

## ROSSETTI'S *VENUS* AND BURNE-JONES'S *MERMAID*: INVITATIONS TO DIALOGUE

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*One face looks out from all his canvases ...  
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.*

– Christina Rossetti

Although Christina Rossetti may have been writing about her brother's obsessive paintings of Lizzie Siddal, her familiar words apply just as well to the portrait-format heads and half-lengths that fill Dante Gabriel Rossetti's canvases from 1858 onward. I refer not only to his fetishistic images of Jane Morris but to the many outwardly gazing beauties, usually accessorized with flowers, whose main purpose seems ornamental rather than narrative. These paintings, owing to what Robert Buchanan would call their "animalism," titillated some Victorian viewers; they incited sexual fantasy before the photograph was cheap and reliable. Rossetti's fellow Pre-Raphaelite F.G. Stephens dismissed the works as highlighting the "marvelous fleshiness of the flesh" but achieving nothing else (qtd. in Riede, *Rossetti Revisited* 80). Both Rossetti and Swinburne countered that only the uncultivated mind would make these charges. Nevertheless, these half-length female figures have continued to be criticized as static descriptions rather than works producing an emotional "exchange" with the viewer. Note the similarity of the following two commentators who wrote eighty years apart: Rossetti's pictures are capable of merely "dazzling the eyes with fires, false perhaps, but superlatively beautiful" (Robertson 86); the paintings appeal to the eye, but not the heart: "the capacity for tragedy is not reached" (Steezman 173). Many of Edward Burne-Jones's female figures have similarly been dismissed. Though Rossetti's and Burne-Jones's art may often appear simply as an arrangement of decorative beauty, some of their works have the capability to invite empathy for a woman's constrained position in Victorian society.

As many have noted and Barbara Munson Goff has discussed at length, Rossetti was highly influenced by Dante's suggestion that one woman –