

*The Poems of Elizabeth Siddal in Context* by Anne Woolley. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2021. xi, 296 pp. + 20 b/w illus. ISBN: 978-1-5261-4384-6. £80.00.

Elizabeth Siddal has been of interest only for her work as a model and for her relation to Dante Gabriel Rossetti for far too long; it is a pleasure – and long overdue – to see a monograph devoted to her poetic output. Anne Woolley begins this book by acknowledging this oversight and by outlining Siddal’s life (and death) in all its mythic and lurid detail, and then moving on to her creative output, although not before including some interesting interpretation. For example, she suggests that the manuscript poems Rossetti cast into his wife’s coffin and later retrieved “became a form of Siddal’s body and a complex substitute for his own so that retrieval was like throwing himself into the grave in reverse. This creates a bond with Siddal whereby his words and her flesh are transubstantiated.” This interpretation is novel, and an original way to conceive of the events, although it does not necessarily help us in the focus that follows on Siddal’s work; however, Woolley is pleasingly firm about the need to interpret Siddal’s work not biographically but within its context and as works of art.

Woolley is clear that Siddal’s poetry is overdue for serious consideration: other Victorian women poets have been “rescued” and examined (Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in particular), and so this book is intended to give weight to Siddal’s creative output – specifically the poems, though with reference to the paintings – by placing it within the context of other writers of the time, both male and female. To place her poetry only alongside other women’s work runs the risk of “reinforc[ing] cultural stereotypes,” Woolley argues, and so the “much larger male canon” is also invoked, with the subsequent chapters exploring Siddal’s work alongside that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Swinburne, Ruskin, Tennyson, and Keats, as well as female poets including Christina Rossetti, Laetitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and others.

The sheer difficulty of a feminist reclamation of women associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is also acknowledged and briefly explored: after all, the women are necessarily situated in relation to the men. Siddal’s position as Beatrice to Rossetti’s Dante shifts her other role as a creative woman onto dubious ground: since “Glorification of the female form was a central tenet of Pre-Raphaelitism,” where does this leave the female creator? The “sheer physicality” of Rossetti’s paintings of women might overwhelm the muse, both paralyzing creativity and affecting the reception of any creative work she might produce – and this has indeed been the case for Siddal. How might women creatively respond to Pre-Raphaelitism, especially