

“SHE MAY COUNT FOR SOMETHING”:
THE PRE-RAPHAELITE DANAË

Dinah Roe

On the publication of William Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise* in 1868, *The Saturday Review* congratulates the poet for providing “our wives and daughters” with “a refined, though not diluted, version of those wonderful creations of Greek fancy which the rougher sex alone is permitted.” This same critic “tremble[s] to think of the treatment which Jove’s wooing of Danaë in the brazen tower would have been met with, had the ‘Doom of King Acrisius’ been handled by the author of *Chastelard*.” The critic’s fears of Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “error of taste” in adapting this myth (730) were actually well-founded. Swinburne had already published “Danaë” in *Once a Week* in December 1867, with suitably scandalous results; Frederick Sandys’s accompanying illustration was withheld by the magazine’s editor because, as Gordon Ray tells us, the artist “refused to cover the genitals of Danaë’s lover” (108).

The myth itself invites sexually explicit interpretation. In the story, when King Acrisius learns of the gods’ prophecy that his daughter Danaë will give birth to his killer, he imprisons her in a brass tower. Jove enters Danaë’s room and impregnates her via a mysterious shower of gold. In some versions, this gold is a bribe offered to Danaë’s guards by her uncle Proteus, who then rapes her. In all versions, Danaë’s son, Perseus, grows up to kill Acrisius. Mary Bly pinpoints the challenges of adapting the story:

The rain of gold presents itself as instantaneous consummation, the body metamorphosed into a sexual weapon. Such a direct focus on a sexual act makes the myth difficult to dramatize or foreground poetically; the image itself is hard to tame. In a sense, the Danaë myth is a perfect metaphor for rape (violation without consent or affection), and it sits uneasily in an amorous context. (343)

Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists handle this uncomfortable material in various ways. Swinburne’s “Danaë” (1867) and Morris’s “The Doom of King Acrisius” (1868), while very different, rewrite the story as a celebration of fe-