

LOVE, DISMEMBERMENT,
AND ELIZABETH SIDDAL'S *CORPUS*

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Ken Russell's 1967 film *Dante's Inferno* opens with a macabre image that one would more likely expect from a B-level horror movie than a Dante Gabriel Rossetti biopic. To the accompaniment of menacing orchestral music, the camera slowly zooms towards a corpse in a state of advanced decay, in a style reminiscent of 3-D schlock horror. The body, we are to understand, is that of Rossetti's one-time wife and studio model, Elizabeth Siddal, whose coffin was infamously disinterred seven years after her death so that Rossetti might retrieve the poetic manuscripts that he had ill-advisedly buried with her. The legendary status of the exhumation notwithstanding, the grotesquerie jars, incongruent with the enigmatic beauty of Siddal, who reappears in the following scene as a surrealistic Joan of Arc, triumphant over a burning pyre of canvases while riotous Pre-Raphaelites chant, "Down with Gainsborough's pretty ladies." The extreme juxtaposition between the ghoulish cadaver and the heroic beauty of the model-cum-soldier/saint speaks to the broader tension integral to Pre-Raphaelite art between the investment in faithful representations of nature on the one hand and the aestheticization of the artistic subject on the other. The very concept of the "real" attains a polyvalence, alternately referring to the naturalist concrete detail of the calluses and knotted tresses of daily life, and the transcendent core ostensibly beyond such coarse minutiae. In this essay I investigate that disjunction as apprehended through the poetry of Siddal, the subject of numerous Pre-Raphaelite paintings and sketches. Her poetry raises discomfiting questions surrounding the nature of representation, suggesting a violence inherent in the act of idealized artistic rendering, and in the power dynamics of the (heteronormative) love that programmatically informs certain Pre-Raphaelite theories of art. Through specific textual signals, her verse points to a figurative dismemberment intrinsic to visual representation – a process involving the fetishization of the model's face, the superseding of the individual by the image, and the Petrarchan cataloguing of her