Lizzie Siddal and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

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A mid-nineteenth century artist group known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) are known for their objectification of women in their paintings; portraying them as meek, ill, near-death, and erotic. The women who posed for these artists were often artists or craft-makers themselves. By repainting and revising their male counterparts' works and creating their own, these women took control of their own stories, and of how women could be portrayed in art. They painted the woman's story: women who were leaders; women who were strong, lively, and active—no longer sexualized waifs. These PRB women reclaimed their space in the art world, and in society.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) were a group of artists in mid-nineteenth century Britain who went against the styles and topics the Royal Academy was producing at the time. The PRB drew inspiration from early Renaissance masters, before Raphael, such as Botticelli and Perugino. Much of their art depicted women very differently than the classical tradition. The so-called "stunners" in the PRB paintings were thin, waif-like figures (as opposed to the curvaceous, sexualized nudes seen in works such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*). They were often in scenes of distress, fainting, ill or near death, pale-skinned, and helpless. One woman, in particular, Elizabeth Siddal, can be seen in many of these PRB paintings. She was an artist herself, but much like the other women in the PRB circle, her artistic abilities were overshadowed and she is remembered more for her idealized beauty and muse-like qualities. Siddal's peers thought she was simply mimicking the men around her and not painting with enough force, passion, or true talent. However, Siddal's

works often revolutionized comparable works from the PRB by shifting the focus away from the male gaze and instead showing a woman's story, from a woman's perspective. Siddal's life and art perfectly reflected the societal role of the Victorian woman.

The sexual objectification of women in PRB art can be directly compared to contemporary pop culture's idea of beauty. The modern concept of beauty often idealizes unnaturally thin women, just as the PRB paintings portrayed them. These Victorian paintings often also focused on illness, death, and tragedy, much like the celebrity stories seen in today's tabloids. As scholar Emily Orlando puts it, they have "equat[ed] 'deathlike' with 'beautiful'."[1] Siddal herself suffered from depression and, most likely, anorexia nervosa. She was extremely thin, weak, and pale, described as looking "thinner and more deathlike and more beautiful and more ragged than ever."[2] The most admired qualities of a PRB muse were the passive, gentle woman in the home: "sickly, sexually objectified, broken, bereft, dying, dead—or a combination thereof."[3] Siddal's sickly state allowed for the creation of artworks portraying her as soft and delicate, doing women's work indoors. Christina Rossetti, sister of PRB artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, wrote that Dante was painting Lizzie as "his model, muse, and eventual wife, not as she is, but as she fills his dream."[4] The PRB women were muses, mistresses, and models; fairy-tale characters more than individuals.

Although the Brotherhood's original goals were centered on being true to nature, this was generally abandoned in favor of painting the overidealized, especially when it came to paintings of historical or literary women. As previously suggested, the PRB tended to enshrine women and eroticize their death. Dante Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* (Blessed Beatrice), which Siddal sat for, is a perfect example of this. Finished after Elizabeth's death by overdose, *Beatrix* was seen as a memorial to her. In the painting, Beatrice sits in a peaceful, prayerful pose as she "transitions from earth to heaven."[5] In other words, it is the scene of her death when,

1. Emily J. Orlando,"'That I May Not Faint, or Die, or Swoon': Reviving Pre-Raphaelite Women," *Women's Studies* 38, no. 6 (September 2009): 613.
2. Ibid, 613.
3. Ibid, 615.
4. Ibid, 614.
5. Ibid, 622.

as Rossetti described, she was "suddenly rapt from Earth to Heaven."[6] This work seems to pay homage to a classic sculpture, Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, a work which also combines a moment of spirituality with sexual surrender. By association, *Beatrix* is now even more sexually charged, and the figure of Beatrice made even more sedate. Images of a dove, a sundial, and a white poppy flower surround her, symbolizing her meekness and her impending death. This documentation of women's deaths further objectifies them; they are truly *objets d'art*.[7]

Author Jan Marsh wrote about Siddal's life and how her image has been shaped and changed throughout history. During the late 1800s, she was the sickly, beautiful, dying figure, but in the Freudian craze of the 1920s and 30s, she was more a frigid, unstable creature who caused much strife for her artist-lover Rossetti. Later she is still an antagonist, not a victim: "The legend of Lizzie as the patient, dying, gentle dove which became a tradition, was created by Gabriel [Rossetti] to exploit [a collector's] sympathy; she was in truth willful and course."[8] In the latter half of the twentieth century, she is described as wishy-washy, a PRB groupie, no longer frigid, but not actively sexual either. She was a drug addict and her death by overdose was seen as romantic. Contemporarily, she is viewed, in part, as a victim of masculine oppression and, alternately, a "rediscovered proto-feminist."[9]

Despite her presence mostly as an *objet d'art,* Siddal was also an artist and poet. This is where her reputation as a feminist originates: her retelling of PRB stories from the women's perspective. The women of the PRB circle created art that could revise their place in art history. "Rather than leaving behind pictures of themselves as dead or dying bodies…they bequeathed to us an oeuvre that includes self-portraits of live, politically, and ideologically conscious, creative beings."[10] The women of the PRB changed their images from that of weak, wan, tired housewife, passive mistress, or damsel in distress, to interesting, powerful, strong, competent women. Art historian Whitney Chadwick observed:

6. Ibid, 623.
7. Ibid, 623.
8. Jan Marsh, "Imagining Elizabeth Siddal," *History Workshop* no. 25 (April 1988): 74.
9. Ibid, 78.
10. Orlando, 616.

> [I]n taking up brush or pen, chisel or camera, women assert a claim to the representation of women (as opposed to Woman) that Western culture long ago ceded to male genius and patriarchal perspectives, and . . . in turning to the image in the mirror they take another step towards the elaboration of a sexualized subjective female identity.[11]

Elizabeth Siddal's works show an awareness of, and a significant shift from, the disempowering ways herself and her PRB sisters were being portrayed in Victorian art. She saw the pattern of fanaticizing and idealizing women in allegorical artworks of the PRB, such as Millais' *Ophelia* and Rossetti's *Beatrice*. Both were modeled by Siddal and both feature her perfect, pale form, "suddenly rapt." Whether in sexual ecstasy or death it is hard to discern. Siddal was frequently represented at death's door, such as in *The Lady of Shalott*. In the paintings by Waterhouse and his peers, *The Lady of Shalott* is a fantasy of idyllic death and a fallen woman. However, when Siddal painted *The Lady*, she portrayed the character earlier in the story (a poem by Tennyson) when the lady is still alive, an active gazer, who has just caught a glimpse of the man (Sir Lancelot) who will ultimately cause her downfall. The lady sees Lancelot in the mirror and turns to look out the window, towards possibility and opportunity. This is her most assertive act in the poem. Siddal decided to depict her activity, rather than her passivity or death. This scene also portrays a woman involved in a creative process, active and wide-eyed, essentially a metaphorical self-portrait for Siddal's progressive ideas on a woman's place.

The comparison of Siddal's work with those of the PRB suggest, as Orlando wrote:

> A visual analogue for (1) the way in which Pre-Raphaelite women artists confronted a fixed set of rules governing how, what, and whether or not they might paint and exhibit, and (2) the extent to which their function as *artists* and not models has been dropped out of most art histories.[12]

11. Quoted in Orlando, 617.
12. Orlando, 634.

Most textbooks do not list Siddal or her contemporaries as artists or by name. More often they are simply the nameless figures in the famous paintings.

The degree to which Elizabeth Siddal disappeared into Rossetti's paintings is emphasized even more by the fact that Rossetti changed the spelling of her name, so she is often listed as Siddal. For generations, we have gone through Rossetti to find Siddal, just as he wrote in one of his sonnets: "They that would look on her must come to me."[13] Siddal however, left behind her previously discussed artworks, as well as a stark self-portrait that barely resembles the tragediennes portrayed in the PRB artworks. Her portrait does not look unearthly, she seems wise and conservative. Her facial expression is disenchanted, and the viewer is drawn to her eyes, adding more to her representation of herself as an active gazer rather than a passive beauty. She is not swooning or baring her body to the viewer. Every aspect is discouraging objectification in favor of seeing the real woman.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood painted in a style that differed from what was popular or Academic. Often their objectification of women was not in style either—it was during a time of suffrage in Britain. They portrayed women as meek and sensual, interior objects. They often eroticized the "fallen woman" or the moment of a woman's death. The women of the PRB circle were artists and crafts-makers who used their voices to revise their image. Siddal and her counterparts painted the woman's story and rewrote their stories within it. They portrayed themselves in action rather than as damsels—alive and well rather than slipping into death.

13. Ibid, 629.

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