CHRISTINA ROSSETTI AND SARAH WOODRUFF: TWO REMEDIES FOR A DIVIDED SELF

In the concluding moments of John Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman, the hero, Charles, locates the long-lost damsel and arrives "in full armor, ready to slay the dragon."[1] But the damsel Sarah breaks all the rules not only by refusing to be rescued, but also by assuming an active role whereby she is free to command Charles. In the second of the novel's three endings, she instructs a de-knighted Charles to await the appearance of a "lady" who can explain the damsel's outrageous conduct; and because Sarah has found her way into the household of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Charles "divined at once" that the "lady" was Rossetti's sister, Christina. Prematurely he blames her for misguiding Sarah and attributes her sway to an "incomprehensible mysticism. . . a passionate obscurity, the sense of a mind too inward and femininely involute . . . absurdly muddled over the frontiers of human and divine love" (456). Charles is mistaken about the lady's identity, for the one Sarah refers to is her child, the product of her one sexual encounter with Charles. Yet he is not amiss in his association of the two women. More than the qualities Charles assigned the poet, Sarah has in common with Christina Rossetti "a spirit prepared to sacrifice everything but itself" (465). Ironically, the same traits that mark them as extraordinary women also set them apart from a society that favored the damsel who played by the rules, the damsel, who like Ernestina Freeman of the novel, "had exactly the right face for her age" (25). These two who lack "the right face" abandon their efforts for integration with a hypocritical society and aim instead for integration of self; here their paths diverge. The questions to be answered are how and why can the fictional heroine achieve an authentic serenity and selfhood while the poet discovers a self that may seem unnatural, contrived, and at times the product of pure artifice.

Because Christina Rossetti and Sarah Woodruff follow their quest to different ends, perhaps it is inaccurate to suggest that Christina is a source for Fowles' heroine. Nevertheless the similarities abound. Neither woman had the pale, delicate, thin-lipped beauty that made her face "the right face for her age," but both faces made perfect subjects for Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Christina is described as having "bright bronze hair which turned [a] rich, dark brown hue . . . a clear, fresh dark complexion" and "large, solemn, intelligent eyes."[2] Just such a face had Sarah Woodruff. In his book on Fowles, Barry Olshen comments upon Sarah's beauty:

It is . . . clear to anyone who has seen the paintings