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Is There Substance Behind the Shadows? New Works on Elizabeth Siddal

We all thought we knew her. Elizabeth Siddal—Pre-Raphaelite muse, the wife of Rossetti, and the amber-haired inspiration for paintings, poetry, and a type of feminine beauty—came to us wrapped in the shadows of myth. Few of us could resist her story and many of us must admit that it was the intrigues of that story that drew us into Pre-Raphaelite study. But, in the past decade, we have come to regard that story as romantic invention and to question the assumptions it puts forth, about her age, her class, her appearance, her talent, and even her relationship with Rossetti. Through the writings of the late 1970s and early 1980s we came to see how we bought into the myth of Elizabeth Siddal and how we took the sign for the woman. Now, new works—Jan Marsh's *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* (1989) and the catalogues for two recent exhibitions *Elizabeth Siddal Pre-Raphaelite Artist 1829-1862* (1991) and *Rossetti's Portraits of Elizabeth Siddal* (1991)—are giving us a clearer image of the woman to put in place of the sign.¹ The time is right to coax the substance out from the shadows, but the process of sorting the life from the legend is slow and difficult, with a hesitancy that goes beyond scholarly caution. Perhaps we fear that the woman who will displace the sign will not be as intriguing as the inventions that obscured her.

From the time that Siddal's appearance in Rossetti's art became a point of critical interest, her image has been used to confirm our assumptions about her. A drawing of her by Rossetti from 1854 (The Art Institute of Chicago) seems typical. Her tall, willowy form fills the high, narrow space. Her dress is simple and her legendary hair frames her inclined face in its characteristic "wings." There is no background to distract our gaze from her. Her own self-absorption enforces this engagement. With downcast eyes and a pensive expression, her gaze is fixed on an object held between her hands. Virginia Surtees tentatively identified this

as a locket (no. 490). A scarf trails from her right hand. Here is the Elizabeth Siddal we know: withdrawn, distracted, sad and ailing, lost in a world of enigmatic dreams. Locked in a claustrophobic enclosure and bowing her head in passive complicity, she is offered to the viewer as a rare object, and the visual pleasure of this action is tinged with voyeurism.

The drawing is one of many that Rossetti did of Siddal during their respite in Hastings (May-June, 1854).² This distinctive group presents Siddal standing or sitting, sometimes reading, but generally distracted, with gaze averted. As a set, they seem to chart Siddal's failing health and growing fragility; they have been used repeatedly to mark Rossetti's obsession with her image and her emerging mistrust of Rossetti's marital intentions. But, this drawing, and the rest of the Hastings group, do not document Siddal's circumstance but the vision of her held by Rossetti at a particular time and place. By mistaking image for actuality, we participate in the myth-making. While it took Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock to remind us that "drawings are never...literal transcriptions of an appearance" (1988; 112), we have to admit Rossetti was never dishonest about the power of appropriation that was central to his art. Consider his declaration in closing the second stanza of "The Portrait," Sonnet IX of *The House of Life*: "Let all men note/That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!)/ They that would look on her must come to me." For Rossetti, artistic depiction was inseparable from possession.

To give corporeality to the ghost that has passed as Elizabeth Siddal for more than a century we need to find new ways to view her, outside the Pre-Raphaelite conventions and within the broader context that defined her life, as a Victorian woman. A revision of the iconography in the Art Institute drawing proves instructive for an appropriate shift in perspective. Charlotte Gere and Geoffrey C. Munn state Siddal holds a