

BEATRIX / CREATRIX:
ELIZABETH SIDDAL AS MUSE AND CREATOR

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Elizabeth Siddal's prominence as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's model has until recently nearly obliterated her own efforts as a creator of both painting and poetry. Scholars have neglected her work as an artist while depicting her as a muse who lacked both personality and ability – apart from her capacity to inspire Rossetti with her fragile beauty. The editor of *Apollo* magazine, writing at the time of the Rossetti exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1973, penned perhaps the harshest assessment: “Lizzie is a pathetic figure. She was beautiful, even though drawings of her do depict a rather wishy-washy personality.... What a strain it must have been to hold her own in his circle It was in keeping with the doomed nature of Lizzie's life that she produced a still-born child.... Rossetti was a sensual man and Lizzie, it may be suspected, was frigid; she answered his dreams but not his needs” (Sutton 123). This evaluation is representative in dismissing Siddal as a pathetic stimulus to another's artistic dream, herself incapable of producing a life – a muse who her self remained literally barren. Also writing on the occasion of the Rossetti exhibition, John Gere in more poetic language focused on Siddal's relationship to Rossetti in demeaning her own artistic endeavours: “under Rossetti's influence she made drawings and wrote verses, but she seems to have had no original creative power: she was as the moon to his sun, merely reflecting his light” (Gere 14).

Rather than merely reflecting Rossetti's influence, however, Siddal's work subtly but incisively critiques Victorian gender ideology. Reading her painting poetry through a biographical lens (employed in both these representations of Siddal as muse) occludes this feminist critique. A first step toward evaluating Siddal's work anew is reassessing her function as muse, recognizing Rossetti's often pragmatic attitude toward his paintings of Siddal and his facility in employing various female models as Beatrice (literally translated, “she who blesses”). De-romanticizing Siddal's role in Rossetti's art invites us to read her own work in a less biographical context, to see her paintings and poetry not merely as expressions of private sorrows but as aesthetic creations participating in her culture's ideological debates.

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 4 (Spring 1995)