

“WHAT OF HER GLASS WITHOUT HER?”  
PRISMATIC DESIRE AND AUTOEROTIC ANXIETY IN  
THE ART AND POETRY OF DANTE ROSSETTI

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“What of her glass without her?” asks the male speaker in the sonnet “Without Her” (*House of Life* 53.1). Rossetti’s answering metaphor – “The blank grey / There where the pool is blind of the moon’s face” (53.1-2) – typifies the manner in which feminine identity could be lost in a hermeneutic hall of mirrors during the nineteenth-century. In “Without Her” Rossetti’s departed lover is caught in a conflation of reflective metonymy: between her looking glass and her own specular visage. The imagery of the “moon’s face” works in a similar manner: the moon reflects light originating from the sun, and is thus, like the mirror, capable of reflection but not creation. Man and woman are set up in cosmic opposition, female power waxes and wanes in accordance with the energy she derives from man. As Arthur Symons in his poem “Moonrise” (1893) infers, the sun must tire “from the sorrowful and immense fatigue of love” and “watch the moon rise over the sea, a ghost / Of burning noontides, pallid with spent desire” (2, 7-8).

This metaphor, in which women are incapable of reaching through the looking glass and making contact with the world, extends into countless works of literature and science. Feminine desire was framed with almost scientific veracity to be merely a reflection of the desire of man.<sup>1</sup> In George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* the narrator remarks that “the vainest woman is never thoroughly conscious of her own beauty till she is loved by the man who sets her own passion vibrating in return” (140). Similarly, in the second of Rossetti’s “True Woman” sonnets (1881), “passion in her is / A glass facing his fire, where the bright bliss / Is mirrored, and the heat returned” (*House of Life* 57.2-4). Both metaphors seem to follow a contrived scientific principle whereby a woman, whether through allusions to heat-reflection or resonance (the point at which an object will vibrate), is synonymous with glass. The ethereality of feminine existence even extended to the female eyeball: where “the eye of the man [was] most firm,” woman’s was “most flexible,” where