

MODELLING GOD, MODELLING RESISTANCE

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Elizabeth Siddal's pale, wan beauty and Jane Burden's dark, exotic looks undoubtedly make them the best-known of all the Pre-Raphaelite models. Dante Gabriel Rossetti immortalized Siddal and Burden in paintings such as *Beata Beatrix* and *Water Willow*. We tend not to think of his sister Christina Rossetti as often as these two women when we think of Pre-Raphaelite models. Nonetheless, Rossetti modelled for over forty paintings and photographs throughout her life (Rosenblum 114). Like Siddal and Burden, Rossetti did not write about her personal experience as a model. In her poetry and prose, however, modelling serves as an important spiritual metaphor in the creation of an identity for her female characters. Since modelling places emphasis upon the body, is highly ritualistic in terms of technique, and is performative in the negotiation played out between self/model, paying attention to modelling can help us further understand Rossetti's views on Christianity as an enacted and performed faith: that is, one's Christian life was a type of modelling of God.

In her modelling, we can identify a merger between Rossetti's own identity and the multiplicity of sacred figures for which she posed. Rossetti primarily modelled scriptural figures and saints. Within both her poetry and prose the emulation of the ritualistic gestures, phrases, and poses of sacred figures from art and the Bible takes on a heightened importance. Modelling the gestures of saintly figures such as St. Agatha, for instance, became a means to take on that identity and some of that spiritual power. For Christina, these negotiations eventually became a source of strength and a part of her performative being.

Looking at Rossetti's poetry from the angle of performance opens up new possibilities in terms of understanding how playing a role as a model, sister, poet, and woman of faith – a famous figure in the public eye, both in terms of her face as well as her poetry – affected her sense of identity. By performance, I am referring to the work of such theorists as Judith Butler,¹ whose work explores how identities are in fact not stable, but instead are generated through continuous performances. As Butler argues, "In avowing the sign's strategic