, where he has taught English Literature and art history for more than 25 years. Rossetti: Painter and Poet by JB Bullen was published by Frances Lincoln in October (£35 hardback). A major exhibition of the Pre-Raphaelites begins at Tate Britain in 2012*

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