

ELIZABETH SIDDAL: THE HEALTH ISSUE

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Before attempting to situate Elizabeth Siddal within the framework of Victorian medicine, it is important to investigate the phenomenon of illness in general, and particularly that of women's health issues, from a sociohistorical standpoint. Thus, a few general comments, inspired by such brilliant exposes as *Complaints and Disorders* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English or *Uneven Developments* by Mary Poovey, need to be established as a starting point to a revisionist understanding of Siddal's aura of romantic frailty.

In *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement*, Jan Marsh summarizes the whole issue of Victorian women's health with a single assertion which constitutes the corner stone of an exploration of the ideological implication of illness:

Cultural attitudes towards women's health were also significant in that the nineteenth-century cult of female frailty among the middle classes led to the general belief that women's physical constitution was naturally weak; their achievements were thus thought to be determined or limited by their bodies and gender. From this flowed the idea that women were incapable of hard work. (156-57)

Notwithstanding, in spite of difficult working conditions and notoriously insanitary living quarters, the British working class had no "right" to ill-health. Therefore, as long as Lizzie Siddal and Jane Morris were full-fledged members of the working class, their health was never scrutinized, nor questioned. Nevertheless, their official inception into the Pre-Raphaelite group was heralded by their accession to bourgeois invalidism, which seemed aimed at exonerating their origins. During the early years of Siddal's career as a semi-professional model, no mention was ever made of her physical frailty, with the exception of the all-too notorious legendary episode of the Ophelia bath tub. On the contrary, she was chosen by Hunt for *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia*, because she had acquired the reputation of being able to sustain difficult poses. Rossetti's correspondence clearly situates the genesis of Siddal's health problems in 1854, the very year of Siddal's

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