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## In Heaven or Hell? A New Reading of D.G. Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel"

"The Blessed Damozel" has often been read as a poem about a beautiful young lady who exists in a luxurious heaven but is dissatisfied because the only thing she wants is her earthly lover.<sup>1</sup> The poem has thus been seen as an exaltation of love and fidelity. Graham Hough in *The Last Romantics* and John Dixon Hunt in *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination* take this view and criticize Rossetti for painting a heaven that is much too sensual, seeing this as a fault in the poem.

Recent criticism has been more alert to a psychic and spiritual element in the poem. The idea that the physical imagery is symbolic of a mental state has been underlined, and Dante's influence has been prominently recognized. Joan Rees, for example, in her book on Rossetti, has written (65):

"The Blessed Damozel" is an ambitious poem. It attempts a modern version of such a moment of communion as Dante experienced on the first anniversary of Beatrice's death and it makes a new assemblage of the elements of physical and spiritual life. It owes something to Poe's example but it embodies a far subtler understanding of how physical imagery can be used to express psychic experience.

Rees places the damozel in heaven and compares her to Lenore. Some other critics have noted that she may be standing on one of the lower balconies of Dante's heaven. Rossetti's most recent critics (Boos, Faxon, Harrison, Richardson) all place the damozel in heaven and treat her in varying degrees as a sainted person. The full extent of Rossetti's irony in presenting the damozel has not yet been explored. In the present essay I would like to suggest that the damozel of the poem, despite all appearances to the contrary, is really damned. She exists in a low and outer circle of a graded Dantesque supernatural world, fixed there for

all eternity and unable ever to move toward "the deep wells of light," where God is. What seems literally and visually a lower circle of heaven is, ironically, the equivalent of the second circle of Dante's hell, the circle of lustful lovers.<sup>2</sup>

When the young Rossetti wrote this poem, he was heavily under the influence of Dante, and he took from *The Divine Comedy* the idea of higher and lower circles in heaven and hell. The chief thematic influence, however, is the *Vita Nuova*, with its great stress on virginal love. Dante and Beatrice, unlike the blessed damozel and her lover, never meet in a sexual embrace, and the suggestion is strong that sexual contact would have poisoned and destroyed the purity of their love.

Rossetti's damozel, on the other hand, is lustful; the love she shared with her earthly lover was sensual. In a picture he painted thirty years later to illustrate the poem, Rossetti shows her clearly dreaming of her lover's lips and face and embraces: the dreams are presented pictorially above and around her head. Appropriately, Rossetti in the poem places her in a sensual world where she is perpetually tormented by her passion: her "heaven" is the ironic equivalent of the second circle of Dante's hell, where the lustful are eternally condemned.

The idea that love should remain virginal is clear in the second published version of the poem:

Heard hardly, some of her new friends  
Amid their loving games  
Spake evermore among themselves  
Their virginal chaste names  
And the souls mounting up to God  
Went by her like thin flames.<sup>3</sup>

In the final published version this stanza became:

Around her, lovers, newly met