CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

THE FEMME FATALE IMAGE IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND: ROSSETTI AND BURNE-JONES

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by

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ABSTRACT:

THE FEMME FATALE IMAGE IN LATE 19TH CENTURY ENGLAND:
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This paper focuses on the emergence of the femme fatale image in late 19th century England. Specifically it will trace her development through the work of two artists: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his student, Edward Burne-Jones. The term femme fatale, literally meaning fatal woman, refers to an irresistably attractive female who seductively lures men into dangerous or compromising situations. She possesses the power to betray and destroy man. Late 19th century artists and poets became so fascinated with her image that by the end of the century the femme fatale was a popularly depicted theme.

Rossetti was a painter whose art was directly influenced by his personal life. His subjects were almost exclusively women, and he often used as models the women that he knew intimately. His feelings toward them were frequently expressed in his work. Rossetti first painted a femme fatale as early as 1853, but it was after his wife, Elizabeth, died in 1861 that the fatal woman began to dominate his work. The elements of mystery, danger and sensuousness inherent in the femme fatale appealed to Rossetti and to his student, Burne-Jones as well.

The objective of this study is to demonstrate how the femme fatale emerged in the painting of Rossetti, progressed within Burne-Jones' work and how both artists contributed to her parallel development in France.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Woman has always been an important subject in Western art. The various roles woman has portrayed in each era, have, in a sense, reflected the societal attitudes of the time. In the Renaissance and Baroque Periods, women were primarily depicted in roles drawn from religion, mythology and Classical history. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the painting Academies were beginning to decline in power. As a result, artists were able to break away from tradition and began to portray women in a variety of new pictorial roles. Woman as the romantic heroine, the hard working peasant and the virtuous, domestic wife/mother started to appear on canvases. In the second half of the 19th century another kind of woman emerges in art--the femme fatale. As the century unfolded, her image became increasingly widespread and well-defined. By the last decade she became a predominant literary and pictorial theme.

The term femme fatale, literally meaning fatal woman, is an irresistably attractive female who seductively lures men into dangerous or compromising situations. She has two essential characteristics; she is beautiful

and she is evil. With her beauty she attracts and seduces men and by evil means she controls and often destroys them. An architypical femme fatale is Homer's siren. Traditionally portrayed as half woman, half bird (and alternatively as a mermaid) the siren enchanted mariners with her sweet song, luring them onto the rocks and beckoning them into the sea.

Late 19th century painters became so fascinated with this powerful female image that they searched through medieval literature, the Bible and mythology to find subjects that personified this type of woman. By the 1890's, the sensuous but cold seductress was a popularly accepted artistic subject. The femme fatale was not an invention of the late 19th century; however, it was during this era that her image gained greater currency than it has ever enjoyed before or since.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Emergence of the Femme Fatale

This paper focuses on the emergence of the femme fatale in late 19th century England. Specifically, it will trace her development through the work of two artists, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and his student, Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898).

Rossetti was a painter whose art was directly influenced by his personal life. His subjects were

almost exclusively women, and he often used as models the women that he knew intimately. His feelings toward them were frequently expressed in his work. Rossetti first painted a femme fatale as early as 1853, but it was after his wife, Elizabeth, died in 1861 that the fatal woman began to dominate his work.

The elements of mystery, danger and sensuousness inherent in the femme fatale appealed to Rossetti, a romantic whose real life and fantasies often merged. He created a female type derived from his almost obsessive interest in the Gothic period. The women he depicted, whether virtuous or evil, possessed a medievalistic beauty. Thin and pale, his pensive women with their long wavy hair, heavy-lidded eyes and regular features, were not beautiful by contemporary Victorian standards. Nevertheless, Rossetti had created a new type of ideal feminine beauty which his colleagues and followers incorporated into their own work.

Edward Burne-Jones: The Progression of an Image

Rossetti's ideal of feminine beauty was passed on to his student Edward Burne-Jones, as was the image of the fatal woman. Burne-Jones first painted a femme fatale while he was apprenticed to Rossetti, and the theme always remained an important part of his work. By

the time he reached mid-career his female imagery had gained popular acceptance both in England and on the Continent.

Rossetti and Burne-Jones were men with non-conformist philosophies and lifestyles. They were, nevertheless, perfect products of their culture. Victorian attitudes were deeply ingrained in their thinking. Like the society that produce them, both men were preoccupied with the concept of the "good" versus the "bad" woman. This dichotomy, generally believed to be present in all women, reflected the misogynistic trend which intensified during the final years of the nineteenth century.

Poets and painters wedded the misogynous dualism with sensuality to create a popular artistic style. The femme fatale was the vehicle of this expression.

This paper examines the emergence of the femme fatale in the art of Rossetti and her progression through Edward Burne-Jones' work and the contribution of both these painters to her parallel development on the Continent. It also suggests that the femme fatale image, commonly thought to have orignated in France, actually began in England.

Chapter 2

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND THE FEMME FATALE

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a painter of women. He portrayed a variety of feminine types all possessing one common characteristic--beauty. In his work one sees a persistent tension between delight in feminine beauty and wariness of its allure. He often equated the beauty of women with an almost supernatural power: power with which to dominate man.

Although English-born Rossetti was raised in an Italian household. A Latin temperament and vivid imagination made him one of the most fascinating cultural figures of his era; he was truly a Victorian Romantic. Rossetti was an eccentric and a bohemian whose real life and fantasies often merged. His artwork often projected his own fantasy life and was therefore more personally expressive than that of his English contemporaries. This was particularly true with regard to women. That Rossetti was obsessed with the "feminine mystique" is apparent in his art work. The models that appear in his paintings were, for the most part, women he was involved with in his private life. These women, depicted on canvas as madonnas,

heroines, and femme fatales, became the manifestations of his emotions and fantasies.

Early Work and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti was the second of four children born to Gabriele Rossetti and Maria Polidori. Born in London in 1828, Gabriel was raised in an environment rich in literary tradition. His mother was an intelligent and energetic woman who exposed her children to poetry and literature at an early age. His father, once a successful poet in Italy, had been forced into political exile during his late thirties. He settled in London, establishing himself at Kings College teaching Italian literature. Rossetti Sr. dedicated his life to studying the 13th century Italian poet Dante Aligheri, and he eventually published a five-volume commentary on Dante's work.

It was not until young Gabriel was beginning to pursue his own career as an artist that he began to take an active interest in his father's literary hero. The influence of Dante Aligheri became the very foundation and inspiration for most of Rossetti's early work. The canvases painted during his early period often illustrate Dantesque scenes with figures clad in Medieval-style clothing. Like his father, Rossetti became steeped in Dante's writings; by the time he was twenty, he had

translated many of Dante's verses and those of other early Italian poets. Dante's poetry was integral to Rossetti's conception of aesthetics.[1]

Rossetti perceived painting, literature and poetry as totally integrated art forms. He often wrote sonnets to accompany his paintings and sometimes inscribed verses on the frames or on the backs of his canvases. His artistic success resulted more from his vivid romantic and poetic imagination rather than from formal training. He had been an impatient and rebellious student. After spending four years at Carey's drawing academy he had gained only the most basic technical knowledge. He then entered into the Antique School of the Royal Academy but there, too, he rejected technical advice. It was not in Rossetti's nature to accept such rigid discipline and dry atmosphere. After a short period he abandoned his academic studies and sought private instruction.[2]

It was during his brief stay at the Academy that Rossetti met John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, with whom he was to form the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The three were men of very different personalities with

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[1] See R. W. Johnson, "Rossetti's Beatrix and the New Life," Art Bulletin, 57, December 1975, 551.

[2] He studied for a short time with the artist Ford Maddox Brown, a man who was to become closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

disparate goals. They had little in common except their shared discontent with the Academy, but together they formed an innovative, rebellious artistic movement. Rossetti's romantic Latin nature and Bohemian life-style set him apart from the other two more conventional young men. At the time Hunt and Millais first met him, Rossetti was:

> "A fascinating, careless, wayward, capricious, irreverent, dominating being. A London Italian. Not even a professional painter--sort of a poet or a poet and something of a painter as well. Spouting endless verses, some of them his own. A genius, perhaps, in a way, but not a straightforward way like Millais'. Full of contempt for authority. Cascading out words, beautiful words, grotesque and invented words, slang words. Casually revealing a curious and wide knowledge. Inclined to be masterful and to turn ugly and irritable if contradicted. Juggling with ideas and making too free, Hunt thought, with the ideas of others. Withal, one you could not resist. His name was Rossetti."3/

In the summer of 1848, Hunt, Millais, Rossetti and four other men formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with the purpose of revolting against the English painting style of the time. The term "Pre-Raphaelite" has come to have various meanings. The reason for the ambiguity is that even at the time of its inception the members were not united in their goals and had no definite aesthetic

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3/This poignant description was written by one of Rossetti's biographers. W. Gaunt, The Pre-Raphaelite Dream, New York, 1966, 31-32.

theory. It is therefore not surprising that the group, in its original form, survived only a few years.

The term "Pre-Raphaelite" refers, literally, to a preference for the style of art produced before Raphael. The Brotherhood's members were inspired by a group of German painters named the Nazarenes. They shared the Nazarenes' view that Raphael's work reflected pagan insincerity and worldliness, whereas art before Raphael was pure and austere.[4] Rossetti's niece, Helen Rossetti Angeli wrote:

> "Pre-Raphaelitism was, in the briefest terms, a revolt against the fossilized academic tyranny of the time, and an effort to breathe new life into art, by refusing allegiance to certain conventions that had followed on the painting and school of the great Umbrian painter."[5]

The Pre-Raphaelites called for a return to the style of painting that was prevalent at the end of the middle ages. They felt that the honesty and simplicity in medieval painting was closer to nature. The paintings produced by the Brotherhood members did not in fact resemble Trecento art. However, by using Gothic architectural settings and medieval costumes, they attempted to capture the essence of the era.

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[4] Ibid, 10.

[5] H. R. Angeli, Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Friends and Enemies, New York, 1972, XIV.

Unfortunately, the Brotherhood's members were not always successful at adhering to their own professed ideals. Hunt and Millais, for instance, although respectful of medieval simplicity, adopted painting styles of what might be called detailed super-realism--every leaf on every tree was given individual attention. Their paintings were thematically similar to Rossetti's, however their work differed from his in a very basic way: Rossetti paid little attention to detail, preferring to approach his subject poetically.

Rossetti was the dreamer of the group, and though he lacked the technical skills of Millais or Hunt, his lyrically romantic imagination and extensive literary knowledge set him apart from the other two. He provided the fundamental innovation and inspiration within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It was Rossetti's strain of Pre-Raphaelitism that was to become most influential in late nineteenth century English art. His poetic approach to painting inspired younger artists such as William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, who in turn contributed to a symbolist style in English painting.

Elizabeth Siddal: Model, Mistress and Wife

Considering the intensity of Rossetti's romantic nature, it is not surprising that love and sexuality were

the most common themes illustrated in his paintings. He portrayed various kinds of love: heavenly love, earthly love, jealous love, frustrated love and sensuous love. Rossetti's artistic imagery, both in painting and poetry, often reflected situations or events occurring in his personal life. The women in his life were a source of inspiration for these themes.

By the late 1840's, Rossetti had become so closely identified with his medieval namesake that he had changed the order of his name, advancing "Dante" to the beginning. He had begun to work on a translation of Dante's Vita Nuova, and his own poetry was beginning to show the stylistic influence of Dante. Scenes from Dante's work were beginning to appear on his canvases.[6] Rossetti in a sense, saw himself as the modern equivalent of Dante.[7]

In 1850 Rossetti was introduced to Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal. Describing his reaction upon first seeing her, Rossetti told Ford Maddox Brown that he felt as though "'. . . his destiny was defined.'"[8] He had been

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[6] Beatrice at a Marriage Feast (1851) Dante Drawing the Angel (1853) The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Paradise (1852). See Johnston, "Rossetti's Beatrix and the New Life," 551.

[7] Gaunt, The Pre-Raphaelite Dream, 61.

[8] W. M. Rossetti, Ruskin: Rossetti: and Preraphaelitism: Papers 1854-1862, London, 1971 (reprinted from the 1899 edition), 33. From an excerpt of Ford Maddox Brown's diary, March 10, 1955.

searching for a women with red hair to model for the Beatrice figure in one of his paintings.[9] Elizabeth was the perfect woman. Her golden red hair, pale skin, slender body and large-lidded melancholic eyes, closely matched Rossetti's perception of the physical characteristics attributed to Beatrice in the Vita Nuova.[10] She was introduced into the Pre-Raphaelite circle when Walter Deverell discovered her working in a milliner's shop and convinced her to model for him. For a short period of time, she modeled for all of the Brotherhood's members, but as her relationship with Rossetti developed she sat exclusively for him.

Elizabeth's beauty was of an esoteric kind, perfectly suited to the Pre-Raphaelite ideal. She had the simple and pure features that were popular by medieval standards rather than by nineteenth-century English convention. John Ruskin described her as having "'. . . more the look of a Florentine fifteenth century lady than

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[9] Pre-Raphaelite Diaries and Letters, edited by W. M. Rossetti, Farnsborough, England, 1971 (reprinted from the 1900 edition), 203.

[10] Beatrice is described by Dante as having the "paleness of a pearl" and "eyes with lids weigh'd down by the heart's heaviness." The Portable Dante, edited by Paolo Milano, New York 1976, 567, 581.

Plate 1
Elizabeth Siddal, 1854.

anything I ever saw out of a fresco. . . .'"[11] William Michael Rossetti, Gabriel's brother and the Pre-Raphaelites' "honorary secretary," described Elizabeth as, ". . . a most beautiful creature . . . tall, finely formed, with a lofty neck, and regular yet somewhat uncommon features, greenish-blue unsparkling eyes, large perfect eyelids, brilliant complexion, and a lavish wealth of coppery-golden hair. Her large greenish-blue eyes, large lidded, were peculiarly noticeable. . . ."[12]

Elizabeth's true personality is unknown. She has been described as quiet, reserved and introspective, yet warm and kind. Some thought her intelligent, others assumed that her quietness masked a fundamental shallowness. Though not as educated or as well born as Rossetti, Elizabeth had filled the void in his life. She moved into his Chatam Place home and became his full-time model and companion. He did countless drawings of her sitting in a chair, standing at a window and reclining on a couch.

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[11] O. Doughty, A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 2nd ed., Oxford, 174. A letter from Ruskin to Dr. H. Acland.

[12] Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, edited by W. M. Rossetti, New York, 1970, I, 171. Reprinted from the 1893 edition. Some, however, denied the existence of her beauty. One of Rossetti's friends described her as not beautiful, but rather as having a "pale face, abundant red hair and long thin limbs . . . strange and affecting." Doughty, A Victorian Romantic, 119.

They spent all of their time together, fashioning their lives after a medieval dream. Elizabeth became his living Beatrice; Rossetti's fantasy had become a reality.[13]

It was not long, however, before the fantasy became increasingly more difficult to perpetuate. Much to his disappointment he realized that Elizabeth was not a heavenly woman, but was in fact a human with actual needs, faults and neuroses. As long as she remained quiet, pensive, and mysterious, she fit Rossetti's ideal, but she could not consistently conform to this demanding role. She was evidently quite frustrated by her burden, for long periods of melancholic silence were often followed by angry fits of hysterical screaming.[14]

Elizabeth's health was another factor that frustrated Rossetti's ideal dream. The precise nature of her problem is not known, but she suffered from a life-long illness that eventually made her an invalid. She was described as tubercular, "'. . . though not

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[13] Gaunt, Pre-Raphaelite Dream, 61.

[14] Doughty, A Victorian Romantic, 194-195.

seriously or vitally affected,"[15] and later her problem was diagnosed as "'mental power long pent up and lately over-tasked.'"[16] Whether mental or physical, her ailment was a constant source of worry to Rossetti, and her dependence was a drain upon him. They were engaged, but Rossetti long avoided marrying her. Neither, however, was he able to end their relationship. Instead, he escaped by taking frequent trips and by focusing his attention upon other women.

It was three years after Rossetti met Elizabeth, when his love for her was beginning to wane, that he drew his first important femme fatale. Entitled Boatman and Siren and dated 1853, he inscribed on it, "Lo marinaio oblia, che passa per tal via" -- "The passing mariner forgets."

The drawing shows a siren being carried downstream in a small boat. Following closely behind is another boat with two men aboard. One sailor, enchanted by the siren's alluring gaze, reaches out towards her. The other sailor clutches his friend around the waist, presumably to prevent him from

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[15] Gaunt, Pre-Raphaelite Dream, 60. Dr. Acland's opinion.

[16] Ibid, 64.

Plate 2
Boatmen and Siren, 1853.

jumping in after her. Rossetti's inspiration for the drawing was a passage from a canzone by Jacopo da Lentino, which the painter had translated:

> "Sweet, sweet and long, the songs the Sirens know
> The mariner forgets,
> Voyaging in these straits,
> and dies assuredly.
> Yea from her pride perverse
> who hath my heart has hers,
> Even such my death must be."17/

In 1860, during a particularly severe phase of Elizabeth's illness, Rossetti finally married her. He was probably motivated by guilt and pity, since he thought her death was imminent.18/ During that same year, Rossetti did another painting of a femme fatale. It was a watercolor called Lucretia Borgia Administering The Poison Draught. Rossetti took the subject from Italian 15th century history. A photograph of the painting in its original form shows dark-haired Lucretia standing before a water basin. She stares straight ahead while washing her hands of the poison that she has just administered to her husband, the Duke of Bisceglie. Her father, Pope Alexander VI, and her

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17/D. Sonstroem, Rossetti and the Fair Lady, Middletown, Connecticut, 1970, 110.

18/Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, edited by W. M. Rossetti, I, 363-364.

Plate 3
Lucretia Borgia Administering The Poison Draught, 1860.

Plate 4
Lucretia Borgia Administering The Poison Draught, 1860.

brother, are seen in the reflection of a round mirror, walking the Duke around the room "'to settle the poison well into his system.'"[19] Rossetti retouched the painting in 1868 and the figure of Lucretia was changed significantly. In the later version Lucretia is light-haired (like Elizabeth), wears a more revealing dress, and instead of staring straight ahead as she washes her hands, she looks back over her shoulder at her husband. In this version, Lucretia's body forms a sinuous curve; this replaces the stiff, linear figure in the original. A decanter of wine and a poppy--the ingredients used for the crime--sit on a table in the background.

It is interesting that Rossetti depicted a woman poisoning her husband soon after he had entered into his unhappy marriage with Elizabeth. During the two years that they were married, Elizabeth gave birth to a still-born child. Her unstable mental and physical health became progressively worse and she came to rely upon large doses of Laudanum to enable her to sleep.

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[19] H. C. Mariller, Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life, 3rd ed., London, 1904, 71. Statement made by Rossetti. Marillier (71) and Surtees (V. Surtees, The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: a Catalogue Raisonné, Oxford, 1971, I, 77) refer to Lucretia Borgia's father as Pope Alexander IV, however, he was clearly Pope Alexander VI. See New Catholic Encyclopedia, Washington, 1967, II, 708-709.

In February 1862 she died of what was most likely an intentional overdose of the drug.[20]

Elizabeth's Death And The Rise Of The Femme Fatale

Elizabeth's death plunged Rossetti into a depression that was filled with guilt and remorse. Although the exact circumstances leading to her suicide have been carefully concealed by the Rossetti family, one can assume that Gabriel felt at least partially responsible.[21] Elizabeth's state of chronic melancholy and neurosis could very well have been caused by her failure to meet Rossetti's impossible expectations. When she proved to be only human, Rossetti sought other women with whom he could act out his fantasies.

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[20] Rossetti found a note pinned to Elizabeth's nightgown that read, "Take care of Harry." Angeli, Rossetti, His Friends and His Enemies, 196-197. Harry was one of Elizabeth's brothers, once described by William Rossetti as "weak-minded." Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, I, 172. This note was withheld from the jury at the inquest and her death was considered accidental.

[21] William Michael Rossetti wrote a very discreet biography of his brother in 1895, carefully omitting any undesirable facts and censoring the family letters.

Elizabeth had been aware of her competition and this probably heightened her misery.[22]

Rossetti's personality underwent significant changes after Elizabeth died, changes that clearly related to alterations in his art work. Discussing these changes in his book Rossetti and the Fair Lady, Sonstroem points out that before Elizabeth's death the "Heavenly Woman" dominated Rossetti's paintings and poetry, but that after her suicide the femme fatale predominated.[23] Sontroem's point is well taken, for before Elizabeth died Rossetti painted very few femmes fatales. In 1863, however, a whole series of fatal women began to appear on his canvases.

Helen of Troy, 1863, was the first painting in this series. The model was Annie Miller, previously

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[22] One version of the story of Elizabeth's suicide is that Rossetti was with another woman the night she took the overdose. Gaunt, The Pre-Raphaelite Dream, 124.

[23] Sonstroem, Rossetti and the Fair Lady, 2-3. Sonstroem classifies Rossetti's women into four types: The "Heavenly Woman," the "Victimized Woman," the "Sinful Woman" and the "Femme Fatale." His psychological approach to Rossetti's artwork is quite interesting, but it is sometimes difficult to separate his own inferences from historical fact. His study is, nevertheless, helpful in showing how Rossetti's life and art often merged.

Plate 5
Helen of Troy, 1863.

Holman Hunt's mistress, who Ford Maddox Brown had once described as "Siren-like."[24] This oil is a close-up of a woman's upper torso and head. She has a mass of shoulder-length, golden wavy hair, full sensuous lips and large-lidded, penetrating eyes. Her expression is contemplative and distant as she fingers the locket hanging from her neck, on which is carved the image of a flaming torch. At first glance the figure of Helen appears to be merely the portrait of a beautiful woman. However, in the background is a smokey sky and a view of Troy in flames. Rossetti made the meaning of this painting quite clear when he inscribed on the back of it, "Helen of Troy--destroyer of ships, destroyer of men, destroyer of cities."[25]

One of Rossetti's friends, the poet Charles Algernon Swinburne, wrote a description of the Helen of Troy painting:

> ". . . The picture of Helen with Parian face and mouth of ardent blossom, a keen red

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[24] Miller was a prostitute who Hunt had attempted to reform and educate, and hoped to eventually marry. (Doughty, A Victorian Romantic, 258.) He was constantly going off on long trips and leaving her home. She finally left him when she had had enough badgering. (D. J. Janson "From Slave to Siren" Art News, 70, May 1971, 52.) Rossetti was the only one of Hunt's friends to console Annie during her fiancee's long absences, and in fact probably convinced her to leave Hunt.

[25] Surtees, Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné, 92.

Plate 6
La Castagnetta, c. 1863.

> flower--bud of fire, framed in broad gold of wide-spread locks, the sweet sharp smile of power set fast on her clear curved lips, and far behind her the dull flame of burning and light from reddened heaven on dark sails of lurid ships. . . ."[26]

Another classic femme fatale painted shortly after Elizabeth's death was La Castagnetta or The Dancing Girl; Daughter of Herodias.[27] This overall canvas shows a close-up of Herodias' daughter, Salome, amidst a whirl of silken veils. As she dances, her long hair sails through the air. She wears a wreath of roses on her head and plays the castanets as she performs her seductive dance. Salome, an archetypical femme fatale, was of great interest to Beardsley and other fin-de-siecle artists.

The following year Rossetti started an oil that he named Venus Verticordia.[28] He originally painted the Venus figure from a very tall, large-framed woman whom he discovered while out walking one day. Rossetti was, however, in the habit of re-working his canvases, and he re-painted the face and body from the model Alexa Wilding three years later. In the surviving version, a nude

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[26] Ibid, 92. Citing Essays and Studies: A. C. Swinburne, 1875, p. 99.

[27] The canvas is not dated but is estimated to be about 1863. See Surtees, Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné, 93.

[28] "Turner of the Heart"

Plate 7
Venus Verticordia, 1864.

Venus stands in a deep bed of honeysuckles and roses. The thick growth of flowers conceals most of her body, leaving only her shoulders and breasts exposed. In one hand she holds an apple, the symbol of temptation, and in the other, a small arrow that signifies destruction. With her large build, dark flowing hair, full lips and penetrating stare, she represents a figure of strength and power. She is the fleshy antithesis of the fragile and willowy representations of Elizabeth that he had done earlier.

To Rossetti, honeysuckles and roses symbolized sexual passion; it was not by chance that he placed his alluring Venus figure amid such foliage. His accompanying verse serves as a narrative for the painting:

> "She hath the apple in her hand for thee,
> Yet almost in her heart would hold it back;
> She muses, with her eyes upon the track
> Of that which in thy spirit they can see.
> Haply, 'Behold, he is at peace,' saith she;
> Alas! the apple for his lips,--the dart
> That follows its brief sweetness to his heart,--
> The wandering of his feet perpetually!
>
> A little space her glance is still and coy;
> But if she give the fruit that works her spell,
> Those eyes shall flame as for her Phrygian boy.
> Then shall her bird's strained throat the woe fortell,
> And her far seas moan as a single shell,
> And through her dark grove strike the light of Troy."29/

29/ The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ed. by W. M. Rossetti, London, 1887, I, 360.

Helen of Troy, La Castagnetta and Venus Verticordia are only a few of the fleshy femmes fatales painted right after Elizabeth's death. Between the years 1863-1868 Rossetti painted more femmes fatales than during any other five-year period in his career.

Elizabeth's death completed Rossetti's fantasy. She, like Dante's Beatrice, died in her twenties. Out of love (or perhaps guilt), Rossetti dramatically buried the only copy of his poetry manuscript along with her.[30] His feelings of guilt were due in part to his long standing, indiscreet, infidelity to Elizabeth. Perhaps it was easier for him to place the blame on the other women who had "lured" him from her. This subconscious rationalization may well explain his preoccupation with the femme fatale in his work during this period.

Fanny Cornforth

Fanny Cornforth was one of the other women in Rossetti's life. Her relationship to Rossetti as mistress, model and friend began in 1853 and lasted until the end of Rossetti's life.[31] In many ways she was the exact

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[30] Several years later he had the manuscript exhumed.

[31] It is thought that Fanny Cornforth was the woman with Rossetti on the night of Elizabeth's suicide. Gaunt, Pre-Raphaelite Dream, 124.

Plate 8
Fanny Cornforth: Study for Fair Rosamund, 1861.

opposite of Elizabeth. She was a large, strong and healthy-looking woman.[32] Born in the country to an impoverished family, she was uneducated, loud, and by Victorian middle-class standards, quite vulgar. She was in fact, working as a prostitute when Rossetti met her. Most of his friends disliked her and could not understand his attraction to her. When Fanny took over the household duties after Elizabeth died, she alienated many of Rossetti's friends to the point that some refused to visit him at home.

But for Rossetti, whose life was infused with fantasy, everyone had to play a role. Vulgar and common, Fanny neither challenged nor threatened him. She was not a Madonna, and he did not depict her as one; in fact, he often portrayed her as a prostitute.[33]

The first painting in which she modeled for Rossetti was entitled Found (1853). This maudlin, narrative canvas shows a countryman discovering his old sweetheart at a London market. His onetime love has since become a fallen woman. She is shown crouching against a

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[32] Rossetti referred to her affectionately as the "Elephant." See Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Letters to Fanny Cornforth, edited by P. F. Baum, Baltimore, 1940.

[33] He never depicted her as Beatrice, Mary or other archetypical virgins.

Plate 9
Found, Begun 1853.

wall, averting her head in shame. The young man gestures to her in an attempt to "lift her from the street," but she refuses his help.

In 1861, one year after Rossetti and Elizabeth were married, Fanny's role (on and off the canvas) changed from fallen woman to mistress. Fanny modeled as Henry II's lover in Fair Rosamund. This clearly contrasts Elizabeth's and Fanny's identities. Elizabeth represented heavenly and pure love; Fanny, earthly and sexual love.

Fanny As A Femme Fatale

As stated before, Sonstroem considers Elizabeth's death to be a turning point in Rossetti's career. Two other Rossetti scholars, Doughty and Surtees, however, regard 1860 (the year of Rossetti's marriage) as the time of his stylistic change. They view the canvas Bocca Baciata (kissed mouth) as the painting which first displayed Rossetti's more sensual imagery. Bocca Baciata is best described by Ms. Surtees:

> "Condemned at the time by some as 'coarse and sensual' this painting (which according to W. M. Rossetti is a faithful likeness of Fanny Cornforth, against a background of marigolds) represents a turning-point in the career of the artist. Arthurian and Dantesque subjects had begun to vanish from the easel; with the declining health of Elizabeth Siddel the small angular figures with their medieval accessories familiar from earlier water-colours gradually disappeared, and in her place appears a new type of woman already observed a year earlier in the pencil

Plate 10
Bocca Baciata, 1860.

> portrait of Ruth Herbert in which the sweep of the neck, the curved lips, the indolent pose of the head and the emphasis given to the fall of the hair foreshadow his prolific output of studies of women (often with similarly fanciful Italianate titles), sensual and voluptuous, mystical and inscrutable but always humourless, gazing into the distance with hair outspread and hands resting on a parapet often with some heavily scented flower completing the design."34/

On the frame of the painting Rossetti inscribed his sonnet: "The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself as doth the moon."35/

Although the woman in Bocca Baciata does not represent a true femme fatale, she is an alluring sensual prototype for the femmes fatales that appear in Rossetti's work from the mid-1860's on. Of this painting Doughty says, "From this time forward certainly 'Women and Flowers' dominated his work; Guenevere replaced Beatrice and 'Body's Beauty' (or Lilth) ousted 'The Blessed Damozel.'"36/

Fanny's image progressed from the fallen woman in Found to the sensual temptress in Bocca Baciata. It was in 1863, when she sat for the painting Fazio's Mistress, that she first became a bona fide femme fatale.

34/ Surtees, Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné, I, 68.

35/ Ibid.

36/ Doughty, A Victorian Romantic, 255.

Plate 11
Fazio's Mistress, 1863.

The subject was taken from part of a canzone by Fazio degli Uberti that Rossetti had translated into English. The poem begins:

> "I look at the crisp golden-threaded hair
> Whereof, to thrall my heart Love twists a net."[37]

Rossetti emphasized hair as a symbolic element. He often referred to hair as a net or trap, or a spider's web. He implied that woman's hair could be used to attract, entangle and destroy man.[38] In Fazio's Mistress the woman (Fanny) is shown languidly combing out her hair in front of a mirror.

The theme of bodily beauty representing destruction is best portrayed in the oil entitled Lady Lilith for which Fanny sat one year later. Lilith was, according to Talmudic legend, the first wife of Adam. She was supposed to have been ". . . a female spectre in

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[37] Sonstroem, Rossetti and the Fair Lady, 113. Sonstroem points out that Fazio degli Uberti abandons the sinister reference to his mistress in the first two lines and goes on to praise her, but that Rossetti chose those lines to illustrate.

[38] Other members of the Brotherhood seized upon this theme. Many Pre-Raphaelite paintings feature sensuous women with long, thick, unbound hair. This stylization was almost certainly a precursor of the sinuous, almost decorative tendrils that appear in the work of Beardsley and other Art Nouveau artists.

Plate 12
Lady Lilith, begun 1864.

the shape of a finely dressed woman."[39] Part of the Lilith legend is that she is an imperishable being who exists as a ". . . beautiful woman luring to herself many souls in every generation of all the generations of men."[40] The original work was repainted, but a photograph of it exists. Again we see a beautiful woman seated in a medieval chair, staring contemplatively into a hand mirror. She appears quite satisfied with her own image as she combs out the mass of golden hair which cascades over her bare shoulders. The line of her head, which bends slightly forward, curves sinously down the long neck to her shoulders. On the far wall is a large mirror in which we see reflected a garden of red roses, and at her left is a dark glass vase containing one red poppy.[41]

Lady Lilith depicts ". . . the allurement of physical beauty uncombined with moral beauty."[42]

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[39] Surtees, Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné, I, 114, refers to "Commentary on Isiah," by Gesenius Teipzig 1821.

[40] W. Sharp, Dante Gabriel Rossetti; A Record And A Study. New York, 1970 (reprinted from the 1882 edition), 208.

[41] The poppy is a flower of passion but also a symbol of death. Johnson, "Rossettis Beatrix and the New Life," 552.

[42] H. T. Dunn, Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle, New York, 1971 (reprinted from the 1904 edition), 79.

Inspired by the subject Lilith, Rossetti wrote a sonnet to accompany the painting. The title is "Body's Beauty."[43]

"Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve)
That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
And, subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

"The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him and left his straight neck bent
And round his heart one strangling golden hair."[44]

The fact that Fanny became a femme fatale in Rossetti's work immediately after Elizabeth's death has some interesting implications. It is possible that Rossetti could have conveniently blamed Fanny, along with

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[43] On the back of a watercolor replica of Lady Lilith painted by Rossetti in 1867 is cited a passage from Goethe's Faust that refers to Lady Lilith. Rossetti could have originally learned about Lilith from Goethe's work. The passage reads:

"Beware of her hair, for she excels
All women in the magic of her locks.
And when she twines them round a young man's neck
She will not ever set him free again."

[44] The Collected Works of D. G. Rossetti, edited by W. M. Rossetti, I, 216.

the other women who "led him astray," for Elizabeth's suicide.[45] Rossetti's portrayal of Fanny as a femme fatale during this period can hardly be considered coincidental, since he eventually went to great lengths to disassociate her from this imagery. In 1869 he sent a letter to a Mr. Raw, the owner of Fazio's Mistress in which he referred to the title as "an absurd misnomer" and asked that Mr. Raw have it effaced from the frame, suggesting "Aurelia" as a more appropriate name.[46] Then in 1872 he retrieved Lady Lilith from its owner and substituted another model's face for Fanny's It is generally agreed that the retouched version is inferior to its original, but Rossetti was pleased by the alteration.[47]

Rossetti had changed his mind about Fanny. As time went on and their relationship developed into a friendship, he realized that she did not fit the role of

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[45] See Sonstroem, Rossetti and the Fair Lady, 218 for further discussion. He quotes a remark made by John Middleton (director of the South Kensington Museum and Professor at Cambridge) that Rossetti was "'. . . addicted to loves of the most material kind both before and after his marriage, with women, generally models, without other soul than their beauty.'"

[46] Wm. Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer, New York, 1970 (reprinted from the 1889 edition) 118. Aurelia means "golden." She was the Roman Goddess of the Dawn.

[47] Marillier, Rossetti; Memorial of His Art and Life, 91, and Dunn, Recollections of Rossetti, 20.

Plate 13
Lady Lilith, 1864,
partially repainted in 1872.

femme fatale. She was in no way subtle, mysterious, or scheming. Neither was she intelligent enough to lure an unsuspecting man into her "web." She was, in fact, outspoken, straightforward, and uncomplicated. Rossetti developed a fondness for her that others were unable to understand. He remained friends with her, and in fact supported her financially until he died.

Jane Morris: Late Years

In 1865 Rossetti completed a watercolor entitled The Merciless Lady. This narrative scene shows a man seated between two women. The dark-haired woman on the left grasps the man's hand. She wears an unhappy expression, presumably because her lover is ignoring her. His attention is focused upon the fair-haired woman, who has enraptured him with beautiful lute playing and song. Three wine glasses are included in the composition. Two of them are empty but the one belonging to the dark-haired woman is full.

The blond woman closely resembles Elizabeth Siddal, who, although dead for three years, was often painted from memory by her husband. The dark-haired woman is believed to be Jane (Burden) Morris. This picture could have been an expression of Rossetti's retrospective feelings toward both Elizabeth and Jane Morris at the time that he met

Plate 14
The Merciless Lady, 1865.

Jane in 1857. They met while Rossetti was in Oxford working with William Morris, Burne-Jones and a few others (later referred to as the second Pre-Raphaelite or Oxford Group) decorating the Oxford Union walls. It is thought that Jane was discovered by Rossetti while at the theatre. He subsequently introduced her into his circle as a model; it is believed they developed a romantic attachment for one another.

Back in London the state of Elizabeth's health became so precarious that Rossetti had to leave Oxford before the project was completed. Moved by a sense of moral responsibility he returned home. Much to Rossetti's disappointment, Jane became engaged to William Morris shortly thereafter.[48] It is therefore quite possible that the Merciless Lady represented Elizabeth, who lured the young man away from his dark-haired would-be lover, Jane.

In Rossetti's own term, Jane was a "stunner." It was her dark, un-English beauty that first attracted Rossetti. Everyone who knew her agreed that she was exceptionally beautiful. William Rossetti wrote this description of her:

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[48] The rumor was that Rossetti loved and admired Jane himself and that he was the only member of the Oxford Movement that did not attend her wedding. See Doughty, A Victorian Romantic, 246.

> "Her face was at once tragic, mystic, passionate, calm, beautiful, and gracious--a face for a sculptor, and a face for a painter--a face solitary in England, and not at all like that of an Englishwoman, but rather of an Ionian Greek. It was not a face for that large class of English people who only take to the 'pretty,' and not to the beautiful or superb. Her complexion was dark and pale, her eyes a deep penetrating grey, her massive wealth of hair gorgeously rippled, and tending to black, yet not without some deep-sunken glow."49/

During the years 1860-1965 Rossetti saw very little of Jane. The Morrises had moved away from London and Rossetti was kept busy caring for Elizabeth and then reconstructing his life after she died. But in 1865 the Morrises returned to London and the old friendship was renewed. The extent of Rossetti's relationship with Jane remains a mystery. Some of his biographers refer to their situation as one of passion and frustration. There is no actual proof that Jane and Rossetti were lovers, but that can be inferred from several facts.50/ In 1871 Rossetti and the Morrises jointly leased an old Elizabethan country home called Kelmscott Manor. William Morris settled his

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49/ Dante Gabriel Rossetti--Family Letters, edited by W. M. Rossetti, I, 199.

50/ Letters exist from Rossetti to Jane between 1868 and 1881, but most of Jane's letter from 1868 to 1877 were ordered by Rossetti to be destroyed upon his death. Only letters from 1878-1881 remain. (See Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris, Their Correspondence, edited by J. Bryson, Oxford, 1976, V-VI.

Plate 15
Portrait of Jane Morris, 1866.

It was also during this period that Rossetti produced a number of paintings that featured Jane as a femme fatale. Studies for the subject Pandora were begun in 1869, and the oil itself was completed in 1971. The painting shows Pandora standing as she holds the fateful box, or casket, in her left hand. With her right hand she closes the lid of the box only upon Hope. The winged evils that she lets escape swirl about her head in clouds of red smoke. Pandora's face is a slightly exaggerated likeness of Jane. Her lips are fuller, and her hair is longer and thicker. She gazes into the distance looking pensive and a bit melancholic, rather than remorseful or grieved. On the box which Pandora holds are inscribed the words, "Nescitur Ignescitur"--"It is unknown and it burns." Rossetti's accompanying sonnet begins:

> "What of the end, Pandora? was it thine,
> The deed that set these fiery pinions free?"[52]

Swinburne wrote a poetical description of the Pandora canvas:

> "The design is among his mightiest in its godlike terror and imperial trouble of beauty, shadowed by smoke and fiery vapour of winged and fleshless passions crowding round the casket in spires of flame-lit and curling

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[52] Mariller, Rossetti; Memorial of His Art and Life, 114.

Plate 16
Pandora, 1871.

Plate 17
Pandora, 1879.

> cloud round her fatal face and mourning veil of hair."53/

Several years later Rossetti once again depicted Jane as Pandora. In this chalk version, Jane's features are exaggerated to a point where they are almost grotesque. Her black hair is extremely thick and wavy, her lips so large they appear swollen. Jane's body, actually thin, is full and fleshy. On the box is printed the legend "Ultima Manet Spec"--"Last remains hope." Pandora is represented here as a femme fatale, yet according to the original tale she lacks one essential quality--malice: She opened the forbidden box due to curiousity rather than maliciousness. Ironically though, the result of her deed is the same as if her intentions had been evil--the outcome is fatal.

Jane was the model for a more clearly defined femme fatale entitled Astarte Syriaca (or Venus Astarte) in 1877. In this painting she appears as a mysterious, powerful, sensuous, yet cold woman. She is shown in a three-quarter frontal view. Again she possesses black wavy hair, full lips and dark, heavy-lidded eyes. A green robe clings to her full body; one shoulder is exposed where the garment has slipped off. With one hand she

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53/ Ibid, citing Essays and Studies, Algernon C. Swinburne, p. 90.

Plate 18
Astarte Syrica, 1877.

clasps an elaborate silver chain tied just under her breasts, and with the other she fingers a second chain which drapes over her hips and ties in the front. This highlighting of her breasts and pelvis places a decidedly unsubtle emphasis on her sexuality. Behind her on either side are two attendants who gaze passionately at the dark sky. Rossetti wrote a sonnet to accompany the oil:

> "Mystery: lo! betwixt the sun and moon
> Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen
> Ere Aphrodite was. In silver sheen
> Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon
> Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune:
> And from her neck's inclining flower-stem lean
> Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean
> The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune.
>
> Torch-bearing, her sweet ministers compel
> All the ones of light beyond the sky and sea
> The witnesses of Beauty's face to be:
> That face, of Love's all penetrative spell
> Amulet, talisman, and oracle,--
> Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery."[54/]

H. Rossetti Angeli gave the painting a more sinister interpretation:

> "Darker and deeper still is the Astarte Syriaca, robed in the green of a shoaling sea with silver girdle, looking out of a blood-red sky, where the struggling moon is veiled. Here indeed the two attendants with their torches and upward glance seem to testify to some dark, unholy power, the cruelty that is akin to lust. The strange sights that she has been in grove and

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[54/] The Collected Works of D. G. Rossetti, edited by W. M. Rossetti, I, 361.

shrine seem to have fed her beauty with lurid and terrible royalty, where she reigns in a dark serenity which nothing can appal."55/

Astarte Syriaca was painted some time after the relatively happy years Rossetti had spent with Jane at Kelmscott. By the time it was executed many changes had occurred. For unknown reasons, Jane had left Kelmscott in the fall of 1871. From that time on, Rossetti's physical and mental health declined. He took large doses of Chloral to combat insomnia, only to become hopelessly addicted. He began to feel paranoid, and started secluding himself from his friends. The following spring, his condition reached crisis level and he had a breakdown which included an attempted suicide. When he began to recover from the collapse, he wrote a sonnet called Without Her which reflects his loneliness and depression during the summer and fall after Jane left Kelmscott.

"What of her glass without her? The blank gray
   There where the pool is blind of the moon's face.
   Her dress without her? The tossed empty space
Of cloud-rack whence the moon has passed away.
Her paths without her? Day's appointed sway
   Unsurped by desolate night. Her pillowed place
   Without her? Tears, ah me! for love's good grace,
And cold forgetfulness of night or day.

What of the heart without her. Nay, poor heart,
   Of thee what word remains ere speech be still?
   A wayfarer by barren ways and chill,

55/Angeli, Pre-Raphaelite Twighlight, p. 111.

Plate 19
A Sea Spell, 1877.

> Steep ways and weary, without her thou art,
> Where the long cloud, the long wood's counterpart
> Sheds doubled darkness up the laboring hill.56/

Astarte Syriaca perhaps displays his feelings of frustrated love or even anger towards Jane, for after his breakdown their relationship became quite strained. She visited him only occasionally and even then primarily to sit for paintings.

A year after his breakdown Rossetti returned to a familiar subject--the siren. The colored chalk, Ligea Siren was finished in 1873; the subject was taken from Homer's Odyssey. She was drawn playing her weapon of auditory allurement--the lute.57/ Although more subtle in treatment and title, A Sea-Spell (1877 oil) displays another siren and one of Rossetti's most fatal women. The model was Alexa Wilding, who in this composition portrays a young, beautiful woman playing a lute. Behind her is a sea bird, which mesmerized by the woman's beckoning song, has left the sea. The woman appears quite harmless and not at all calculating. It is the accompanying sonnet and other clues that fully explain the story:

56/ The Collected Works of D. G. Rossetti, edited by W. M. Rossetti, I, 203.

57/ The whereabouts of this chalk are presently unknown.

"Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree,
While flashing fingers weave the sweet-strung spell
Bewteen its chords; and as the wild notes swell,
The sea-bird for those branches leaves the sea.
But to what sound her listening ear stoops she?
What netherworld gulf-whispers doth she hear,
In answering echoes from what planisphere,
Along the wind, along the estuary?

She sinks into her spell: and when full soon
Her lips move and she soars into her song,
What creatures of the midmost main shall throng
In furrowed surf-clouds to the summoning rune:
Till he, the fated mariner, hears her cry,
And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die?"[58]

The temptress is dressed in a flowing gown which drapes across her arms but leaves her shoulders bare. On her head she wears a wreath of poppies. An added feature, not at first apparent, is the inclusion of several Venus Fly Traps amid the mass of foliage that surrounds the siren.

The late 1870's were particularly unhappy years for Rossetti. He continued to use Chloral in large doses and his mental and physical health steadily deteriorated. He became increasingly bitter and paranoid. With respect to women his views had become quite cynical. Even years before, he had said in a letter to Ford Maddox Brown:

"I regard all women, with comparatively few exceptions, as being so entirely loose-tongued

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[58] The Collected Works of D. G. Rossetti, edited by W. M. Rossetti, I, 361.

> and unreliable that to suggest such qualities in one does not seem to me to interfere with any respect to which a member of the sex is likely to have any just pretension."59/

This same attitude of suspicion along with the tendency to overgeneralize about women is reflected throughout Rossetti's artwork. His women all possessed similar physical characteristics. He had, in fact, often been accused of using the same model for all of his paintings. Whether madonnas or femmes fatales, their heavy-lidded eyes, luxuriant hair, full lips and melancholic or dreamy expressions created the same sensuous and mysterious images.

It was this strange, other-worldly element that attracted Edward Burne-Jones to Rossetti's work.

59/ Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, edited by O. Doughty and J. R. Wahl, Oxford, 1976, II, 590.

Chapter 3

EDWARD BURNE-JONES AND THE FEMME FATALE

It was in 1855 that Edward Burne-Jones, a student at Exeter College, Oxford, first came in contact with Rossetti's work. He was deeply impressed when he saw the artist's illustration for William Allingham's poem, "The Maids of Elfenmere."[1/] Burne-Jones later described it as,

> "'. . . the most beautiful drawing for an illustration I have ever seen; the weirdness of the Maids of Elfenmere, the musical timed movement of their arms together as they sing, the face of the man, above all, are such as only a great artist could conceive.'"[2/]

Early Years And Education

Burne-Jones had viewed the illustration while in the company of his friend and classmate William Morris. The two young men had met while freshmen at Oxford in 1854. Although their backgrounds were dissimilar, they were to form a close and lasting

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[1/] The "Maids of Elfenmere" was published in a volume of Allingham's poems entitled Day and Night Songs, D. Cecil, Visionary and Dreamer; Palmer and Burne-Jones, Princeton, New Jersey, 1966, 113.

[2/] G. Burne-Jones, Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, London, 1904, I, 119-120.

friendship. Burne-Jones was an only child whose mother died soon after giving birth to him. He was raised in a somber home by a housekeeper and his father, the struggling proprietor of a framing and gilding shop. In contrast, Morris was the third of nine children born into a wealthy, middle class family. Morris was a large-framed, robust man whereas Burne-Jones was slender and delicate in health. Though they were in some ways an unlikely pair, they shared an eager passion for literature and art.

Perhaps it is a measure of their idealism that each had enrolled as divinity students at Exeter. Together, however, they had become progressively disenchanted with the college, and in a broader sense with all doctrinal forms of Christianity. Instead of concentrating on their religious studies, they buried themselves in literature. They spent many hours reading to each other from Shakespeare, Keats, Tennyson and the Arthurian legends.[3/]

Gradually their interests moved in the direction of the arts. They eagerly read John Ruskin's writings, and found particularly interesting his

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[3/] P. Fitzgerald, Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography, London, 1975, 27-28.

Edinburgh lectures in which he praised a young group of artists called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Ruskin contrasted their work with what he perceived to be the declining quality of Academic painting.[4] Early in the summer of 1855 they went to see a small, private exhibit of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Included were important pieces by Hunt and Millais, but it was Rossetti's Dante Drawing The Angel which most impressed and delighted them.[5] They became convinced that he was the central force within the Brotherhood.

Although they continued in their studies at divinity school, their interest in the arts intensified. The pivotal experience was a summer tour of France, during which they had the opportunity to visit cathedrals and study the Masters at the Louvre. They were also delighted to find seven Pre-Raphaelite pieces on exhibit at the Beaux Arts Academy.[6] By the end of the trip the two men became determined to pursue artistic

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[4] Ibid, 30.

[5] G. Burne-Jones, Memorials, I, 110. Georgiana Burne-Jones refers to this piece as Dante Drawing the Head of Beatrice, however most Rossetti scholars use the title listed above. See H. C. Marillier, Dante Gabriel Rossett: An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life, London, 3rd ed., 1904, 154.

[6] G. Burne-Jones, Memorials, I, 114.

careers. Morris was to become an architect, and they decided, Burne-Jones, a painter.

Their decisions were not arbitrary. The trip had actually rekindled their respective boyhood interests. As a youth Morris had had a passionate interest for Medieval Architecture. A visit to Canterbury Cathedral, at the age of eight, left him awed by its beauty.[7] Burne-Jones had drawn prolifically from the time he was a small child. Though never intending to choose art as a vocation, he had, at age fifteen, studied basic drawing and color theory at the Government School of Design in Birmingham.

Now having firmly decided to pursue a career in art, Burne-Jones felt compelled to see the man whose work had so inspired him. He later said, "'I had no dream of ever knowing Rossetti, but I wanted to look at him . . . .'"[8] In 1856 during the Christmas recess of his third year at Oxford, Burne-Jones went to London where, he had heard, Rossetti was teaching a night class. Hoping to catch a glimpse of the artist, he attended one of the school's public council meetings.

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[7] J. W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris, I, 1899, 10.

[8] G. Burne-Jones, Memorials, I, 128.

Rossetti apparently did not enter the room until the meeting was well under way, and as Burne-Jones later described the incident,

> "'. . . I saw him for the first time, his face satisfying all my worship, and I listened to addresses no more, but had my fill of looking, only I would not be introduced to him.'"9/

An introduction did come a few evenings later through Vernon Lushington, the man who had been sitting next to Burne-Jones at the meeting. Rossetti was both courteous to Burne-Jones and flattered by the young man's interest in his work. For Burne-Jones the timing was ideal. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had broken apart and Rossetti's own work was not going well. His ego was in need of reinforcement and the young man's quite genuine interest invigorated him. Burne-Jones was invited to visit Rossetti's studio the following day.

For a short while Burne-Jones returned to school, but by Easter he had decided to leave Oxford and move to London to study with Rossetti. He enrolled in some painting classes and took a room near Rossetti's residence.

Morris, having apprenticed himself to a Gothic Revivalist architect in Oxford, visited Burne-Jones on the weekends. The two young men spent as much time

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9/Ibid, 129.

as possible with Rossetti. They found his whole persona intriguing. They spent hours listening as he discussed his opinions, until slowly his ideas became incorporated into their own individual philosophies.[10] Burne-Jones later considered this period of apprenticeship as one of the most fulfilling years of his life.[11] Of Rossetti, he said, "'He taught me to have no fear or shame of my own ideas, to design perpetually, to seek no popularity, to be altogether myself. . . .'"[12]

Particularly significant to Burne-Jones was the fact that Rossetti shared his love for medieval literature; both were inspired by Malory, Chaucer and Dante. Burne-Jones, like Rossetti, lived partially in the nineteenth century and partially in a medieval fantasy world. Rossetti once described Burne-Jones to his friend Willian Allingham, as "'. . . one of the nicest fellows in Dreamland . . . .'"[13]

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[10] Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 24.

[11] G. Burne-Jones, Memorials, I, 151.

[12] Ibid, I, 149.

[13] Ibid, I, 130.

Apprenticeship And Introduction To The Femme Fatale

Burne-Jones spent his first two years in London entirely immersed in the study of art. He was enrolled in classes at Cary's drawing school, and Gandishe's school on Newman street; he attended a night class as well as studying in Rossetti's studio whenever the opportunity arose. During this period (late 1856-1858) he worked primarily on a series of small, highly finished pen and ink drawings. The content and style of these clearly reflect Rossetti's influence.[14]

Going to Battle, a drawing done in 1858, depicts a scene in which three women bid farewell as their knights go off to battle. Set against a background of medieval architecture, the mood is dreamlike and otherworldly, akin to the ethereal environments created by Rossetti.[15] The female figures, thin and angular with long wavy hair, closely resemble the Rossetti woman.

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[14] Pen and ink was the medium used most often by Rossetti during the 1850's. The numerous portraits of Elizabeth were done with pen and ink.

[15] Rossetti portrayed a similar subject in a watercolor the year before entitled Before the Battle which could have inspired Burne-Jones. See, Arts Council of Great Britian, The Paintings, Graphic and Decorative Work of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, London, 1975, 21.

Fig. 1
The Maids of Elfenmere, 1855.

In spite of these obvious similarities, some basic technical differences can already be detected in this piece: Burne-Jones' drawing technique was, from the beginning, more intricate and precise than Rossetti's, and more embellished with decoration. The meticulously executed lines in Going to Battle, along with the detailed design on the dress of the central figure, exemplify the characteristics that set him apart from his master.

Although their styles diverged increasingly over the years, one element of Rossetti's influence that persisted in Burne-Jones' work was the portrayal of the femme fatale. The woman as seductress and destroyer appeared during his apprenticeship with Rossetti and continued to appear throughout his career.

In 1857 Rossetti went to Oxford to speak to Benjamin Woodward, the architect who had constructed the new Oxford-Union Building on campus. Woodward proposed that Rossetti paint a mural on a high strip of wall which ran the length of the library.[16] Rossetti accepted the commission and in a typically impulsive gesture he expanded the project into a much more elaborate undertaking. He conceived a whole series of murals

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[16] M. Bell, Sir Edward Burne-Jones: A Record and Review, London, 4th ed., 1895, 25.

for the Oxford Union walls and enlisted many of the young artists he knew to participate in the plan. He chose Malory's Morte D'arthur as the central theme and each artist was to paint a scene from this narrative. Burne-Jones, as yet inexperienced, was nevertheless convinced by Rossetti to take part in the project. His subject was Merlin Being Lured by Nimue, a theme which was to recur throughout his professional life.

In this episode Merlin, the magician, meets Nimue when she is brought to King Arthur's court. He falls hopelessly in love with her, whereupon she persuades him to teach her his magical secrets. Using one of these spells, Nimue then lures her enchanted teacher under a rock, and with another great stone, traps him there permanently.[17]

Burne-Jones' panel no longer exists, for it, along with the entire Oxford project, was unfortunately destined for disaster. Few of the artists had the knowledge or ability to tackle a project of this sort and many of the murals were left uncompleted. Even those that reached completion eventually faded or

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[17] Sir P. Harvey, Ed., The Oxford Companion to English Literature, Oxford, 4th ed., 1967, 457.

peeled. The brick surface had not been properly prepared, nor was the medium tested. Rossetti was forced to leave before his portion was completed because Elizabeth, whose condition was worsening, required his care. Burne-Jones' work was particularly ill-fated because a brick string course projected from the area of wall he was to paint and ran directly across the faces of the figures.[18] Nevertheless he stayed on to finish his assignment after most of the others had gone.

The Oxford project was indeed a technical disaster, but for most of the men involved, it proved to be a memorable experience.[19] Each day's work was accompanied by a good measure of joking and laughter; the evenings were filled with lively discussions about art and literature. For William Morris, this experience was perhaps most significant, for it was during

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[18] P. Fitzgerald, Edward Burne-Jones, 64.

[19] Rossetti referred to the project as "The Jovial Compaign," O. Doughty, A Victorian Romantic, 1949, 224. The Oxford project was an important link between the two stages of Pre-Raphaelite art. The original Brotherhood had disintegrated, but now a second generation of Pre-Raphaelites was forming. The artists involved were Rossetti, Burne-Jones, William Morris, Arthur Hughes, Val Princep, Spencer Stanhope, Alexander Munro, and Hungerford Pollen. They distinguished themselves from the older generation of Pre-Raphaelites by placing more emphasis on decoration and aesthetics.

the mural project that he met Jane Burden, who was to become his wife. Burne-Jones returned to London, resumed his training and continued to absorb ideas and techniques from Rossetti. In the fall of 1859, he traveled to Northern Italy with Val Princep and Charles Faulkner. Having had the opportunity to study the Italian masters, he found he was particularly impressed by the fifteenth century artists, and by Botticelli in particular.[20] Botticelli's gracefully poetic and decorative style suited Burne-Jones' aesthetic tastes.

Certain stylistic changes occurred as a result of these Italianate influences. He began to combine his Rossetti-like imagery with some of Botticelli's stylistic elements and incorporated them into his own work. This is evident in his designs for a wooden sideboard done the following spring. He painted several scenes on the front and sides and according to Georgiana Burne-Jones he called them "'Ladies and Animals . . . in various relations to each other.'"[21] In describing the scenes on the front his wife said "Three kind and attentive ladies were feeding pigs parrots and fishes"; of the side panels she says "two cruel ones

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[20] Cecil, Visionary and Dreamer, 119.

[21] G. Burne-Jones, Memorials, I, 206-7.

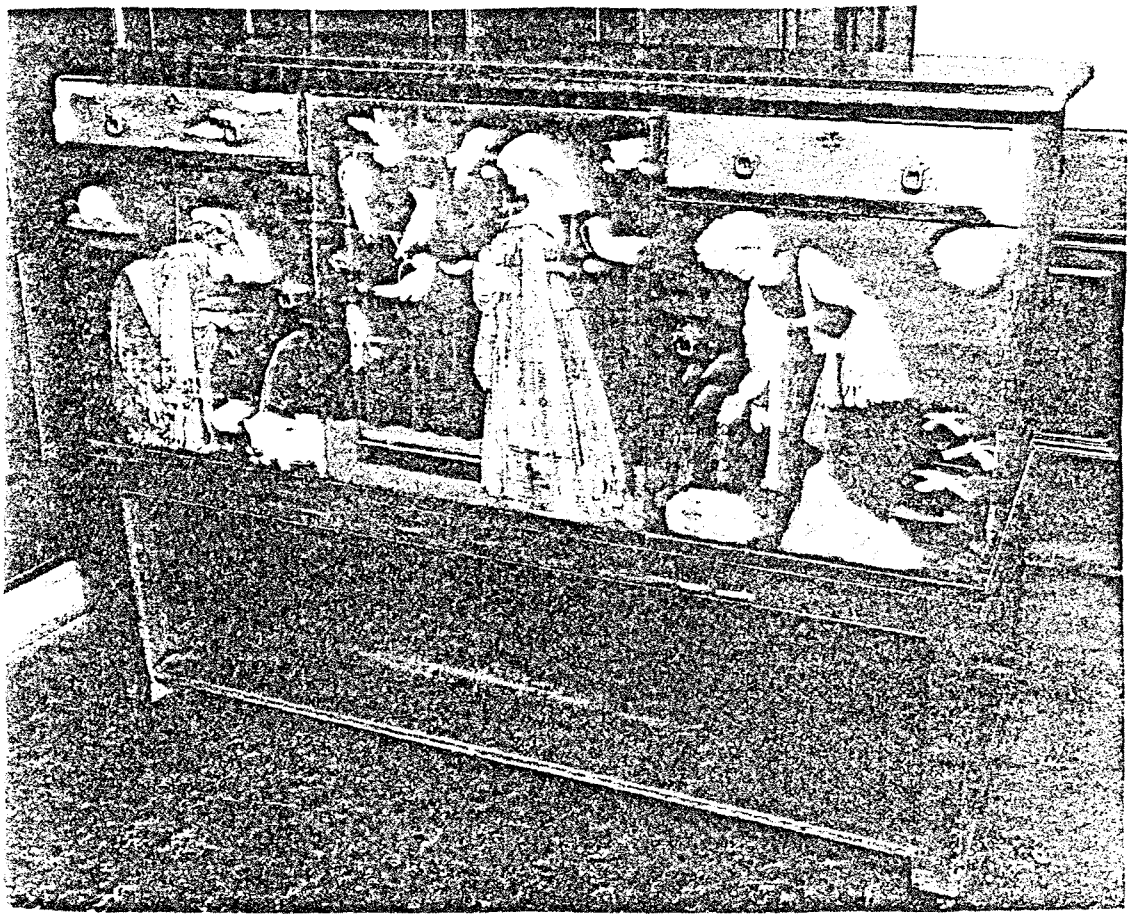

Plate 21
Ladies and Animals, 1860.

[ladies] were tormenting an owl by forcing him to look at himself in a round mirror, and gold fish by draining them dry in a net . . . ."[22/] The figures, though of the Rossetti type, show Botticelli's influence both in mood and in the lyrical use of decorative birds and flowers. The sideboard is a preview of the handcrafted and hand-decorated furniture that was to be produced by the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company.[23/]

In the same year Burne-Jones painted a canvas entitled Sidonia Von Bork. The subject was taken from Wilhelm Meinhold's book, Sidonia the Sorceress published in 1847 and translated into English by Lady Wilde in 1849. Burne-Jones had become acquainted with the book through Rossetti, who greatly admired it and felt a need to share the story with his friends. Meinhold's Sidonia was a young girl from a wealthy Pomeranian family whose beauty was so remarkable that all those who saw her fell in love with her. Accompanying her beauty, however, was her incurably vicious personality. Among many of her evil acts, she succeeded in bewitching the

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[22/] Ibid.

[23/] Burne-Jones was a founding member of the firm when it was established in 1861.

Plate 22
Sidonia Von Bork, 1860.

entire house of Pomerania, luring them to their deaths or rendering them sterile.[24]

Burne-Jones chose an early episode in Sidonia's life in which she plots against the Dutchess of Wolgast. Sidonia is shown in the foreground wearing a white dress which is overlaid with black velvet cord, woven in such a way as to suggest the writhing and slithering of snakes. The back of her long, golden hair is covered with a decorative net. In one hand she grasps one of the sepentine forms on her skirt and with the other she fingers the locket around her neck. Her face reveals a pensive and sinister expression as her next victim, the Dutchess, enters in the distant background.

The watercolor, Sidonia Von Bork, so closely resembles Rossetti's style of the 1860's that it could easily be mistaken for the older artist's work. It is, in fact, quite similar in composition to Rossetti's Lucretia Borgia which was begun during the same year.[25] Both works feature their subjects in the immediate foreground. Sidonia's body, like Lucretia's, is shown in a full length profile pose which forms a sinuous curve.

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[24] Arts Council of Great Britian, Paintings, Graphic and Decorative Work of Burne-Jones, 25.

[25] It was retouched in 1868.

Burne-Jones painted a companion piece to Sidonia Von Bork during the same year entitled Clara Von Bork. Clara was a good and gentle woman who married Sidonia's virtuous cousin, Marcus Von Bork. Clara eventually became a target for Sidonia's viciousness and was cruelly destroyed. Clara's image is personified by the nest of fledging doves she holds in her hands, and her relationship with Sidonia is symbolized by Sidonia's cat (her familiar) staring hopefully at the vulnerable doves. Clara's posture is linear and upright. Her hair is shorter than Sidonia's, her facial expression reflects innocence and virtue.

Sidonia and Clara are spiritual as well as physical opposites. They represent that dichotomy of feminine types which intrigued Rossetti and obviously interested Burne-Jones as well. Burne-Jones once said,

> "There are two kinds of women I like, the very good--the golden haired, and the exceedingly mischievous--the sirens with the oat coloured hair. Perfect snips they are."26/

The femme fatale with her inherently mystical, almost allegorical qualities no doubt appealed to Burne-Jones' sense of romance and mystery. Like Rossetti, he became

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26/Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 161.

Plate 23
Clara Von Bork, 1860.

interested with the power of feminine beauty and the element of control it wielded.

Stylistic Development: The Femme Fatale

On June 9th, 1860, Burne-Jones was married to Georgiana MacDonald. The daughter of a Methodist minister, she was part of a large family of modest means. As a result of her warm, accepting home life, she was already mature and confident by the time she was engaged to Burne-Jones at age fifteen. The marriage however, did not take place until four years later. Georgiana proved to be an exceptionally dedicated and faithful wife, who provided continuous support throughout her husband's career. Burne-Jones did not, however, reciprocate this faithfulness; like Rossetti, he had a series of indiscreet affairs. But unlike Rossetti, his artistic imagery, the femme fatale in particular, rarely related to women in his personal life.[27/]

[27/] In 1866 Burne-Jones fell in love with a young Greek woman named Maria Zambaco. Although their relationship was stormy his work reflects only his positive feelings for her. He did a series of sensitive drawings of her which can be compared to Rossetti's pen and ink portraits of Elizabeth. On canvases she appears as Beatrice, one of the Three Graces Love Disguised As Reason, The Evening Star, Summer, and as the woman in Phyllis and Demaphoon; none of which portray the femme fatale. Only in The Beguiling of Merlin (1870-1874)
(footnote continued on following page)

The femme fatale appeared in Burne-Jones' work more as a result of Rossetti's influence than as a reflection of his own experiences. In 1861 Burne-Jones employed Rossetti's mistress, Fanny Cornforth, to model for his second version of Merlin and Nimue. In the composition, Nimue stands in front of Merlin, holding his book of magical spells and enchantments. Having just read a passage from the book, she glances to the side, aware that Merlin is approaching from behind. Merlin holds his left hand over his heart and tightly clenches his right fist, these gestures illustrating his confusion between a love for Nimue and knowledge of her evil intentions. Burne-Jones chose to interpret the stone under which Merlin was lured as an underground cell partially covered by a huge stone block. In clear view hang the keys that will lock the magician behind the barred room of the underground chamber. In the immediate foreground some red poppies (Rossetti's symbol for death) spring from the ground.

This watercolor again demonstrates Rossetti's strong influence upon Burne-Jones' early work. Nimue,

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(footnote 27 continued from previous page)
does she appear as a femme fatale and this piece had been started when their relationship had already begun to deteriorate. This painting will be discussed later in the text.

Plate 24
Merlin and Nimue, 1861.

with her unbound, copper-colored hair, pale skin, prominent lips and heavy-lidded eyes, conforms to Rossetti's alluring female archetype. The figures are dressed in medieval-style robes, and the whole composition is charged with mystery and subtle emotion.

While some of the elements of Rossetti's influence prevail throughout Burne-Jones' work, in many ways their mature styles diverged. As Rossetti's women grew fleshier and more sensual, Burne-Jones' women became progressively more ethereal and otherworldly. Rossetti's femmes fatales always reflected an intense psychological aura, whereas Burne-Jones' temptresses always remained idealized and decorative.[28/]

Burne-Jones became a founding member of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company in 1861. He hand-painted furniture and murals, and designed stained glass windows for the firm. One of these projects was a window for Peterhouse College, Cambridge. Commissioned in 1864, it

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[28/] When Rossetti moved to the fuller, more rounded woman his work began to diverge from the other second generation Pre-Raphaelite painters, who continued to depict thin, delicate ladies. However, Rossetti's personality and literary tastes continued to be vital to the movement. The repressed sexuality and languor in his women were characteristics passed on by Rossetti and ever present in the work of his followers.

illustrates the story of Hypsiphile and Medea from Chaucer's Legend of Good Women. Chaucer's tale is a poetic adaption of the Greek myth concerning the two wives of Jason.[29]

Hypsiphile and Medea represent the virtuous and the evil woman respectively. Jason first married Hypsiphile and together they had a set of twins. Jason then abandons Hypsiphile, never to return, yet his wife remains forever virtuous and chaste. Jason later marries Medea, often referred to in mythology as the "cunning one."[30] In the story of the Argonauts, Medea, the witch, falls in love with Jason and uses her magical powers to help him defeat his enemies. When Jason later leaves her for yet another woman, Creusa, the Princess of Corinth, Medea sends Creusa a poisoned robe for a wedding gift and sets fire to the Princess' palace. Medea then murders her own children by Jason, a vengeful act that prompts him to take his own life, and then flees to Athens in a cart drawn by dragons.[31]

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[29] S. P. Tatlock and P. Mackaye, The Modern Reader's Chaucer, New York, 1960, 569-574.

[30] The Oxford Classical Dictionary, N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, editors, Oxford, 2nd ed., 1970, 650, 658.

[31] The Encyclopedia of Classical Mythology, Merriam and Company, editors, New Jersey, 1965, 86.

Plate 25
Hysiphile and Medea, 1864.

Burne-Jones depicts Hypsiphile with a longing, melancholic expression; he shows Medea with a cold and calculating gaze. Both Hypsiphile and Medea exude that Medievalistic sensuousness characteristic of Rossetti's women.

Still another femme fatale from Greek mythology painted during the same period was The Wine of Circe. Burne-Jones began this watercolor in 1863 and completed it in 1869. According to Homer's Odyssey, Circe was a beautiful goddess who lived on the Island of Aeaea and possessed potent magical powers. Mariners who visited her island were invited to feast and to drink her specially prepared wine--a potion which transformed the men into various beasts. When Odysseus' men were turned into swine he came to their rescue. He used an herb called Moly to protect himself from Circe's magic, and forced her to reverse the spell.[32/]

In the painting, Circe is shown with two panthers at her feet--men that have been transformed into her bestial servants. She reaches over them towards an urn and adds a few drops of liquid to her

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[32/] Oxford Classical Dictionary, edited by Hammond and Scullard, 1970, 658.

Plate 26
The Wine of Circe, 1863-1869.

potion from a small vial held in her hand. Through a large window in the background one can see the sails of Ulysses' ships.

This watercolor marks a transition in Burne-Jones' painting. Over the six-year period in which he worked on The Wine of Circe he had begun to experiment with new styles. Showing little evidence of Rossetti's influence, this piece reflects the artist's new interest in antique sculpture[33] and his increasing involvement in the decorative arts.

The interior, in contrast to Rossetti's dark, mysterious Gothic environment, is flooded with light and creates a classical atmosphere. The furnishings are ancient Greek in flavor and Circe herself wears a draped, classical-style garment. In the left-hand corner of the painting is included a vase of large sunflowers, the plant that was to later become a symbol for the Aesthetic Movement.[34]

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[33] During the mid-1860's Burne-Jones studied antique sculpture. His sketchbooks contain many drawings of the classical pieces at the British Museum. Arts Council of Great Britian, Paintings, Graphic and Decorative Work of Edward Burne-Jones, 93, figure 340.

[34] Although often associated with the Aesthetic Movement, which emerged in the 1870's, Burne-Jones was never actually a member. He could never fully accept the idea of "Art for Art's Sake" with its premise of non-narrative painting. Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 93-94.

In spite of stylistic changes in The Wine of Circe, Rossetti was inspired to write the following sonnet as an expression of his interest and approval of the theme.

> "Dusk-haired and gold-robed o'er golden wine
> She stoops, wherein, distilled of death and shame,
> Sink the black drops; while lit with fragrant flame,
> Round her spread board the golden sunflowers shine.
> Doth Melios here with Hecate combine
> (O Circe, thou their votaress?) to proclaim,
> For these thy guests all rapture in Love's name,
> Till pitiless Night give Day the Countersign?
>
> Lords of their hour, they come. And by her knee
> Those cowering beasts, their equals heretofore,
> Wait; who with them in new equality
> Tonight shall echo back the sea's dull roar
> With a vain wail from passion's tide-strown shore
> Where the dishevelled seaweed hates the sea."35/

In 1871 and 1873 Burne-Jones made his last trips to Italy. Throughout the rest of his life, the influence of Botticelli, Mantegna, Signorelli, Leonardo Da Vinci and Michaelangelo could be seen in his work.36/ Upon his return in 1873, Burne-Jones began to work on an oil entitled Laus Veneris. The subject, based on the Medieval legend of Tannhauser, had been re-created in a contemporary poem by Charles A. Swinburne. The

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35/The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, edited by W. M. Rossetti, London, 1887, I, 350.

36/Art Council of Great Britian, The Paintings, Graphic and Decorative Work of Burne-Jones, 48, and Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 107.

poem was published in a book called Laus Veneris in Poems and Ballads in 1866 and it was most likely this version of the tale that Burne-Jones chose to illustrate.[37]

Laus Veneris depicts a subtly erotic scene with what has been described as ". . . an air of malaise within the painting."[38] A lovesick Venus (depicted royally) reclines on a chair while female attendants play music for her entertainment. This is obviously to no avail for the Queen still languishes with desire. Describing the Venus and her ladies, Swinburne wrote:

> ". . . There loverlike with lips and limbs that meet
> They lie, they pluck sweet fruit of life and eat;
> But me that hot and hungry days devour,
> And in my mouth no fruit of theirs is
> sweet. . . ."[39]

The music, however, has drawn the attention of some knights on horseback and they peer through a large rectangular window. Soon to be captives, these warriors have been successfully lured by the women inside. The crowded chamber is medieval in feeling but the walls are

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[37] Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 115. The book included a dedication to Burne-Jones, as Swinburne had seen the artist's watercolor version of this subject in 1861. See, Arts Council of Great Britian, Paintings, Graphic and Decorative Work of Burne-Jones, 53.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Citing Swinburne's poem Laus Veneris. Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 115.

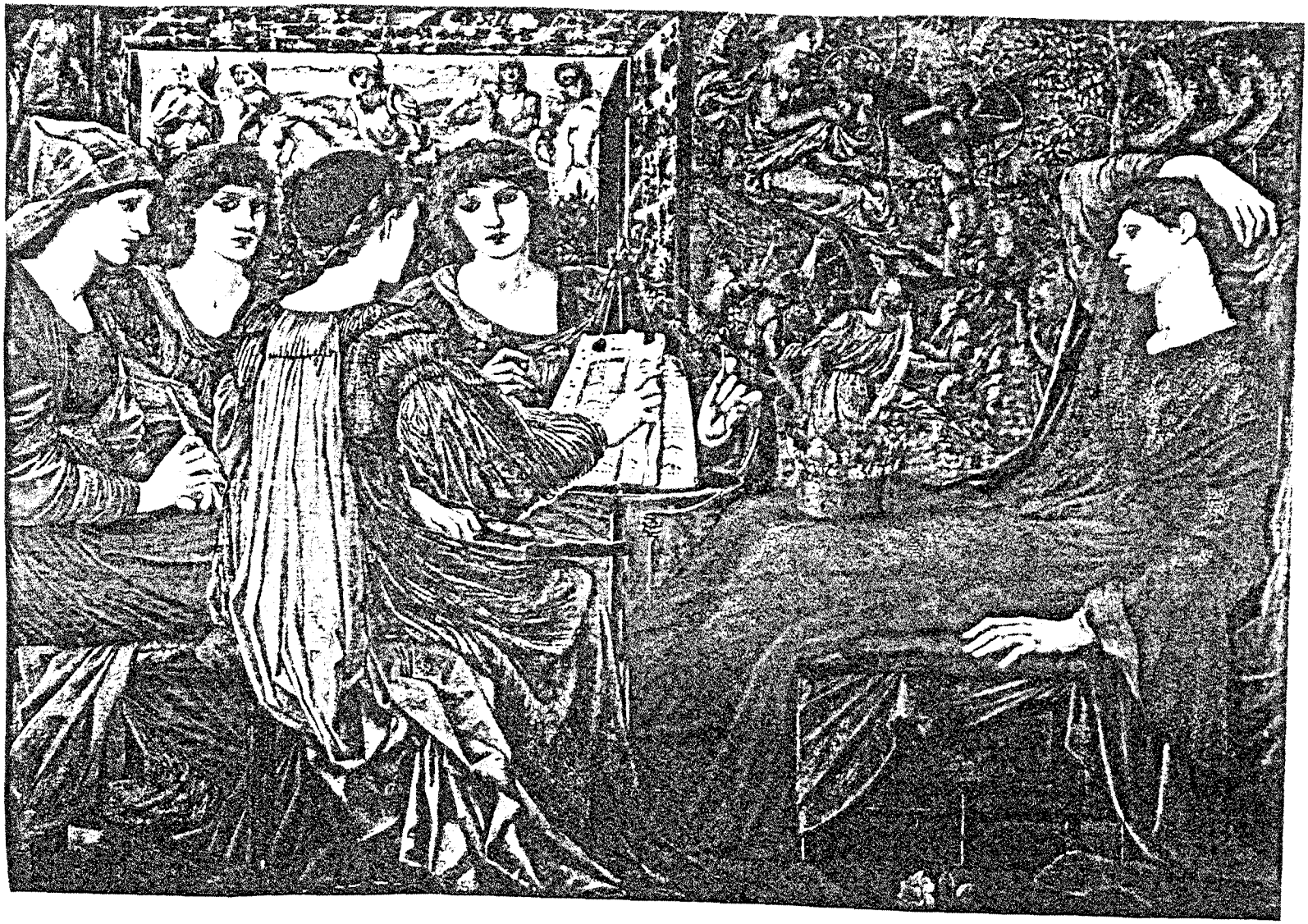

Plate 27
Laus Veneris, 1873-1875.

decorated with two murals that are Italianate in style. One depicts "Passing of Venus" and the other shows a Siren wading in a pool of water.[40]

The Venus figure can compare thematically to Rossetti's Lady Lilith in that both women languidly await the arrival of the men they will overpower with their beauty. Both express sensuousness and lust but no warmth or love. When the painting was exhibited in 1878, a critic from the magazine Temple Bar described the Venus figure as "'Stricken with disease of the soul . . . eaten up and gnawed away with disappointment and desire.'"[41]

The figures in this piece show little of Rossetti's style but rather, the influence of the Italian Renaissance masters, Botticelli in particular. The Queen's attendants are painted with the same kind of delicate, serene beauty we see in Botticelli's Birth of Venus. Interestingly, the faces of the knights are painted in this same style. Their faces are sweet and delicate, their bodies small-framed and non-muscular.

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[40] See Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 114 and plate 30 for an interesting discussion and good illustration of this painting.

[41] Arts Council of Great Britian, Paintings, Graphic and Decorative Work of Burne-Jones, 53, citing F. Wedmore, Temple Bar Magazine, L 111, July 1878, 35.

Burne-Jones differs from Rossetti in that he includes men in many of his compositions; however, they are often as beautiful as the women. His thin-hipped, small-breasted women and delicately framed men begin to take on androgynous forms.[42]

Laus Veneris fully demonstrates Burne-Jones' mature style. It shows a synthesis of the artist's various influences within the framework of his personal artistic language.

During the years 1870-1874 Burne-Jones worked on his third version of Merlin and Nimue. Entitled The Beguiling of Merlin,[43] the painting was based on a French medieval version of the story called The Romance of Merlin, which had been translated and published in England during the late 1860's. In this version, Nimue

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[42] Perhaps this imagery was inspired by Leonardo's work. See Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 107. During the mid-1870's his figures have a muscular, Michaelangesque appearance. But as with Michaelangelo, the women are painted as muscularly as the men; thus we have androgyny in another form.

[43] It is sometimes referred to as Merlin and Vivien. The names, "Nimue," "The Lady of the Lake," "Morgan Le Fay" and "Vivien" apparently represent various aspects of one mythic figure. The names "Nimue" and "Vivien" resulted from "miscopying by successive scribes," The Oxford Companion to English Literature, 458-9.

convinces the wizard to take refuge from a storm under the branches of a hawthorne tree. Using Merlin's book of enchantments as a guide, she puts the magician into a sleeplike trance and leaves him there forever.[44]

The scene is stylistically very different from his 1861 rendering of the subject. The figures of Merlin and Nimue are inspired by Hellenistic sculpture, and are not at all like their Rossetti-influenced counterparts in the 1861 canvas. Merlin is now shown reclining among a complex network of twisting, blossoming branches. His arms and legs have gone limp and he stares blankly as he falls more deeply under the spell.

Nimue, holding the book of magic in her hands, looks over her shoulder and watches Merlin as he slips into his trance. Both figures are dressed in flowing classical-style drapery, their bodies curving and twisting like the decorative branches that surround them. Burne-Jones has created a strange and mysterious yet highly aesthetic composition. Even sinister elements such as the entwined serpents atop Nimue's head (which symbolize her evil deed) appear pleasingly decorative.

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[44] Ibid, 537.

Plate 28 The Beguiling of Merlin, 1870-1874.

Harrison and Waters refer to Nimue as "seductress and conqueror."[45] They make the point that the body postures of Merlin and Nimue represent a reversal of roles. Nimue standing vertically above Merlin, symbolizes the role of the active male, while Merlin, lying powerless beneath her represents the (traditionally) passive female figure.

The model for Nimue was Mary Zambaco, a woman with whom Burne-Jones was deeply involved between 1866 and 1871. This however, was the only canvas in which she (or any other of his women) appears as a femme fatale. Studies for the painting were begun in 1870, close to the time that their relationship ended. It is possible that his portrayal of her as a femme fatale was an expression of negative feelings that he had begun to have for her.

Success and Influence

The Beguiling of Merlin and Laus Veneris were two pieces exhibited at the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877. Eight of Burne-Jones' pieces were exhibited in all and the public received them with

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[45] Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 111.

great enthusiasm. The show proved to be quite beneficial for the painter for it marked the beginning of his recognition and acclaim.

The acquisition of new patrons afforded him financial success and he was able to purchase a seaside cottage at Rottingdean. This marine atmosphere inspired a series of drawings and paintings, among them, The Depths of The Sea of 1886. This painting portrays a mermaid, who having lured a young sailor into the sea, is shown pulling her victim down to the ocean floor. As the two descend, it is apparent that the young man has already drowned. The scene is not fully explained for the mermaid's intentions remain somewhat ambiguous. She looks out at the viewer smiling faintly. Does she wear this expression in evil satisfaction because she knows she has destroyed him? Or, unaware that he has drowned, is she smiling triumphantly at having captured him? Whether or not his death was caused intentionally, the result is the same; the sailor has been lured to his destruction.

The Depths of the Sea exemplifies the influence of Michaelangelo and Leonard Da Vinci upon Burne-Jones' late work. The muscular body of the captive sailor is reminiscent of Michaelangelo's Dying Slave. The mermaid's facial expression is ambiguous like that of the

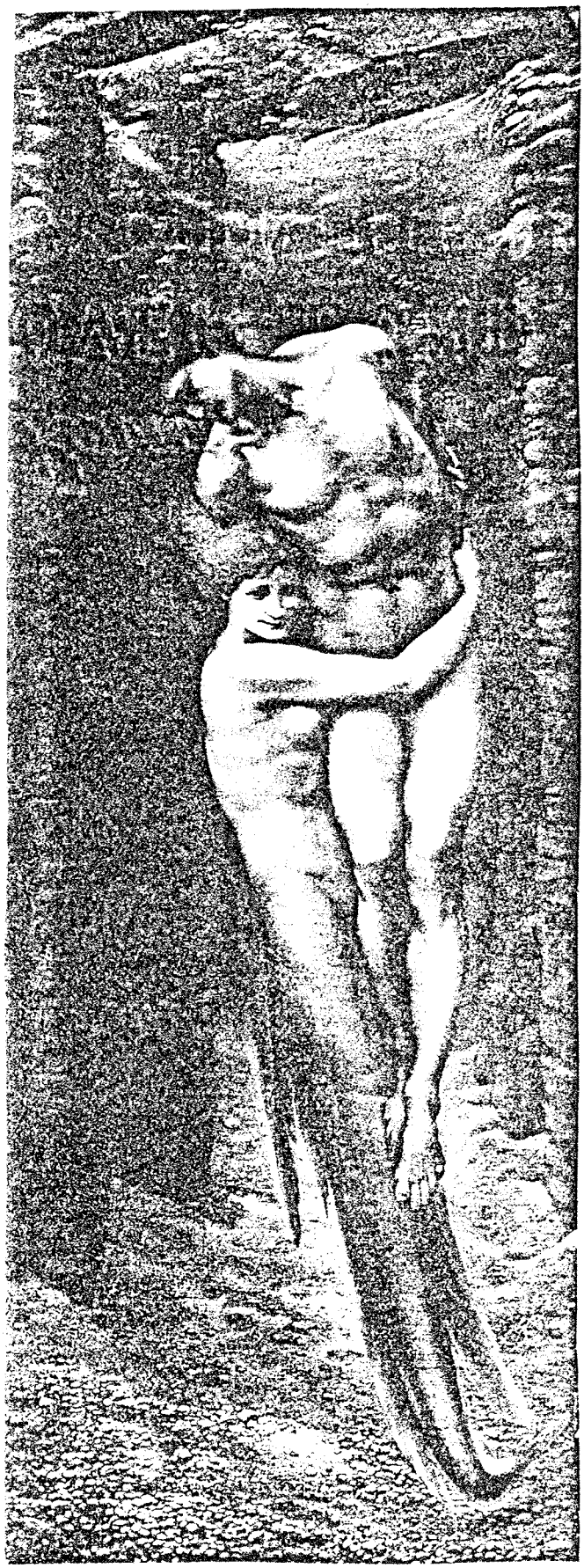

Plate 29
Depths of the Sea, 1866.

Mona Lisa's. This was no doubt done purposely for Burne-Jones felt that mystery and a certain degree of puzzlement were positive and necessary characteristics in painting and that art should "'. . . suggest the mystery of life.'"[46]

An oil entitled The Sirens was begun in 1885. This piece, which Burne-Jones worked on over a period of years, further demonstrates his desire to create an art form that projected an aura of mystery. In a letter to his patron, Frederick Leyland, Burne-Jones described the painting while in progress.

> "It is a sort of Sirenland--not Greek Sirens, but any Sirens, anywhere, that lure on men to destruction. There will be a shore full of them, looking out from rocks and crannies in the rocks, at a boat full of armed men, and the time will be sunset. The men shall look at the women and the women at the men, but what happens afterwards is more then I care to tell."[47]

Standing on shore within a cove, the sirens watch the approaching ship. Strange lighting and cold blue atmospheric hues convey a feeling of impending disaster. The figures are neither Greek nor Italian in style. They cannot be identified with any specific

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[46] G. Burne-Jones, Memorials, II, 263.

[47] Ibid, II, 222, a letter to Leyland in 1891.

Plate 30 The Sirens, 1875, never completed.

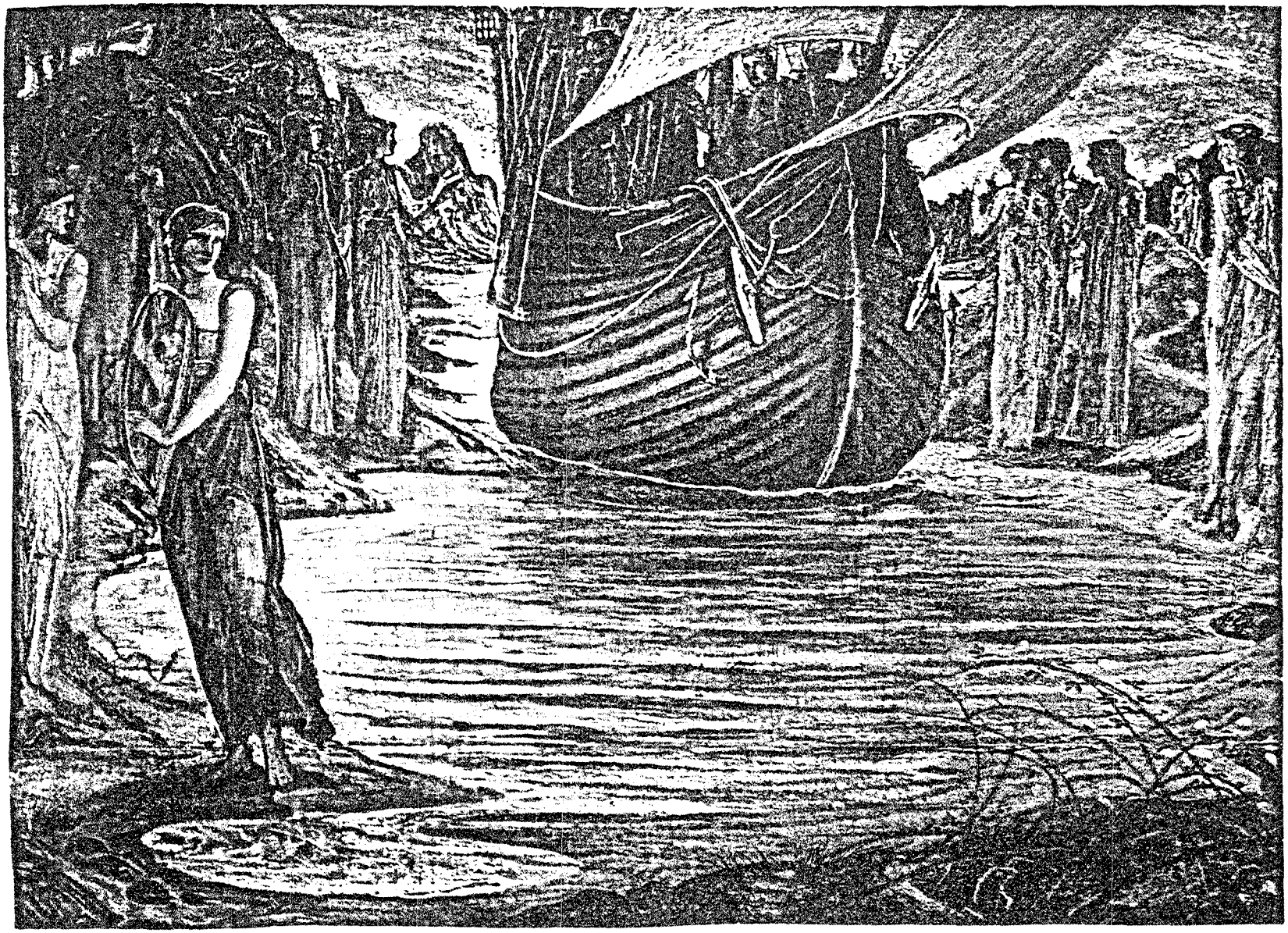

Plate 30 The Sirens, 1875, never completed.

time or place, but belong rather to an eerie fantasy world created by the painter. The Sirens was one of the last paintings Burne-Jones worked on before he died in 1898.[48] Like his teacher, Burne-Jones never lost interest in the fatally alluring woman.

Burne-Jones' success was not limited to England. In 1878, The Beguiling of Merlin and Love Amoung the Ruins were exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in Paris and were enthusiastically received by the critics as well as the Parisian public.[49] Burne-Jones had introduced a new kind of feminine beauty to the Continent. His thin, pale, melancholic female archetype, reminiscent of Botticelli's women in flowing gowns, proved so appealing to the French that Parisian women soon began to emulate her image.[50]

During the same Exposition, Charles Blanc, a critic with traditional ideals (and founder of the Gazette des Beaux-Arts) surprised the public with his favorable review of Burne-Jones' entries. He said,

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[48] The painting was never completed.

[49] J. Lethève, "La Connaissance Des Peintres Préraphaélites Anglais En France," Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 53, May-June, 1960, 318.

[50] A. Springer, "Some Images of Women in French Posters of the 1890's," Art Journal, Winter 1973-4, 116-24.

"A mon sens la plus etonnante peinture qui nous soit venue de Londres est celle de Burnes-Jones [sic]: Merlin et Viviane. Il y a là une quintessence d'idéal, une poésie sublimée qui m'appréhende au coeur."[51]

It is the element of "sublime poetry" which drew the young Symbolist writers to Burne-Jones' work. His paintings illustrated a kind of imagery with which they could identify. Like Burne-Jones, the Symbolists[52] rejected the real world around them for an environment of their own creation--a spiritual, imagined world of another place and time.

The dualism of good and evil apparent in Burne-Jones' women was particularly consistent with the Symbolist mentality. This dichotomy was, in fact, one of the predominant themes within Symbolist art. John

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[51] "In my opinion the most striking painting which has come to us from London is Burne-Jones' Merlin and Viviane. There is in it the quintessence of the ideal, a sublime poetry which deeply frightens me." J. Lethève, "La Connaissance Des Préraphaélites En France," 319. Citing an article by C. Blanc, "Les Beaux Arts a L'Expos un de 1878," Renouard, 1878, 335.

[52] The Symbolist movement began as a literary movement. The Symbolist Manifesto was written by Jean Moreas in 1886. The writers sought painters who illustrated their type of written imagery. By the 1890's, the poets and painters worked together, illustrating each other's art forms.

Milner points out that in Symbolist art woman is portrayed as either virginal or maternal on the one hand, or as an evil, lustful destroyer on the other.[53] This dualism expresses broad generalizations which are inherently misogynistic.

Mallarme, Verlaine, Rimbaud and other Symbolist authors had originally been inspired by the work of Baudelaire, particularly by his Les Fleurs Du Mal (The Flowers of Evil) published in 1857. This essentially misogynistic volume of verses eventually became a source for much of the Symbolists' imagery. A full decade before Burne-Jones' paintings were first exhibited in France, G. Burty, a French critic for Gazette des Beaux Arts, viewed Burne-Jones' work while visiting England. Upon his return, he noted that Burne-Jones' paintings evoked the imagery created by Baudelaire in Les Fleurs De Mal.[54] Burty was, in a sense, anticipating the Symbolists' later interest in Burne-Jones.

Philippe Jullian states that the Pre-Raphaelites were, without a doubt, the principle influence upon the

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[53] J. Milner, Symbolists and Decadents, London, 1971, 41.

[54] Lethève, "La Connaissance Des Preraphaelites En France," 327.

Symbolist painters.[55] This is certainly true with respect to the image of the femme fatale. What the Pre-Raphaelites had portrayed as the Victorian temptress with her subtle eroticism, mysteriousness and allure, the Symbolist painters transformed into a blatantly lustful and malicious destroyer. By 1890 sphinxes, sirens and sorceresses became not only acceptable but quite fashionable in the arts. Sarah Bernhardt, the incarnate femme fatale, proved this by gathering huge audiences when she played roles such as Salome and Medea.

From 1878 until his death, Burne-Jones' work was exhibited regularly in Paris. His continuing popularity led to a one-man show at the Durand-Ruel Gallery in 1892. That same year he was invited to exhibit at the first Salon de la Rose-Croix. The Rosicrucian branch within the Symbolist movement had been organized by Joseph Peladan. In the Rosicrucian manifesto Peladan wrote, "'we will go to London to invite Burne-Jones, Watts and five other Pre-Raphaelites.'"[56] Burne-Jones,

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[55] Jullian, Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890's, New York, 1974, 21.

[56] Harrison and Waters, Burne-Jones, 174.

however, turned down the invitation to exhibit in the Salon.

Perhaps the Rosicrucians were too extreme for Burne-Jones. Their often decadent and nightmarish imagery contrasted with Burne-Jones' basic principal of producing art that was aesthetically pleasing. His portrayal of femmes fatales was much more subtle than that of his French followers, and for that reason more acceptable to the general public. Because Burne-Jones' message of feminine evil and beguilement was transmitted by means of a popular and attractive art form, its subliminal impact was all the more potent. He therefore might have had a more permeating effect upon the 19th century's prejudicial stereotype of women than his more flamboyantly misogynous followers.

The femme fatale was a theme introduced into Burne-Jones' work by Rossetti; his earliest apprentice pieces portray this imagery. His teacher and mentor passed on to him an image that was innately mysterious, dangerous and sensual. For Rossetti and Burne-Jones, who were both born into the Romantic period and raised in the atmosphere of Victorian sexual repression, the femme fatale was an ideal form of artistic expression. She possessed all the qualities that appealed to each of their emotions, tastes and fantasies.

Chapter 4

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The femme fatale image was a visual expression of the overwhelming misogynistic climate that prevailed in the latter part of the 19th century. The belief that woman possessed special mystical, spiritual and sexual power over man was a fashionable concept during that period. In actuality, woman was, indeed, beginning to threaten man, for her social status was suddenly changing. The women's rights movement was beginning to gain momentum and the industrial revolution had brought about changes in business and industry. As a result, women had begun to enter the job market, and became potential competitors to men.

The idea of women leaving the home and entering a world that was formerly restricted to men was perhaps the largest threat. Rossetti and Burne-Jones' friend, John Ruskin (a respected writer and critic), delivered a public speech in 1864 in which he tried to convince the English women to stay in the home. Filled with flowery language and flattery, his lecture, entitled "Of Queen's Gardens" urged women to not waste time developing

their intellects. His thesis was that women's sentimentality was their strength, and a virtue that men lacked. For Ruskin, woman's best task was to supplement man's achievements.

Rossetti and Burne-Jones, though not as conservative as Ruskin, obviously shared many of his viewpoints. Rossetti, for instance, allowed Ruskin to join him in his constant concern for Elizabeth's health. Ruskin put the delicate Elizabeth high on a pedestal, arranging for her to see various doctors and giving her money to travel so she could breath healthier air.

Elizabeth's frailness was considered a desirable attribute to the people in Rossetti's circle. After visiting the Rossettis one day Ford Maddox Brown noted in his diary that Elizabeth had looked thinner, more pale, more deathlike and more beautiful than ever.

Rossetti's femme fatale, in her strength and assertiveness, therefore represented the antithesis of Elizabeth. Because it was not considered "becoming" for a Victorian woman to appear strong and assertive, it is not surprising that the femme fatale gained notoriety only when her image began to be portrayed in France. By the end of the century, French women began to act out the role in real life. This perhaps occurred because the

image allowed more personal and social freedom than other traditional feminine roles.

While the femme fatale gained currency in France, it must be remembered that she was not commonly pictorally depicted there until the late 1880's and 1890's in the work of the French and Belgian Symbolists that exhibited with the Salon de la Rose Croix. Among these were Armand Point, Alexander Séon, Ferdinand Khnopff, Jean Delville and Émile Fabry. When Rossetti and Burne-Jones were painting femmes fatales in the 1860's and 1870's, French painters were depicting women in essentially every role except the femme fatale. In French art before this period, one sees women personified as allegorical, classical and biblical subjects, as well as bathers, dancers, barmaids, mothers, peasants and ladies in the park.

Although it is generally assumed that the femme fatale image began in France, an examination of the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones indicates otherwise. It is therefore clear that we must consider her possible roots in England.

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