

Dante Rossetti: Re-envisioning desire in the domestic sphere of Victorian society

by

Allison Alexis Watson

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Program of Study Committee:

Linda Shenk, Major Professor
Sean Grass
Charles Kostelnick

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ABSTRACT

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's romantic vision represented in his longer poems, such as "Jenny" and "The Blessed Damozel," spurred a vast amount of criticism with scholar who note the various themes of female sexuality. However, many of these analyses neglect prevalent themes such as sexuality, religious allusions, and the male-female relationship within the domestic space. Rossetti's *The House of Life* continually presents these themes; however, many non-anthologized sonnets are not critically studied by scholars. Rossetti both challenges and propels Victorian ideals through the portrayal women and their relationships with men within the domestic space. In my thesis I will discuss the ways in which Victorian legal reforms and Rossetti's revisionist ideas help to shape the role of women by giving them agency within his verse. While critics have looked at the presence of prostitution in Rossetti's longer poems, a gap remains in terms of his contribution to feminist rhetoric. In this full sonnet sequence Rossetti, quite literally, works to embody a relationship between a man and a woman. Each sonnet shows the evolution of the minds and bodies of the young lovers as their love blossoms, grows, and extends beyond the physical world. These revelations occur in conjunction with one another and build upon themes of daily life. In this way, Rossetti works to incorporate Victorian values of ennobling daily life within the domestic space and presents a new vision of the domestic sphere that celebrates the physicality and spirituality of sexual desire as an integral part of love in marriage as long as this new-found female sexuality occurs within the private space.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Dante Gabriel Rossetti crafted hundreds of sonnets during his lifetime, and scholars have devoted particular attention to such well-anthologized poems as “Willowwood” and “Silent Noon,” yet there remains a lack of critical analysis of his lesser-known poetical works, particularly his final piece, *The House of Life* sonnet cycle. Critics focus on a few, well-known sonnets such as “Willowwood”¹ and “Silent Noon”² in terms of the darker, less pastoral imagery presented or opt to analyze longer works like “Jenny” and “The Blessed Damozel,”³ both of which evaluate the portrayal of women, either as prostitutes or angels. Through the entirety of *The House of Life*, Rossetti layers sexual imagery in conjunction with religious themes that add to the tension the narrator faces. David Weiser describes the purpose of the Petrarchan sonnet as perpetuating the “conceit of love as an unconquerable army” (393). Arthur Marotti points out that sonnets in Elizabethan England used love language as a means of expressing political sentiments (400). In a similar way, Rossetti uses the love language of sonnets to express changing ideas about sexuality as Victorian reform laws took hold in the mid nineteenth century.

The gap in scholarship surrounding *The House of Life* has been noted previously. Wendell Harris explains the lack critical reception surrounding Rossetti’s poetry, noting, “The reader familiar with romantic poetry has no difficulty in taking them as signs suggesting an ideal, somewhat mystic, vision of love. That is the great problem in reading the *House of Life*: one gets accustomed very early to reducing the sonnets to conventional statements about love and life” (300-01). The tendency remains for readers to generalize Rossetti’s verse as simply flowery

¹ Critics who have published on “Willowwood” include: Paul Jarvie and Robert Rosenberg (1977) & Douglas J. Robillard (1962), and Christopher Nassaar (1982).

² See Stephen Spector’s article, “Rossetti’s Self-Destroying ‘Moment’s Monument’: ‘Silent Noon’” (1976).

³ “The Blessed Damozel” has been studied in terms of longing and aesthetics by Kristin Mary Mahoney (2010).

language and complex imagery. I argue that viewing Rossetti's sonnets as straightforward declarations of love proves limiting because his complex sonnets change and develop over the course of *The House of Life*, physically embodying the progression from lust to love the narrator experiences. In *The House of Life*, which includes previously published sonnets revised and reworked, Rossetti presents a new vision of the domestic sphere that celebrates the physicality of sexual desire as an integral part of love in marriage as long as this new-found female sexuality occurs within the private space.

Scholarship on Rossetti and his work has been plentiful in terms of his Italian translations⁴ and the aforementioned widely anthologized poems. However, few critics have attempted to explain Rossetti's portrayal of feminine-centered verse beyond traditional love poetry. Instead of proposing a means of praising women for their ability to lift their male lovers up closer to God, Rossetti highlights feminine sexuality within the private sphere. The themes of sexuality and gender make Rossetti's verse potentially appealing to feminist critics, yet scholarship has overlooked the prevalence of these themes in Rossetti's final work, *The House of Life*, with the exception of some individual sonnets. Nassaar has analyzed individual sonnets and sonnet cycles from *The House of Life* such as the four-part cycle, "Willowwood." Nassaar focuses his interpretation on water and well imagery found within the "Willowwood" cycle. While others have studied and written on "Willowwood," Nassaar remains one of the most recent scholars with his 1982 publication, "D. G. Rossetti's 'The Choice' Sonnets in The House of

⁴ Jerome McGann "A Commentary on Some of Rossetti's Translations from Dante" (2000) & Simon West "Translating the Ideal Lady: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Treatment of Guido Cavalcanti in The Early Italian Poets" (2008).

Life: A Reading." When searching for publications from scholars in regards to *The House of Life*, scholarship increased in the late 1960s through 1980,⁵ but interest has since declined.

Poetry, never an especially lucrative business, became increasingly tough to write and publish as technological innovations in the nineteenth century coincided with the declining cost of paper. These innovations opened the door for the novel to replace verse as the popular literary format for the first time (Erickson 27). Poets who wished to navigate successfully the shift from the Romantic period (in which poetry flourished with the likes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth) into the Victorian era needed to find a way to balance transgressive sexual imagery with the burgeoning Victorian trends of portraying everyday life in new ways.⁶

Rossetti's ability to balance these shifting times shows through in his portrayal of women in *The House of Life*. The representation of religious imagery and sensual language set within the domestic space accounts for the need for current criticism to focus on this sonnet cycle. This technique may also contribute to the current lack of attention to *The House of Life*. In this full sonnet sequence Rossetti, quite literally, works to *embody* a relationship between a man and a woman. Rossetti uses his verse to shape and portray the female persona. Instead of shaping his narrator to embody the characteristics trumpeted in Patmore's "Angel in the House," Rossetti gives the women in his poetry control and power over lust and love. However, *The House of Life* continually stresses the importance of the domestic setting and feminine places when portraying women in-control. Rossetti's final work which has fallen out of print today—a problem that has affected the level of critical attention received for *The House of Life*.

⁵ David G. Riede compiled a book of "recent" Rossetti criticism in 1992, *Critical Essays on Dante Gabriel Rossetti* spanning from 1968-1988.

⁶ The history of Romantic poetry in terms of lyrical progression and popularity is further explored in William Keach's 2008 book article, "Rethinking Romantic Poetry and History: Lyric Resistance, Lyric Seduction."

Victorian values continually shifted and changed during the technological revolution, and literature changed alongside these movements in response to political reforms both in London and in Paris. Just as Haussmannization in Paris provoked an attempt to clean up the streets and contributed to the movement of prostitution indoors, London was experiencing several decades of new laws in regards to female sexuality and female rights, in general. Female sexuality was continually being challenged in the Victorian era. Lee Holcombe argues for the view of the Victorian era as a time for social reform, especially for women. The road to reform began in the 1830s and lasted through the 1870s with notable bills such as the “Matrimonial Causes Act” in 1857 (becoming the “Married Women’s Property Act of 1870”) which coincided with the revival of reformist activity by the feminist movement in the 1860s (Holcombe 13). While Rossetti may be best known for his portrayal of this issue in “Jenny,” similar themes can be seen throughout *The House of Life*, implying that these events had a significant impact on Rossetti’s works. In Paris in the 1850s, Haussmann’s laws came into effect and prostitution moved into the private domestic space. Michael Hollington discusses the impact of Haussmannization⁷ in Europe during the Victorian era. The prevalence of prostitution and the impact Haussmann’s clean up on Paris had on literature cannot be overlooked. The outdoors was viewed as a masculine space while the indoors remained strictly feminine which led to the allegorizing of spaces. Driving prostitution indoors was seen as establishing greater control over the “dangerous outdoors” (Hollington 201). The modernization of Paris, in terms of replacing the cobblestones and widening the streets, ultimately led to a “clean-up” of the streets and consequently forced prostitution out of the masculine sphere back into the private, domestic space.

⁷ Haussmannization is detailed more fully in Chapter 3 “A Modern Dante: Rossetti Re-envisioning Female Sexuality in the Domestic Space.”

Simon Petch connects Victorian law and the impact that reforms had on literature (which he dubs the Law and Literature movement), stating, “At first glance Victorian studies seems to have gained very little from the Law and Literature movement. This is because the ‘core’ literature component of the Law and Literature canon has been extremely limited. The effects are palpable and obvious” (361). Petch identifies the need for further research between literature and the shifting laws occurring during the Victorian era as the effects are noticeable throughout the canon. These reforms, which spanned the decades of Rossetti’s career, influenced the language and metaphors used in *The House of Life*. In this work, Rossetti takes the Victorian shift of female sexuality from the masculine outdoor sphere (where it becomes prostitution) and instead places it in the feminine domestic space—a shift that allows women to continue to be celebrated as the “angels in the house”⁸ while also displaying their sexual natures in his verse.

While Rossetti, as both a poet and an artist, has not been neglected by scholars, many of his smaller sonnets and the majority of his *House of Life* sonnet cycle has been passed over by critics. When examining Rossetti’s works, Romantic ideals burgeon on the surface; however, each sonnet contains complex layers. I argue Rossetti works to re-envision traditional values, including various women’s reform acts, giving his female characters more power and agency, as well as re-envisioning classical works. Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) worked to re-envision well-known images, such as those contained in the Bible and the stories of the Italian Masters, like Dante Alighieri. Rossetti and the PRB combined religion and sexuality to re-imagine classical biblical stories, such as the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ.⁹ The decision for Rossetti and his contemporaries to take classic works and re-

⁸ A reference to Coventry Patmore’s 1858 publication, “The Angel in the House” which is later examined in more detail.

⁹ George P. Landow details in his book, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought* the relationship between the PRB and Biblical allusions in their works.

imagine them for the Victorian era was a defining trait of the Pre-Raphaelites. Julie Codell comments on the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the values which they attempted to instill upon all of their creations, writing, "The PRB reversed accepted values of significance as they had reversed the notion of what was a natural depiction of a figure in art. For the PRB, conventions merely created an opacity which blinded viewers from seeing their own nature" (260). Rossetti and his fellow brothers refused to be blinded to their own nature, and Rossetti worked in his painting and poetry to unveil the sexual nature of men and women to his readers.

Victorian audiences, including the PRB, were intensely interested in reviving classic works such as Dante's *Vita Nuova*.¹⁰ The love story of Beatrice and Dante spoke to Rossetti's fixation on the cycle of love and loss. Beatrice in *Vita Nuova* exists within the public sphere, but she is still able to remain a symbol of purity and heaven for Dante. To re-envision this story for his Victorian audience, Rossetti places his lustful relationship within the domestic space, an appropriate avenue for love and the sphere where women were able to be in control. The romantic images presented in *The House of Life* revolve around women and the narrator's relationships with these heavenly women—all of which take place within the private, domestic sphere and mirror the unfolding infatuation Dante developed toward Beatrice, which then inspired Rossetti's works. While picturesque language remains a key component to Rossetti's verse, he continually presents images of the domestic space and everyday life through the medium of high style language and poetical devices, in a similar way to that of his inspiration, Dante Alighieri, who uses language to elevate the idea of his beloved, Beatrice.

Current scholarship on Rossetti and Dante Alighieri exists, but this scholarship has focused on Rossetti's Italian to English translations. Jerome McGann, for example, has spent

¹⁰ This connection has been studied extensively by Julia Straub in both her 2012 and 2013 book articles (referenced throughout).

years digitizing Rossetti's manuscripts; however, his criticism tends to center specifically on Rossetti's prolific Italian to English translations of Dante Alighieri's works. McGann does not articulate the influence of the Italian tradition upon Rossetti's verse and how this model further disconnected Rossetti and his reader. However, Rossetti broke away from these earlier idealistic visions of love in *The House of Life*. Instead, he chose to depict more realistic representations of daily life in ways that acknowledge the shift of Victorian values from the trope of the "angel in the house" to a stronger, more sexual representation of women. In order to do this, Rossetti writes to re-envision classical works and placed these examples of female sexuality within the private, domestic space.

The revisionist barrier between Rossetti and his audience, in terms of understanding and the appreciation of his works, may have contributed to his lack of critical reception, but this is not the only separation standing between Rossetti and his audience. During the last Pre-Raphaelite revival in the mid-to-late twentieth century, Harold Weatherby comments on the failure of PRB artwork. Weatherby does not point to Rossetti as the sole failure, but rather sees Pre-Raphaelite art in general as failing to have a concrete focus, and as a result, he suggested Rossetti's poetry and artwork would have been successful if it were less ambiguous, or blurry in terms of meaning. Weatherby continues, noting, "One might also say 'problem,' for there is really a single difficulty underlying all Rossetti's failures to establish proper relationships between content and form" (69). Sensing a dualistic divide between Rossetti's form and content in his poetry, Weatherby viewed Rossetti as failing to adequately connect with his audience. The inability to understand Rossetti sticks out as the "single difficulty underlying all [of] Rossetti's [work]." However, I suggest that the lack of focus Weatherby perceived may be resolved by

examining Rossetti's personal background in conjunction with the themes of religion and female sexuality.

In this thesis, I will argue that, by reversing the accepted values, Rossetti creates a new type of art which draws heavily upon Victorian values in order to expose society's burgeoning interest in human sexuality, while still being careful to situate this desire within the private, domestic space. I will cover Victorian ideals re-envisioned as pre-Raphaelite values, along with Rossetti's Italian tradition in connection with the influence of his personal life upon his poetry. I will accomplish this through an analysis of select poems from *The House of Life* that are representative of Rossetti's traditional style in order to show how these Victorian values of ennobling daily life and the domestic space are present in his verse. Rossetti continually presents images of the domestic space and everyday life through the medium of high style and poetical devices that align with other popular Victorian works. The romantic images presented in *The House of Life* revolve around women and the narrator's relationship with these heavenly women—all of which take place within the domestic sphere.

My argument will focus on the feminine role within the private space, both in Rossetti's personal life and in his verse. I will also describe the importance of the domestic sphere in Rossetti's poetry as he works to re-envision classical works and popular Victorian tropes, such as the fallen woman. My goal in writing this thesis is to shed light on Rossetti's works, particularly on the lesser known sonnets from *The House of Life*, in order to reveal the themes present in his work, both in individual sonnets and as a cohesive piece. These themes include religious imagery, sexuality, and the domestic space—all of which combine to create complex, layered metaphors through Rossetti's use of imagery.

In the opening chapter, I discuss the ways Rossetti used traditional religious imagery but reimagined it to become more sexualized. Specifically, this sexuality can be seen in the relationship between the narrator and his lover in the poem, “The Choice,” who may also be viewed as Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. In this sonnet, I argue Rossetti’s dual language serves to allude to both a sexual, passion-filled relationship between the narrator and his lover, and an imagined relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ. Biblical stories are alluded to throughout “The Choice,” but these stories are re-envisioned to place women in a more prominent role. Instead of seeing Mary Magdalene as a fallen women, due to traveling in the public sphere and her sexuality, Rossetti depicts the female lover as a redeemed sinner and a privileged viewer of the resurrection. Rossetti’s choice of both Mary Magdalene and biblical stories reflects his Pre-Raphaelite ties.

Dante is not the only Rossetti child to utilize this Pre-Raphaelite concept to re-envision biblical imagery; however, scholarship has centered on his sister, Christina Rossetti,¹¹ and her religious and sexual verse. The relationship between the two siblings in terms of their production of verse and editing has been noted, but Rossetti is typically seen as molding Christina’s poetry into a more masculine vision. Feminist critics have picked up on the sexual and simultaneously religious aspects of Christina’s well known poem, “Goblin Market,” but have yet to pinpoint similar themes occurring in Rossetti’s verse, such as “The Choice.” In my thesis I will examine how *The House Life* sonnet cycle contributes to Rossetti’s attempt to re-envision traditional biblical imagery and incorporate them within his Pre-Raphaelite ideals.

In chapter two, I discuss Rossetti’s poetical influences and the way these influences shaped his verse by analyzing various sonnet cycles from *The House of Life* including, “Bridal Birth,” “A Day of Love,” and “Newborn Death.” In these poems, a noticeable trend occurs in

¹¹ Throughout this thesis Dante Gabriel will be referred to as “Rossetti” while his sister will be “Christina.”

which Rossetti not only focuses on containing the sexuality of both male and females in the domestic space, but he also stresses the inevitable cycle of life and time—just as the title of the work hints, *The House of Life* portrays the life of those residing within the domestic sphere. These relationships must be different than previous depictions of love, such as Dante Alighieri's work, *Vita Nuova*. Whereas Dante sets his relationship within the public, masculine space, Rossetti must shift his love story into the private space in order to depict sexuality in an appropriate fashion for Victorian readers. I suggest that *The House of Life* uses dualistic language to re-envision Victorian values of traditional religious imagery and female sexuality.

Going further beyond the metaphors of love and desire present in *The House of Life*, I also want to pinpoint the poems and places where Rossetti portrays these Victorian values of ennobling daily life within the domestic sphere through his focus on women. By establishing the ways in which Rossetti accomplishes these ideals in my thesis, my hope is to address the need for future Rossetti scholarship and study as a serious poet especially in regards to his final work, *The House of Life*.

CHAPTER 2

D.G. ROSSETTI: PHYSICAL LONGING AND SPIRITUALITY IN PRE-RAPHAELITE
DEPICTIONS OF SEXUALITY

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetical verse in *The House of Life* has been noted for its themes of love, life, and death. John Granger and Robert Zweig examine the extensive representation of these themes. Granger explains the prevalence of spirituality and sensuality in Rossetti's poetry, noting, "Desire will not be predicated here, although the sonnets will propose a 'there,' to be found after death, where desire may be met" (1). Granger's reading spans a broad spectrum of poems from *The House of Life* including famous works such as "Willowwood;" however, Granger does not discuss the connection between sensual biblical relationships, such as the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ in the overtly allusive poem I examine, "The Choice." Zweig also describes the "death-in-love" present in Rossetti's work as a result of the influence of Dante Alighieri. Whereas Granger and Zweig work with more familiar poems from *The House of Life*, Christopher Nassaar publishes on Rossetti's lesser known sonnet cycles such as "The Choice." In "The Choice," Rossetti couples religious references with allegorical imagery not largely employed in his later sonnets of *The House of Life*.

These lesser anthologized poems have fallen out of study, as Nassaar notes: "'The Choice' sonnets, in the final analysis, presents a typical young person's way of thinking, and they show that Willowwood is the ultimate and inevitable lot of all humanity...the path of sexual love leads not to heaven, but to hell" (57). Nassaar's reading of "The Choice" is insightful in how it shows the prevalence of well imagery and hell within Rossetti's poetry, but Nassaar does not extensively examine the religious allusions present in the sonnet cycle that works to shape

the complex images of women as both physical lovers and spiritual symbols. All roads—sensual, corporeal, and spiritual—need not lead to damnation.

In “The Choice,” originally written in 1848, Rossetti couches sexual imagery within religious allusions to show the levels of desire—physical, corporeal, and spiritual. Readily apparent in the opening of “The Choice” is the double purpose imagery that outwardly portrays a religious connotation, yet can be read with a sexualized connotation as well. I argue Rossetti’s poem expresses a re-visioning of traditional Victorian biblical imagery, such as the trope of Mary Magdalene as a fallen woman, and changes the context of biblical women in his poetry to be seen as a privileged viewer of the resurrection. Indeed, Rossetti shows the blending of sexuality and religion leads to salvation for sinners.

Traditionally Pre-Raphaelite ideals of reimagining biblical tales and portraying art in a true to life manner can be seen in both Christina’s and Rossetti’s poetry. The theme of sin, the threat of death, and the promise of salvation—all tinged with sexual allusions—continue to show up in both “The Choice” and *Goblin Market*. Knittel elaborates on the siblings’ inventive style, noting, “Religious feeling [during the period] is perceived as naive and anti-intellectual, religious poetry as conservative and conventional, and ‘sexual repression’ is considered a more likely topic than spiritual longing” (24). Neither Rossetti nor Christina chose to portray sexual repression, although Knittel declares this subject a more likely topic for Victorian literature. Instead, they use religious imagery to show the sensual coupling of spirituality and desire. Due to the highly allusive nature of both poems, the siblings prove religion need not be considered naïve or anti-intellectual. This technique mirrors Christina’s style of writing in her famous poem, *Goblin Market*, in which the religious and physical blend together becoming seemingly inseparable. Christina’s heroine, Lizzie, can be seen as a Mary Magdalene figure who is present

to her sister's ascension from death and re-entrance to the physical world, now wiser through her sinful encounter with the goblin men. In "The Choice," the narrator experiences a personal relationship with a religious savior as an example of spiritual and physical longing.

In a similar way, Rossetti's verse portrays issues of female sexuality, desire, and redemption through the use of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood tradition of re-envisioning biblical imagery. I argue a feminist reading of Rossetti's allusive verse in "The Choice" leads to an equally fruitful analysis in a similar fashion to Christina's *Goblin Market*. While it is not uncommon for Rossetti to utilize religious imagery in various poems throughout *The House of Life*, "The Choice" proves to be the most prolific through independent analysis in terms of better displaying the techniques in common with Christina's widely studied poem, *Goblin Market*.

Religious imagery abounds in Rossetti's verse; however, "The Choice" is the perfect medium for exploring Rossetti's interest in re-envisioning traditional biblical stories. Written in allusive language, the poems seem to explore male-female relationships and the consequences of lust, while simultaneously harkening to religious figures and stories from the Bible. In "The Choice," Rossetti attempts to capture the sexual longing present in youth between men and women, humans and nature, and he does so in ways that integrate sexuality quietly within religious imagery. In these poems, Rossetti empowers women by showing them as privileged witnesses of Jesus's resurrection. Pairing "The Choice" with Christina's *Goblin Market* is fruitful as both poems portray the trope of a fallen women and work to reverse it to show the power women maintain when they are shown as a witness to a spiritual resurrection.

The joining of religious and imagery and sexual language is explored by Ernest Fontana who notes the complexity present in the PRB religious depiction in terms of women, particularly in their treatment of Mary Magdalene. Rossetti worked to reimagine the story of these fallen

women, as Fontana explains, “The Victorians inherit this ancient tradition and often in their art represent Magdalene as the fallen woman or ‘unnamed woman of the city’ of Luke 7...we also see among the Pre-Raphaelites an attempt, largely ignored by scholars and critics, to reimagine the Magdalene story and to reassess her” (89-90). Ironically, Fontana’s evaluation of PRB artworks points to Rossetti and claims his artwork offers one of very few examples of the pre-Raphaelite’s exploiting the “old tradition” of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. Rossetti chooses to fixate on Mary’s sexuality, possibly due to the Victorian tradition of representing Mary as a fallen woman just as Fontana highlights.¹² Yet, this is not the sole example of Rossetti representing Magdalene in his work, as is clear upon further examining his verse in regards to his depiction of love and spirituality in “The Choice.”

However, the sonnet cycle as a group is important to analyze as a common religious representation during the Victorian era, especially in regards to the Pre-Raphaelites, was to portray a famous biblical woman, Mary Magdalene, in a reimagined light.¹³ Instead of reading Christina’s heroic Lizzie as a female Christ who rescues her sister, scholarship suggests the viability of Christina presenting the typical, fallen woman, as a witness to the resurrection of her near-dead sister, Laura. G.B. Tennyson describes religion as Christina’s “single most important lens through which to view [her]. We must be willing to see religion not as Rossetti’s opiate or her tyrant but as her life” (351). The view of Lizzie as a Mary Magdalene figure proves a fitting medium to view Christina’s poem as Tennyson describes religion as the compass for Christina’s life. Just as Christina’s poem imagines women as privileged viewers of the resurrection, Rossetti’s poetry can be seen enacting similar poetical traits. Likewise, “The Choice,” sonnets

¹² This portrayal of Mary as a fallen woman may be the case Rossetti’s 1877 oil painting, *Mary Magdalene*, Fontana examines as he notes Dante’s art portrays Magdalene as a prostitute (Fontana 90).

¹³ Not only is this idea detailed fully by Ernest Fontana (2000), Diana D’Amico notes the connection between Christina Rossetti and her re-invention of Mary Magdalene in the article, “Eve, Mary, and Mary Magdalene: Christina Rossetti’s Feminine Triptych” (1987).

can be read as a warning against sensual love, such as Nassaar suggests, or the narrator and his unnamed love can be replaced by Christ and Mary Magdalene, and instead express the importance of women in Victorian art and history.

Reflected in Christina's poetry is the same emphasis on love and the sexuality seen in Rossetti's poetry; however, in *Goblin Market*, this love occurs between two women. Whether this female-female relationship is to be read as simply two sisters, or as a female Christ figure and her Magdalene-like lover, Christina clearly transgresses Victorian values by treading in similar territory as Rossetti, as both siblings work to show the sexual side of Victorian females. Knittel commends Christina on her blending of the physical with the religious, writing:

In Christina Rossetti's poetry, "secular" and "devotional" concerns are linked. These terms do not designate strict generic boundaries; rather, they are overlapping fields of poetic expression and emotional experiences. Her manipulation of this overlap is one of her primary poetic techniques and is most apparent in poems which describe a relationship with Christ using the language of love poetry. (14)

In this description, Knittel picks up on a common trope of secular poetry—the relationship between a religious follower and his or her savior is often depicted through the use of love language. This description of Christina's verse as an impressive manipulation of poetical techniques is a noted similarity between the siblings in terms of their thematic content, specific language, and imagery—again showing the need for Rossetti's equally feminist and re-envisioning verse to be revived and studied in a similar context.

***Goblin Market*, Sensuality, and Redemption**

In his writing, Rossetti typically relies heavily on classical imagery and the theme of love instead of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's focus on deeply detailed nature scenes and religious depictions. Blending traditionally religious verse with sexually charged imagery, whether in painting or in verse, Rossetti transforms the work of the PRB into revolutionary artwork. As Knittel asserts, the Rossetti siblings were more alike than different, and this can be seen when viewing their poetry. Looking at Christina's poetry as purely devotional and Rossetti's as only aesthetic proves short-sighted and dismissive of the intricacy present in their verse.¹⁴ Their layered verse works on several levels, and offers more readings than can be expressed through one critical lens. Oftentimes, Christina and Rossetti explore the realm between religion and love, preferring to show these boundaries as malleable. Duality present in the sonnets adds to the intellectual nature of Rossetti's poetry. Rossetti followed the PRB's values and reimagined the physical relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, as Mary is presented as a privileged female figure who does not "fall" through sin but finds salvation.

The blending of religious imagery can be hard to unweave among the layers both Christina and Rossetti utilize in their poetry. A popular opinion when reading *Goblin Market* is to see the heroic sister, Lizzie, as a Christ-like figure;¹⁵ however, I propose her sacrifice and her role as an observer to her sister's redemption suggests Lizzie may stand in as a figure for Mary Magdalene.¹⁶ Christina's personal connection to Mary Magdalene and fallen women has been

¹⁴ Knittel describes the influence of the siblings as being the two "storms" among the four Rossetti children, and explains that Christina and Dante were more alike in temperament to each other than to their more reserved siblings. For this reason, it is all too easy for readers and critics alike to see them as opposites, one ascetic and the other aesthetic (15).

¹⁵ This idea is further explored by Simon Humphries (2007), Albert Pionke (2012), & Kristin Escobar (2001) in recent publications.

¹⁶ While this idea hasn't been explored in previous scholarship, Christina's use of Mary Magdalene in her verse is noted by Phyllis Passariello in the book chapter, "Never, without Her Gladiator: Christina Rossetti, Mary Magdalen, and the Disguises of Desire" (1995). Diana D'Amico also noted the connection between Christina

recorded through her work as an Associate Sister for the reformatory for penitent prostitutes known as St. Mary Magdalene House (Fontana 89). Diane D'Amico notes, "Christina's interest in the life of Mary Magdalene began early. It is not so much the nature of a specific sin that interests Rossetti as the possibility of redemption" (185-6). It is this idea of redemption that Christina explores more fully in *Goblin Market*. In this poem, Christina not only depicts her young protagonist as a woman with curiosity and desires, but also refuses to let her character succumb to the trope of a tarnished and overlooked fallen woman.

The women of Christina's *Goblin Market* form a relationship of sinner and savior, faller and redeemer, which serves to further emphasize the biblical connections present within the story of passions. Similar to Rossetti's narrator in Sonnet II, who feels a sense of helplessness and anxiety over his lack of control of his fate and that of his love, Christina describes the fallen sister, Laura, in *Goblin Market*, as succumbing to her feelings of despair which she alone cannot overcome. Arguably Laura needs to fall from grace in order to allow Lizzie to be lifted up and act as a savior, in the traditional style of Italian poets that Rossetti favored. By weaving an aura of sexuality throughout the poem, not only between the sisters but between Laura and the goblin men, Christina gives her heroines the ability to transgress typical notions of sin and fallen women. Laura's demons are cast out in a fashion akin to Jesus' casting out of Mary Magdalene's demons, allowing the women to regain their purity. Again, Christina and Rossetti's influence on one another's verse illuminates matters of spirituality and sexuality, as a "fall from grace" refers not only to spirituality but also to a premature loss of maidenhood.

This loss is reflected in Laura's forfeit of her maidenhood. From this point on, Laura's condition worsens in the poem, until her sister fears she will die as other fallen women before

Rossetti and her re-invention of Mary Magdalene in the article, "Eve, Mary, and Mary Magdalene: Christina Rossetti's Feminine Triptych" (1987).

her. The fact that Laura continues to long for the "succous pastures" of the goblin men, even though the fruit caused her condition, shows an intensity similar to those described by critics as spiritual longing. As the poem insinuates a loss of virginity through interacting with the goblin men, it is apparent that Laura longs for not only literal fruit but also sex. Typically critics draw the parallel between religious references and spiritual longing in Christina's verse while Rossetti's similar usage, due to the subtlety of its nature, is missed entirely.

Religion and Sensuality: "The Choice" Sonnet I

Current criticism on "The Choice" is limited to analysis by Nassaar and Bentley who both note the apparent religious themes, but do not go into full detail on Rossetti's use of religious images and allegory presented in the sonnets. Bentley's analysis covers the connections between Rossetti and Raphael, but spends most of his critique discussing "Sonnet III," claiming, "While the group exhibits a structural symmetry, the emphasis is definitely on the last sonnet...the argument of the three sonnets is weighted toward the figure of the questing soul which, as it were, tips the balance both philosophically, and within the asymmetrical, linear movement of the group, structurally (144). Bentley correctly picks up the importance of the poem's structural symmetry, but devalues Sonnets I and II of "The Choice" as being less than Sonnet III in terms of philosophical merit and content.

Sonnets I and II need not be seen as the lesser of "The Choice" sonnets. When considering the layered allegorical meanings present in "The Choice," this relationship can be read as representing the relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene. As Fontana notes, this representation mirrors Christina's representation of Magdalene in her own work, not as a prostitute or a fallen woman but instead as a "privileged witness to the resurrection" of Christ,

showing the power of the female role in religion and Victorian poetry (90). This new vision of women as empowered through sexuality, especially in a medium which had perpetuated the idea of the fallen woman, demonstrates the PRB's dedication to re-envisioning traditional Victorian ideals. Scholars such as Alison Chapman and Maura Ives have made the connection clear between Christina's verse and Rossetti's continual editing of her manuscripts, and this influence can be seen by her use of sexualized adjectives in conjunction with religious undertones. However, the influence Christina had upon Rossetti's verse has been largely ignored. When viewing the sonnet cycle as a whole, the religious imagery and allegory continuously build in complexity. This complexity stems from the portrayal of love and desire embedded within religious allusions. In Sonnet I of "The Choice," Rossetti's verse centers around physical desire as the narrator holds up and examines the power of feminine virginity: Sonnet II depicts corporeal longing with allusions to fertility through images of the natural world and celestial bodies. Sonnet III completes the cycle and hinges on the narrator's spiritual needs as this sonnet contains frequent religious allusions to re-birth and the promise of salvation.

The opening sentences of "The Choice" set the foundation for a religious and sensual reading as the relationship between the narrator and his lover can follow the Biblical story of Jesus and his last supper. This double meaning is apparent in the opening lines of Sonnet I as it begins, "Eat thou and drink; to-morrow thou shalt die. / Surely the earth, that's wise being very old, / Needs not our help. Then loose me, love, and hold" (1-3). The first line of verse, "Eat thou and drink; to-morrow thou shalt die" can be read as a religious allusion to the crucifixion of Jesus and his last supper. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says to his disciples, "With desire, I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer: For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (KJV Luke 22:15-16). These verses mirror

the language used by Rossetti in the opening of “Sonnet I” as Jesus addresses the “desire to eat” before he suffers, or possibly dies. Jesus himself uses the word “desire” twice in the verses discussed above, further cementing Rossetti’s reliance upon the Bible to create the duality of meaning. Just as the narrator seems to maintain a degree of omniscience, Christ’s reference to his future bodily fulfillments in the kingdom of God.

The entire first octave of Sonnet I can be read as a direct reference to Jesus and the last supper before his death. However, the tone changes at the Volta to become increasingly sexualized through the use of descriptive language and the inherent duality of the phrases Rossetti chooses. Repeated images of hair, various body parts, and sensual language all add to the sexualized tone in the sestet. This tone can then effect the preceding octave. McGann notes in the Rossetti Archives, “Like the other sonnets in ‘The Choice’ group, [the first] reflects DGR’s early preoccupation with ideas associated with Pre-Raphaelite programs. Here religious and biblical provide a point of view that can look critically at some of the more common “progressive” ideas of the Victorian Period” (“Introduction”). The “progressive ideas” addressed by McGann may be a reference to Rossetti’s re-envisioning of Mary Magdalene, not as a woman of the city, but as a privileged woman of the Bible. This idea is perpetuated through a sensualized relationship between the narrator and his lover, who can also be seen as Mary Magdalene and Christ. McGann may also be alluding to Rossetti’s depiction of physical longing not as a condemnation for men and women, but as a natural experience linked directly to religious following and salvation. This progressive idea multiplies when further analyzing the religious connections between Rossetti’s verse and the King James’ Bible. Rossetti chooses to focus almost exclusively on male-female relationships. Catherine Maxwell examines how three prominent Victorian male poets, Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne, shaped the feminine

identity in Victorian literature, observing, “Private spaces have long been associated with women because their distance from the male public sphere of political and economic relations. Woman’s body, like her supposedly ‘mysterious’ nature, is also a bower, a secret garden to be explored by the male when he temporarily absents himself from his life of action” (84). The love language Rossetti chooses as a vehicle of expression for his notions of female sexuality mirrors these sentiments. In Rossetti’s poetry, women appear mysterious, as the male narrator grasps to comprehend the nature of love as opposed to lust and desire.

The prevalence of spiritual and physical longing is notable in the poetry of both Rossetti and Christina. The prevalence of scholarship on Christina’s secular poetry is much more prevalent than similar scholarship on Rossetti and religious imagery.¹⁷ Feminist scholars have championed the importance of Christina’s secular poetry due to her focus on female roles; yet, Rossetti’s love poetry, which centers on women and the domestic space, has yet to be studied fully and in careful detail. While others such as Knittel and Chapman have commented upon the connections and the overlap between Rossetti and Christina’s poetry, critics have failed to revive Rossetti’s extensive sonnet collections in a similar manner. Rossetti blends together desire and religion in order to show women in a new, more powerful light. By examining Christina’s revived verse and juxtaposing her work with those of Rossetti’s, the similarities between the two Victorian siblings in terms of complexity and theme bring to light the need for further study of Rossetti and his various sonnets. Christina, and her verse have long been studied and revived by critics who praise Christina of the various readings possible for *Goblin Market*. Christina’s poetry is praised for its radical portrayal of female issues in the Victorian era—issues that Christina explores through the use of various lenses such as: religion, commodity, and feminism.

¹⁷ Recent Scholarship on Christina and Christianity include Elizabeth Ludlow’s 2014 book, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints*, as well as the 2010 article, “‘Would Not Open Lip from Lip’: Sacred Orality and the Christian Grotesque in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’” by Heather McAlpine.

Images of sexuality coupled with spirituality continually arise over the course of reading *Goblin Market*. The influence Rossetti held over Christina, as described by Chapman, shines through in her poetry. Rossetti's style, well known for sensual imagery is apparent in the relationship presented between the maidens and the goblin men. Laura longs to taste the goblin juices as described by Lizzie when she says, "She sucked and sucked and sucked the more / Fruits which that unknown orchard borne; / She sucked until her lips were sore" (134-6). The image of Laura sucking on goblin fruit inspires blatant connections between maidenhood and loss of virginity just as Dante implies in Sonnet I of "The Choice." Similarly, Laura longs to taste more as she has kept herself sheltered from this reality throughout her life. A sense of Laura's desperation comes across through Christina's repeated use of the word "sucked." This action shows a sense of urgency and a lack of self-restraint. The "unknown orchard" from which the fruits were borne further implies the danger the goblin men represent. Not only are the origins of the fruit questionable, so are the origins of the mystical goblins. As stated in the beginning of the poem, the goblins call out only to maidens, or those whose virginity remains intact. As a sexual metaphor, Laura's inexperience shows clearly through her uncontrolled and unrefined actions with the fruit. Obviously Laura enjoys the experience as she continues "until her lips were sore." Such unrestrained love can be found in Rossetti's sonnets in *The House of Life*, especially toward the middle of the sonnet cycle when his poetry transforms from idealized love poetry to sexual images and metaphors present in "The Choice."

The combination of sexual imagery within poetical verse is Rossetti's way of creating dual meaning within "The Choice." Many of Rossetti's works, including other works on Mary

Magdalene, have a corresponding painting, known as a double work.¹⁸ These works, when viewed in conjunction with their poems, generate additional meanings. The doubling of meaning apparent in the sonnet format Rossetti uses influences the reading of the sonnets in *The House of Life*. Brian Donnelly describes the purpose of the Petrarchan sonnet in Rossetti's writing, explaining:

The idea of doubling would become so central to Rossetti's artistic manifesto is inherent in the sonnet form, particularly that which dominated the nineteenth century, the Petrarchan. The Petrarchan sonnet, divided as it is between octave and sestet, invites a self-reflective mode of representation, an opportunity to explore two sides a single thought, or emotion, fashioned in Rossetti's image.
(479)

The dual nature of Rossetti's work, as Donnelly describes it, purposefully allows the reader to explore multiple facets of the same idea or argument. Dual language and double meaning are apparent from the beginning of Sonnet I. Whether the poem is meant to be read in one light, religious, or another, sensual, is not as central as the realization of Rossetti's purposefully divided verse. Rossetti plays on this fact through the use of language.

Before even arriving in Jerusalem, Christ is aware of his impending death, mirroring the narrator's attitude in the beginning of the sonnet. The narrator expresses the same sentiment as Jesus as he resigns himself to leaving the earth, who no longer depends upon his presence. The sonnet continues to build upon both biblical and sexual allusions, reading, "Surely the earth, that's wise being very old, / Needs not our help. Then loose me, love, and hold / Thy sultry hair up from my face; that I" (2-4). Christ, like the narrator, knows that the earth does not need his

¹⁸ For more information on Rossetti's double works refer to the article by J. Hillis Miller, "The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art" (1991) or G.L. Hersey's book chapter, "St. Cecily and the Lady of the Tomb: Rossetti's Double Works of Art" (1986).

physical presence as much as the people of earth need to be ridded of sin and to let him “loose” from the world. However, this is not the only meaning that can applied to the word “loose.” Loose can also mean, “to set free, or to release” (OED “loose” 1a). Reading the phrase as “loose me, love, and hold [me],” allows for a more sensual reading of these lines. Instead of forecasting a literal death, the narrator insinuates a sexual connection occurring. The corresponding lines which reference “thy sultry hair up from my face” furthers this reading as Victorian literature, and literature throughout many periods, often used hair to depict sexuality.¹⁹

As a result of the dual meaning present in “The Choice,” viewing the poem as an allusion to Christ and his crucifixion proves equally fruitful as the proceeding lines then serve to further this reading. Instead of being “loosed” or released through love, the poem suggests Jesus will shortly die and leave the earth, as they no longer need his help, physically. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks to the twelve disciples, and states, “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief and unto the scribes and they shall condemn him to death. And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him” (KJV Matthew 20:18-19). There is a sense of finality felt in both the poem’s verse and the biblical verse quoted above showing that the narrator has resolved to his death and sees the world as ready to continue without him, just as Christ understands and acknowledges his impending death. Whether Christ makes the choice to die or simply resigns himself to fate can be left to interpretation, but Rossetti sets up the poem as a dichotomy of choices to be made. The title of the poem itself, “The Choice,” seems to imply that the narrator, or Christ, continually makes a choice. Instead of giving each sonnet in the cycle a separate, distinct title, the word “choice” is

¹⁹ For more information on the representation of female sexuality through hair in Victorian England see Rose Lovell-Smith’s article, “Out of the Hair Tent: Notes Further to Elizabeth Gitter’s ‘The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination’” (1995) or Nadja Durbach’s book article, “The Missing Link and the Hairy Belle: Krao and the Victorian Discourses of Evolution, Imperialism, and Primitive Sexuality” (2008).

used over and over again. This repetition pushes the audience to acknowledge the dualistic choices occurring in the poem. From the choice of the narrator to die to the choice to give into human passion.

Passion in Sonnet I becomes more apparent as the tone of the poem suddenly changes. The Volta occurs at line eight, as the focus of the narrator shifts from an allusion to Christ's last supper. The final sestet alludes to the sexual nature of humans and the purpose of life. This sudden change can color the meaning of the preceding octave as well. Rossetti's particular use of adjectives in the opening octave of the poem works to create the didactic structure of the poem. While secular poetry often overlaps with other genres, such as love poetry, certain aspects of the poem that do not easily fit in with the religious reading can be corrected and applied when analyzing "The Choice—I" as a poem centering on physical desire and longing. Problematic lines, such as, "Then loose me, love, and hold / Thy sultry hair up from my face; that I / May pour thee this golden wine, brim-high" can be better explained when viewing the impending "death" as a sexual experience (3-5). While it would not be a stretch to correlate love and wine with Jesus and the last supper, the word "sultry" in relation to hair when holding "thy hair up from my face" seems out of place in a strictly religious reading, even when accounting for Mary Magdalene as Christ's imagined lover in Dante's poem.

Description of hair coupled with repeated images of gold to describe the man's lover brings to mind Mary Magdalene, who is often depicted with lush, golden locks in artwork although Rossetti himself favors painting the Saint with flowing red hair. In reality, Mary followed Jesus as closely as the twelve disciples according to the Gospel of Luke, which reads:

And it came to pass afterwards, that he went throughout every city, and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve

were with him. And certain women, of which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils. (KJV Luke 8:1-2)

Mary's continual presence as a companion amongst Christ and his followers in the Bible as well as her privileged viewer of his resurrection shows the emphasis placed upon her relationship with Jesus. Speculation suggests a closer relationship between the two than simply follower and teacher, which these lines may allude to; however, Mary is never explicitly stated to be in a physical relationship with Jesus. In the setting of the last supper, the sensualized manner in which the narrator commands to be loosed, loved, and held by his love in the poem seems less appropriate than a young man urging his passion to be unleashed and "let loose," so the prophesized "death" will be achieved.

The sexualized language of death in connection with passion is repeated throughout the poems and is apparent in from the beginning of Sonnet I. The opening lines begin, "Eat though and drink; to-morrow thou shalt die" can be re-interpreted when considering the meaning of the word "die" which can be read as, "to experience a sexual orgasm (most common as a poetical metaphor in the late 16th and 17th century)" (OED, "die," 7b). Rossetti repeats the motif of "dying" in the opening of each sonnet. By situating the word "die" at the beginning of each sonnet, Rossetti makes the dual meaning more apparent as the reading of "die" in terms of an orgasm is not obvious immediately. While Rossetti was writing in the mid-19th century, his poetry was greatly influenced by the Romantic poets before him, and the PRB drew upon classical writers such as Shakespeare as inspiration for their artwork. Therefore, it would not be out of character for Rossetti to draw upon this late 16th- and 17th-century meaning for the word "die" to create a dichotomy of meaning between physical longing and spiritual longing. As the

sonnet progresses, it is nearly impossible for the reader to decipher which lines of the poem accurately represent the relationship between the Victorian couple and which represent the relationship between Christ and his followers. To account for the sudden switch from a religious octave to a sexual sestet and the connection with the empowerment of women, a reader need look no further than Rossetti's overlapping interests between women as lovers and women as the key to eternal salvation.

Both a warning and a revelation of the powers of physical pleasure occurs with the Volta. As the poem continues, the narrator imagines a seduction occurring between himself and his lover. The actual act of seduction is halted while a future sexual encounter is mused upon by the narrator immediately before the octave. The first sestet concludes with several images of the lover's feelings upon completion, as the narrator says:

I may pour for thee this golden wine, brim-high,
Till round the glass thy fingers glow like gold
We'll drown all hours: thy song, while hours are toll'd,
Shall leap, as fountains veil the changing sky. (5-8)

Drinking and revelry lead to images of the narrator's love's fingers glowing "like gold," until they are drunk both literally and metaphorically on wine and the touch of one another. This type of revelry and seduction is condemned in the book of Revelation, which reads, "I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet colored beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness for her fornication" (KJV Revelation 17:3-

4). The woman goes on to be described as the mother of harlots and abominations, but the portrayal of drinking and seduction is shown positively in Rossetti's verse.

While the image of gluttony and excess serves to prompt a negative response in the biblical reader, Rossetti's coloring of the woman's skin as "glowing like gold" transforms the notion of a "fallen women" and argues against this condemnation found in the Bible by countering with natural imagery. This technique may suggest the normal human nature associated with physical pleasure by both men and women. Women, specifically, are singled out in the book of Revelation for fornication and pleasure, while men are seemingly let off the hook for their actions. Instead, Rossetti rejects this typical trope of the fallen woman and portrays her as better off for enjoying herself, as her song is described as "leaping" like "fountains [which] veil the changing sky." In anticipation of events to come, the narrator compares their encounter to the countless hours tolled by a clock, or the water leaping from a fountain so high that they cover the "changing sky," imagining that time will cease to bother the lovers.

Although a majority of this sonnet revolves around the ecstasy promised by desire, Sonnet I ends with the presentation of a choice. Rossetti explores the purpose of a life devoid of pleasure as the final sestet of "The Choice—I" revolves around giving into physical desires instead of simply anticipating and imagining the results of longing. Whereas the narrator was simply imagining the outcome of a seduction at the end of the octave, the sestet concludes with a shift in tone: "Now kiss, and think that there are really those, / My own high-bosomed beauty, who increase / Vain gold, vain lore, and yet might choose our way!" (9-11). "Our way" which the narrator holds up to his "high-bosomed beauty," is most obviously the way of giving into your physical desires and longing in order to live a life of pleasure and find fulfillment with

another person instead of in pursuit of “vain gold” or “vain lore.” The narrator refers to his love as a “high-bosomed beauty.” This reference is both sensual and endearing as well as embedded with biblical connotations. Referencing the woman as “high” refers to her physical body and her youth, but brings to mind allusions of Heaven and God as high, holy figures.

Rossetti’s narrator continues to lift up his female lover as he goes on to describe the vain gold and vain lore which others choose to pursue. By rejecting vanity but praising her “high beauty,” Rossetti creates juxtaposing ideas that both confirm and contradict the book of Proverbs, which reads, “Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised” (KJV Proverbs 31:30). Redemption from sin stems from a fear of the afterlife, and Proverbs notes that women who fear the Lord will be praised and ultimately redeemed. Contradiction in this sonnet may exist to set the context for the following poem in which Rossetti stresses the importance of fear, as fear and love seem to both complement each other and simultaneously contradict, just as these ideas occur in a similar fashion in the Bible. Rossetti’s emphasis on vanity and the vainness of a lifestyle defined by gold and beauty serves to highlight the necessity for the natural, such as the passion embodied by the narrator and his lover.

The travesty of this lifestyle is commented upon by the narrator as the poem ends, noting, “Through many years they toil; then on a day / They die not,--for their life was death, --but cease; / And round their narrow lips the mould falls close” (12-14). In this context, the word “die” is presented with its traditional connotation as life ending. This inference may be due to the narrator’s negative usage of “die” in conjunction with those who toil and work continuously without experiencing the pleasures of life. The narrator laments, “They die not,--for their life was death” and warns his lover of the dangers for those who do not choose “their way” of living.

Instead of maintaining a degree of control over their lives, those who toil are passive as time actively wears on them until, “round their narrow lips the mould falls close.” Not only are the toilers described as having “narrow lips” in contrast with the fullness of the narrator’s lover, but the workers do not find themselves dying. Instead death is pushed onto them as “the mould falls close” and the grave proves to be closer than previously imagined (OED, “mould,” 3). The lack of love for life described by the narrator ultimately leads to this imagined downfall.

The sexual fulfilment of passions described by the narrator can also be related back to religious notions, as the gospel of John states, “He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto eternal life” (KJV John 12:25). This verse stresses the need for mankind to embrace life in order to be redeemed. While passion is a natural part of life, Rossetti warns against vanity and stresses the narrator has chosen his way of living, giving into sexual desire, in order to live a life free from toil. In the verses previously described, Mary Magdalene becomes the first to witness the resurrection and then serves as a messenger for God, and preaches to the other disciples that their Lord continues to live even after death. For the narrator, the indistinguishable ideas of physical passion coupled with religious desire directly relates to man’s life on earth and salvation afterwards. Her critical role in the story of Jesus and the resurrection, as well as the female lover’s important role as the catalyst for a love-filled life, shows the privileged roles Rossetti bestows upon the females in his verse.

While the highly charged language in the ending sestet contributes to the sexual allusions in “The Choice—I,” the moral of the poem can be equated to living a life balanced between sensual longing and religious desires for fulfillment from God due to Rossetti’s strategic layering of both biblical and sexual allusions. Here, the idea of Christ’s rebirth through resurrection after his crucifixion most readily connects to the experience described by the narrator in Sonnet III.

The narrator expresses the importance of something more than simply toiling, and the something more hinted at by the narrator may be as obvious as accepting religion into your life. Those who toil without recognizing the importance of a deeper meaning to life will not experience death or a re-birth, as their life was death and the end of their spiritual existence. Sonnet I focuses on physical desires in relation to religion, but Sonnet II of “The Choice” shifts the attention to human survival needs—the need for safety, shelter, and sustenance both physically and spiritually.

Resisting Temptation: “The Choice” Sonnet II

The techniques Rossetti employs while crafting Sonnet II reflect similar values seen in earlier works such as “The Blessed Damozel,” which he wrote originally in 1847, though he published it in *Poems 1870* only after making extensive revisions. The ability to examine religion and weave in traditional ideology with PRB values reflect Christina’s influence on Rossetti’s poetry. Previous scholars have studied the sibling’s influence; however, few have pushed the boundaries of their verse. Knittel describes an overlap of Pre-Raphaelite love poetry coupled with Christ-like imagery in Christina’s poem, “Advent,” and Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel.” However, Knittel demonstrates the ways in which the genres interweave, but never outwardly shows Rossetti as embodying Christina’s use of religious values.

While the two categories do overlap in “The Blessed Damozel” and “The Choice” alike, Rossetti clearly re-envisioned typical Victorian notions of religion as synonymous with nobility and the extraordinary in favor of the realistic, sensual, religious imagery and language the Pre-Raphaelites would come to embody in their work. When examining Christina’s verse, the PRB connections between poetry, religion, and passion become increasingly clear. Her blending of the

religious and the sensual through everyday events such as going to the market and eating fruit in conjunction with her use of lowly adolescent women as the heroines embody the PRB mantra of extensive details rooted in the reality of Victorian society. Christina's technique, while abundantly clear in her extended narrative, is much harder to detect in Rossetti's concise, fourteen line work. The themes of love in both Rossetti's and Christina's poetry come coupled with spiritual longing and a removed presence; however, the spiritual aspects of Rossetti's sonnets are much more subtle.

This subtlety is especially prevalent in Sonnet II of "The Choice". The tone of Sonnet II is the most outwardly gloomy and serious of the sonnet cycle, possibly as a result of the loss of innocence and the narrator succumbing to his passions with his lover. Sonnet II begins in a similar fashion to Sonnet I, as the narrator states, "Watch thou and fear: to-morrow thou shalt die / Or art thou sure thou shalt have time for death?" (1-2). The tone of this sonnet is explained by McGann, who notes, "The theme of death in *The House of Life*, elsewhere treated in a highly positive fashion through its association with spiritual ideas, is here given an unusual affirmation in a very different lexicon...the sonnet measures a death-in-life existence against a rich morality" ("Introduction"). Morality and sin in correlation to life and death are prevalent themes in "The Choice" sonnets. Concerns shift from Sonnet I, and the narrator seems to have had a change in priorities as he mulls over life, death, and God. Unlike Sonnet I, in which the narrator appears happy despite the looming promise of "death," the narrator commands the listener to "watch and fear." However, the threat of fear was alluded to toward the end of Sonnet I, which helps to smooth the transition between the two poems. Rossetti again poses the question of death as a choice to be made, further emphasizing the importance of the name assigned to the three poems, as the narrator questions, "Or art thou sure thou shalt have time for death?" In the gospel of

Matthew the lack of knowledge in terms of death and time is revealed, reading, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (KJV Matthew 24:36). The narrator possesses the knowledge that tomorrow is his death day while he simultaneously ponders the feasibility of death. Rossetti uses choice as a symbol of power as each poem puts the action in the hands of the narrator to determine his fate.

Rossetti depicts choice as a stipulation of redemption for the sinners in his poem. Revelry felt in the first sonnet is replaced with reality, as the narrator continues to ponder their future salvation and the uncertainty of life: “Is not the day which God’s word promiseth / To come man knows not when? In yonder sky / Now while we speak, the sun speeds forth” (3-5). With his repeated questioning, the narrator looks for knowledge and longs for meaning to be assigned to the life he knows. Images of both redemption and the end of the world spring to mind when analyzing Rossetti’s work. The day which God’s word promised may speak to the apocalypse, or to the redemption of mankind. The sky as an image of rebirth and God’s promise of life after death occurs in the gospel of John when Christ says to Mary Magdalene, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend to my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God” (KJV John 20:17). Jesus is portrayed as untouchable and unknowable to others in his state of being, just as the form and timing of death remain unknowable to the narrator. Christ suggests the future promised to him, and to all men by God, of ascension into Heaven by equating mankind with himself when he states that he ascends, “to my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.” The level of equality established serves as a message for Mary and the other disciples who are later instructed to spread the word of Christ’s resurrection. A similar image is repeated from Sonnet I as the poem progresses: “Now while we speak, the sun speeds forth” (5). Whereas Sonnet I uses the image of hours tolling as

“fountains veil the changing sky,” the imagery used in Sonnet II utilizes fewer adjectives to create more concise verse, drawing the focus away from the seemingly infinite amount of time possessed by the narrator and his lover.

Following Rossetti’s presented theme of redemption, Christina describes the falling of her female heroine, Laura, as her longing for knowledge parallels the story of Eve. Once Laura has tasted the goblins’ fruit and confronts Lizzie, the scene that takes place demonstrates both love and heightened sensuality. Laura’s inability to hear the goblin calls leads to a sense of doom as her inability to hear points to Laura’s loss of maidenhood and the sense of longing that can no longer be quenched. An apparent biblical connection to Laura’s loss of innocence through eating “forbidden fruit” can be drawn to the story of Eve eating the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. In this case, knowledge is not a cure, but a curse as the book of Genesis states, “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of both of them were open” (KJV Genesis 3:6-7). Eve eats from the tree due to her desire to make herself wise, although she understands it is forbidden. As a result, Eve’s eyes are opened, and she loses her sense of innocence in the same way.

The necessity for Rossetti’s narrator to be saved through his acceptance of Christ is highlighted in Sonnet II. In keeping with the duality present in Rossetti’s sonnet cycle, “The Choice—II” could also be representative of a sermon by Christ to his disciples preaching on the fleeting quality of their corporeal life and needs. This reading would account for the short, stifled images and straightforward language as God is touted as an individual to be both feared and respected for His breath, “Even at the moment haply quickeneth / The air to a flame, til spirits,

always nigh / Though screened and hid, shall walk the daylight here” (7-9). These lines serve as a reminder by the narrator to their audience that even at their impending moment of death, God continues to provide air to the flames as a life source. Rossetti’s reference to spirits which walk the daylight parallels the verse in 1 John, which reads, “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in the darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanseth us from all sin” (KJV 1 John 1:6-7). Jesus is described as the light that others must walk in to be cleansed from sin. Although the poem seems to be warning the audience to fear, and to recognize the impending nature of death, Rossetti embeds religious morals to explain the nature of life as one of contradictions.

Whereas in Sonnet I, the narrator preaches the importance of living a life that you love in order to find salvation, Sonnet II points to the necessity of a spiritual cleansing through the acceptance of Christ. The lines referencing the spirits that “shall walk the daylight here” can be read as an allusion to the resurrection of Jesus after his death. Unlike Rossetti’s typical Italian sonnets, there is no clear distinction between the octave and the sestet except in terms of the rhyme scheme changing. McGann comments upon this formatting decision in Sonnet II, writing, “By running the octave and the sestet together DGR seems to have wanted to construct a formal equivalent for the theme of spiritual anxiety that governs the sonnet” (“Introduction”). The high levels of anxiety present in the narrator in this sonnet can be equated to the concern felt by Christ’s disciples upon learning of his death. Not only is the apprehension clear in regards to the narrator and his longing for more in his corporeal life, the palpable fears of Jesus’ disciples can also be used to explain the uncommon nature of this Sonnet.

The spiritual anxiety McGann references can be seen in the rhetorical questions that dominate the final sestet of the sonnet as the narrator questions the choices laid out before himself, and all of mankind. Philosophical questioning begins in line 10 and continues:

And dost thou prate of all that man shall do?
 Canst thou, who hast but plagues, presume to be
 Glad in his gladness that comes after thee?
 Will *his* strength slay *thy* worm in Hell? Go to:
 Cover thy countenance, and watch, and fear. (10-14)

These rhetorical questions could be occurring between the narrator and God, or between Jesus and his disciples as he prepares for his death as the continued questions act as a measurement of temperament. Can man withstand a lifetime of plagues, and yet, rejoice in the life of the person occurring after him? The emphasis is placed on the way the narrator lives his life as to what will come afterwards. A test of the narrator's faith and belief arrives in the final two lines of the sonnet, asking, "Will *his* strength slay *thy* worm in Hell? Go to: / Cover thy countenance, and watch, and fear" (13-14). Rossetti's inclusion and emphasis on the slaying of "*thy* worm" acts as a direct contrast to the promise of salvation. Instead, Isaiah concludes with a description of the fate awaiting those who make the choice to reject God reading:

And it shall come to pass, that from one moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship me, Saith the Lord. And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh. (KJV Isaiah 66:23-4)

Just as God warns against those who do not believe in him in Isaiah as doomed to a life of fire, so does Rossetti's narrator question the ability for a non-believer to transgress earthly boundaries and "slay thy worm."

The final warning delivered in the poem repeats the message from the opening line of the sonnet: "watch thou and fear." Fear does not always have a negative connotation, as fear can be seen as a healthy motivator for believers to continue to act in a positive manner instead of falling into compliance. Instead, the narrator urges the reader to "cover thy countenance" and maintain a sense of fear of God. Fear stressed by the narrator works to symbolize the life which will come after—an issue Rossetti addresses extensively in the final sonnet of "The Choice—III."

Spiritual Longing and Rebirth: "The Choice" Sonnet III

The choices presented to the narrator throughout Rossetti's sonnet cycle lead the audience through a cycle of acceptance and fear which serves to exasperate the mounting anxiety noted in his verse. In the final sonnet of "The Choice," Rossetti stresses spiritual longing and redemption of "fallen women" through the repeated imagery of water and rebirth. Just as in Rossetti's earlier works, such as "The Blessed Damozel," his verse transforms through vigorous revisions to create a genre not often seen in his famous sonnets. In "The Choice" Rossetti breaches his traditional values of love and instead incorporates clearly Christian themes into his verse. Knittel explains, "In 'The Blessed Damozel,' Rossetti has appropriated an established metaphor equating the intensity of sexual love between individuals with that of an individual's spiritual relationship with Christ" (19). This metaphor continues to build in Rossetti's writing and shines through in "The Choice" sonnets, written within one year of "The Blessed Damozel." Knittel continues to describe Christina's influence on her brother's verse, noting, "By making...his poem more

overtly sensual, Dante Rossetti acknowledges the extreme sensuality of Christina Rossetti's own ostensibly religious poem. He revises his poem in order to make his poetic language exceed the inevitable tendency of sacred language to become fraught with sensuality" (23). This sensuality is especially apparent in Sonnet I of the choice, and continues to occur throughout *The House of Life*. The sonnet cycle as a whole depicts an individualized and spiritual relationship with Jesus, just as one would describe a relationship with a woman.

In particular, Sonnet III shifts from the previous verses that focus on lust and the unknown to portray the narrator's acceptance of Christ into their life and the ultimate effect of this choice on their life. Keeping with the opening structure of each sonnet, the final verse begins, "Think thou and act; to-morrow thou shalt die. / Outstretched in the sun's warmth upon the shore" (1-2). From the first line of the poem the tone has changed noticeably from that of Sonnet II. Gone are the warnings of doom to come; instead, the narrator holds up rational thought combined with spiritual faith to deliver his message to the audience. Physical acts such as eating, drinking, and fearing are replaced with mental acts as the narrator commands the audience to think and act. Even the imagery is expanded from Sonnet II to include more descriptions—particularly images that continue to cycle back to water through the metaphor of the shore line. The image of a man outstretched in the sun's warmth conveys the absence of fear and anxiety which dominated the preceding sonnet as this narrator needs not fear death any longer because his destiny is set.

This technique employed by Christina and Dante depicting the progression of longing, to sin, to re-birth, is also described by McGann when critiquing "The Choice," as he writes, "This sonnet [is a] critique of what William Michael Rossetti called 'the theory of self-development' [and] calls attention to the way DGR involves each of the three sonnets with the others"

(“Introduction”). A female counterpart as the catalyst for reflection in the narrator is strengthened as he continues, asking, “How should this be? Art thou then so much more / Than they who sowed, that thou shouldst reap thereby?” (7-8). In referencing “they who sowed” creating those who reap, Rossetti calls to mind the creation story in which Eve is crafter from Adam’s rib, to be his destined partner. Genesis describes the creation of Eve as: “The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man” (KJV Genesis 2:21-22). In referencing the creation of Eve, the story of Eve’s fall and her consequent redemption through the infinite production of man-kind perpetuates Rossetti’s focus on females are a redeemed sinner. For this interpretation, Adam or God could serve as the one who “sowed” Eve, and Eve continues to reap through reproduction; however, the narrator asks, “Art thou then so much more” as a result of her pre-destined creation.

As the Volta occurs at line 9, the poem shifts to show the infinity that God has created for the two lovers—an infinity so grand as to make female reproduction seem limited and finite. The narrator opens the eyes of his lover calling upon her to, “Come up hither. From this wave-washed mound / Unto the furthest flood-brim look with me; / Then reach on with thy thought till it be drown’d” (9-11). Every line from the Volta onwards contains at least one image of water signifying the unknowable depth of faith or a re-birth to compliment the promise of a future death. The “wave-washed mound” and flood-brim” referenced by the narrator suggests a biblical connection to the flood and a covenant with God that was established as a result, saying, “And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: and I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh” (KJV Genesis 9:15-16). The covenant promised represents an agreement between God and

man-kind in regards to the redemption of sinners. Rossetti's use of the word drowned in combination with the flood and wave references hint at the recurring theme of destruction that looms over the narrator throughout the entire poem, but not without the promise of salvation. While the poem begins with the command from the narrator to think, as the lines progress the narrator now suggests his love "reach on with thy thought till it be drown'd" in the immensity of the universe.

Just as love must work to reach through the sins of lust and desire in order to be redeemed in the infinity of heaven, stress continues to be placed on the infinity of the soul and the sea as Sonnet III concludes, "Miles and miles distant though the grey line be. / And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond, / Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea" (12-14). At the conclusion of the sonnet cycle, the narrator pushes the unfathomability of nature and the infinity of the universe God created. The horizon, though visible, is ever further than one can reach just as the soul cannot breach the unending leagues beyond the seas. References to a sea and the end of the world abound in the book of Revelations, which states, "The angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and all things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things that are therein, that there should be time no longer" (KJV Revelations 10:5-6). The angel is said to be standing both upon the sea and the earth. The sea is not a stand-in for heaven, as heaven itself is further referenced in the book of Revelations; however, bodies of water and the sea have various biblical significance including that of a promise of better things to come. Whether examining the Israelites crossing the Red Sea to escape to their promise land, or the story of Noah and the great flood as a representation of a covenant between the people of earth and God, the sea as a physical embodiment of a promise

reoccurs throughout the Bible. Now, at the end of the progression, the narrator pinpoints the importance of spirituality and faith. For the narrator and his lover, their sins are only able to be redeemed through faith. While Sonnet I hails sexuality as a natural part of life and something to be revered, Sonnet II begins to devalue lust and replace physical longing with spiritual longing. .

When comparing Christina's, *Goblin Market*, with Rossetti's sonnet cycle, "The Choice," the siblings demonstrate a similar usage of stylistic devices, such as allegory and Christian rhetoric, which elevate their poetry and highlights the dualistic quality of their verse. The reader follows the narrator's moral progression: from lust to knowledge to spiritual enlightenment through the sonnet cycle. In Christina's poem, *Goblin Market*, images of sexuality coupled with spirituality continually arise as Lizzie rescues her sister Lizzie from her sin through the juices of various goblin fruit. In this scene from the poem, the influence Rossetti held over Christina is obviously shown as his style, well known for sensual imagery, is apparent in the relationship presented between the maidens and the goblin men of Christina's *Goblin Market*. Christina and Rossetti's poetry goes so far as to mirror the other's language.

Considering the close professional and private relationship between Christina and Rossetti along with Christina's close association with the PRB, reading of Rossetti's poetry as enacting similar conventions to those of Christina's poetry is appropriate. Christina echoes the opening phrase of "The Choice—I" with her famous line and controversial lines, "eat me, drink me, love me." Female sexuality and desire are addressed in Christina's *Goblin Market* as she devalues fleshly desires. This technique is typical of her work; however, she incorporates multifaceted metaphorical imagery similar to Rossetti's poetry. Both poems contain references to God and a personal savior—different in key ways from traditional Victorian, Christian views as

the siblings describe a sexualized relationship with their personal savior, and Christina's Christ-like figure in *Goblin Market* is a woman in place of a man.

Laura's re-birth through her sister, Lizzie, after the encounter with the goblin men proves a sexual and spiritual experience. Lizzie says:

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me. (468-471)

The juices of the goblin fruits have a sexual connotation as they are described by sensual verbs. Lizzie commands Laura, "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices...Eat me, drink me, love me." Lizzie looks to Laura to consume her. This consumption parallels the act of communion where religious followers willingly consume the flesh and blood of Christ through transubstantiation leading to the redemption of their sin by Jesus, who sacrificed his body for mankind. Lizzie similarly sacrifices her body in order to obtain the healing liquid that will save Laura from the fate of a fallen woman. Laura has successfully undergone the same process as Rossetti's narrator from her physical longing, to her spiritual anxiety, and completing with her re-birth of life.

The religious and sexual aspects present in Christina's verse show not only an influence from Rossetti inadvertently, but he also played a very prevalent role as editor to Christina. Chapman notes, "The configuration of D. G. Rossetti's revisions to the first two volumes suggests the imposition of an aesthetic upon Christina's work and the revised poetry consequently is predicated on his definition of the feminine, which embraces both the feminine subject within the poetry and the assumption of what a female poet should produce" (139). The fact that Chapman states Rossetti feels the need to censor Christina's poetry to reflect an

appropriate manner for a female poet is shocking when considering how he himself was received by much of the Victorian public. Jay D. Sloan explains that Victorian readers viewed Rossetti as "effeminate" and his reputation suffered as a result (8). Even after Rossetti's death, his brother, William Michael, strived to restore Rossetti's reputation but ultimately failed. Rossetti himself remained unable to escape the labels forced onto him by those around him. His push to point Christina toward gender-appropriate poetry may reflect the longing Rossetti felt to be taken seriously as an artist and seen as masculine within the sphere of his Victorian audience. Rossetti certainly worked to change facets of Christina's poetry, yet the end result was successful, not hindering. Christina's hopes of being accepted as a Pre-Raphaelite poet alongside her brother and his need to be accepted by critics for his complex, multi-faceted poetry leads to the siblings' embodiment of one another.

Personal interests and religious ideology mix together to create the blurred line between octave and sestet, as well as contributing to the scholarly commentary on Rossetti's works in a similar fashion to the comments that have revived Christina's career. Confusion between physical life and religious is apparent in "Sonnet I" as the reader is unable to untangle which lines and imagery relate to the lovers and which lines allude to a spiritual relationship. Christina used similar techniques in her poem *Goblin Market* when she depicts the spiritual longing and sexuality present in the relationship between Lizzie and Laura. In order to empower her heroines, Christina shows one woman as the redeemer, a privileged witness to a type of resurrection. Both women are then able to return to their domestic lives free from the stigma of a fallen woman.

Although Rossetti is seen as forcing his style onto Christina's verse at times, their editorial influences on one another's poetry shine in Christina's *Goblin Market* and Rossetti's "The Choice." While the line between sensuality and religion is not clear cut in either poem, the

ability to incorporate both aspects become important to the success of both Christina and Rossetti's works. Not only do Christina's devotional purposes come across in *Goblin Market*, she successfully transgresses the boundaries described by Knittel and proves her competence as a poet. Her success prompted Rossetti to revise his poems accordingly to incorporate religious ideals reflected in Christina's verse. These influences come across as both natural and revolutionary in terms of Victorian values. Through their re-defining of religion and sexuality, the imagery and language present add an additional layer of depth to both of the poets' works as the siblings explore the repercussions of longing, sexuality, and the re-birth of sinners.

CHAPTER 3

A MODERN DANTE: ROSSETTI RE-ENVISIOING FEMALE SEXUALITY WITHIN THE
DOMESTIC SPACE

The success of a career as a painter and poet in the Victorian era hinged upon the artist's ability to walk a fine line between portraying traditional values and shocking his audience. When poetry as an art form began to attract fewer readers and decline in popularity, poets felt the pressure to re-envision the verse of the Romantic era and break into the popular Victorian literary sphere. As Erickson notes, "Cheaper printing stripped poetry of its cultural preeminence and its mnemonic force" (19). This cultural shift from verse to prose forced poets to create a new taste for their audience. For Dante Gabriel Rossetti, this balance was achieved by the portrayal of pictorial imagery laced with sexualized verse but contained within the domestic sphere. At times, the ambiguous nature of *The House of Life's* metaphorical conceits makes interpreting Rossetti's works a complicated process. John McGowan recognizes the skill present in Rossetti's verse, but points to the lack of critical attention as an issue of subject matter, explaining:

His poetry keeps falling away from the real and the universal toward the poet's personal experience. This failure to find an adequate poetic subject might be attributed to Rossetti's lack of talent or lack of faith, but his struggles also suggest the predicament of the post-Romantic Victorian poets who found that the sources of Romantic poetry were no longer fruitful. (113)

While McGowan sees Rossetti's inability to connect with his Victorian audience as a commentary on his ability to create and develop appropriate subject matter, I argue Rossetti's autobiographical poetry, in which he pulls from his personal interest in Dante Alighieri and his tumultuous relationships with women, enhances his subject matter and leads to a deeper

understanding of Victorian values surrounding sexuality. By the late 1860s Rossetti's personal life was in shambles, and his writing demonstrates a shift from a precocious artist to a tormented poet as his poetry turns from youthful desire and passion to the looming threat of death.

Throughout Rossetti's poetical career, which spanned from the late 1840s through his death in 1882, he continually produced poems and then revised and reworked the original drafts. For this reason *The House of Life's* poems span from the beginning of his career until 1881. There is a distinct difference between Rossetti's earlier poetry and the verse he writes toward the end of his life. The cycle begins by creating what Nassaar calls, "The image of the heavenly lady whose love leads to God," but reverses and destroys this image (52). This reversal of the trope of Neoplatonic love as presented by Dante was occurring within poetry as well as in a broader sphere.²⁰ Julia Straub explains a similar harkening back to Dante and his works occurring within all Victorian literature, noting, "Many Victorian writers went to the *Vita Nuova*—leading to a refashioning of Beatrice as a paragon of Victorian wifely virtuousness, as a heroine of bourgeois drama, as an object of mundane, this-worldly desire" (Straub, "Transmediality," 97). Rossetti was not insensible to the Dante and Beatrice mythology sweeping through the nineteenth century. Poets and artists were not replicating the relationship portrayed in *Vita Nuova*; instead, writers were reversing the tradition of Neoplatonic love and re-envisioning the male-female relationship for their Victorian audience. In the later poems of *The House of Life*, the tendency to "destroy and reverse" the love that leads to God becomes abundantly clear as death remains the central theme. Straub notes a similar focus on Dante in the art and literature of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as a direct result of Rossetti's influence, stating:

²⁰ The connection between Petrarchan sonnets and Neo-platonic love is explained in Paul Siegel's article, "The Petrarchan Sonneteers and Neo-Platonic Love" (1945).

As for the visual arts, it is mainly the Pre-Raphaelite artists who pictured Beatrice, which is obviously motivated by their general interest in the themes and style of older, especially medieval, literary texts and artistic traditions, their penchant for beautiful, frail women, and most importantly their founding father's devotion to Dante and his muse. (Straub, "Transmediality," 98)

As the founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti was fascinated by the story of *Vita Nuova* and often replicated and re-envisioned Beatrice in his work. By drawing upon contemporary Victorian laws and reformation occurring throughout Europe, Rossetti took the passion and desire experienced by Dante and Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova* and transformed the relationship for his Victorian audience in *The House of Life*. The incorporation of sexualized, pictorial verse framed within the context of the everyday domestic space works to align Rossetti's verse with popular Victorian rhetoric while simultaneously pushing the envelope of comfort for both his contemporary critics and audience.

Throughout *The House of Life* various sonnet cycles depict women as the care-takers of relationships and as closer to God. The fixation on desire and lust is portrayed as the original instigator of the relationship in the beginning of the sonnet "A Day of Love." Only when Rossetti places this lust within a private sphere, is the relationship able to blossom into something more. However, this strategy was missed by Rossetti's Victorian audience. As a result, his connection and contributions to feminist rhetoric, in terms of the female identity and Victorian sexuality, have remained neglected by current scholarship. While the connection between Dante and Rossetti proves indisputably clear and has been thoroughly explored by critics, Rossetti breaks away from the idealistic visions of life described by scholars such as Barbara Goff. In order to re-envision Dante's work, Rossetti must create a sense of desire and

passion in his verse between the male and female lovers, but then situate this love in a Victorian context. Whereas Rossetti's relationships are clearly set within a private space, Dante and Beatrice's love occurs outside of the domestic space, as Dante first sees Beatrice in a public marketplace. Kurt Bruner describes the context for Dante's first meeting with Beatrice, stating, "It all started on a street corner in Florence. It began in the simplest way such a story can begin: with a girl. So overwhelming was the experience that he forever after regarded it as the occasion of his *rebirth*—the point at which his "new life" had begun" (6). Scholars have noted that Beatrice is in a public area—Bruner even describes it as a street corner—yet the connection between the public and Beatrice as a woman penetrating the public sphere has not been fully explored.²¹

By placing Beatrice within the setting of a public marketplace upon their meeting, Dante placed his love within a masculine space—a space regarded as inappropriate for women in the Victorian era. Instead of developing this discrepancy for Victorian readers, the academic emphasis has been placed on Beatrice's ability to lead Dante to "the very gates of Heaven" instead of the "eternal damnation" which occurs as a result of fleshly lust (Bruner xi). Beatrice exists simultaneously in the public, masculine space while maintaining her identity as a holy spirit who guides Dante through purgatory. Dante continues to raise his lover up and view her as both a woman in the public sphere and a virgin. His continual praise of his beloved despite her public persona, may stem from the fact that Beatrice and Dante are never united as lovers. Beatrice cannot be in Dante's private space as their personas never collide. The private, domestic sphere established greater control over the "dangerous outdoors" and replaced the idea of a public woman as a lady who was seen in public (Bruner 201).

²¹ This issue is also addressed by Julia Straub in her 2012 article "Dante in the long nineteenth century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation."

Rossetti uses Dante's works, such as *Vita Nuova*, as a springboard for his ideas, but re-envision the role of his female protagonist in his poetry. Rossetti's depiction of female sexuality, as set within the private sphere, coincides directly with the changing Victorian laws in regards to both women's rights and prostitution, as well as the need to push his verse to appeal to his audience. Rossetti shifts the focus from a woman in the public sphere, like Dante's Beatrice, and moves his lovers into the domestic space. This feat occurred in the same time period as the political revolution occurring throughout France as a result of Haussmannization. Michael Hollington describes the laws enacted by the Parisian Baron, Georges-Eugène Haussmann, as these laws originally started the process of driving prostitution indoors. Implemented by Napoleon III, the modernization of Paris, in terms of replacing the cobblestones and widening the streets, ultimately led to a clean-up of the streets and consequently forced prostitutions out of the masculine sphere back into the private, domestic space. Many Londoner's moved between Paris and London, and Rossetti himself visited Paris in the early 1850s during the peak reformation and modernization of the city. Aware of the declining readership for traditional poetical verse, Rossetti explored the ideas of female sexuality and empowerment while situating his verse within the everyday domestic space—a private sphere where women were free to rule and express themselves without the fear of being labeled a public woman. In the safety of the feminine sphere, women were able to achieve more power. This is seen in *The House of Life* as Rossetti frequently places the women in his poetry in a dominant position. The move from the public sphere into the private does not mean that Rossetti's female lover must forfeit her sexuality. Instead, the couple indulges in desire from the safety of the private space.

An impact on the rise of prostitution in the early nineteenth century was the result of the population shift from the rural to the urban lifestyle coinciding with the 1834 Poor Law Act

which “assigned women sole responsibility for their illegitimate children, thereby diminishing legal pressure on men to marry” (Walkowitz 75). Later, the Contagious Disease Acts in the 1870s and 1880s worked to distinguish the relationship between the unrespectable and respectable poor classes by forcing prostitutes to accept their status as public women, and to “destroy their private identities and associations with the poor working-class community” (Walkowitz 73). While these acts span several decades, so did Rossetti’s poetical career. The road to reform began in the 1830s and lasted through the 1870s with notable bills such as the “Married Women’s Property Bill” in 1857 (becoming the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870) which coincided with the revival of reformist activity by the feminist movement in the 1860s (Holcombe 13). Because of Rossetti’s far reaching career, he would have been composing and revising the bulk of his sonnets during this same time span, allowing for any and all of the laws to influence his works in the same way that Dante Alighieri and his relationship with Beatrice influenced Rossetti’s verse. As a result of the shift of prostitution into the domestic space, Rossetti’s lover can be seen as both sexual and maintain her status as the “angel in the house” as long as the relationship takes place within the confines of the private sphere. An apparent obsession with women and female sexuality harkens not only the various reforms occurring, but also strengthens the connection between *Vita Nuova* and *The House of Life*.

A Mother and Child—Nurturing Love in “Bridal Birth”

Throughout *The House of Life*, Rossetti’s poems replicate the relationship that occurs between a man and a woman. In his early sonnets in Part 1, “Youth and Change,” Rossetti’s verse hinges on desire and places the agency on the woman to nurse their fledgling relationship. The woman as a metaphorical mother, who must nurture lust into a relationship of love, is most evident in his

poem, “Bridal Birth.” Here, the setting is kept within the domestic space and his lover is charged with the task of developing the relationship from one of lust to one of love. Immediately Rossetti sets up the metaphor of his lover as a mother to their relationship, writing:

As when desire, long darkling, dawns, and first
The mother looks upon the newborn child,
Even so my Lady stood at gaze and smiled
When her soul knew at length the Love it nursed. (1-4)

When the sonnet begins, desire is stressed as the motivating force between the narrator and his Lady. Clearly the narrator understands the negative tone associated with desire as he describes the child of desire as a “darkling,” or a “child of darkness” (OED, “darkling,”¹). However, his Lady does not reject this child as a result of the impurity attached to it. Instead, she looks upon desire and, “smiled when her soul knew at length the Love it nursed.” Due to the inherent ambiguity in the poem, it is unclear whether “desire” is the child which transforms into Love, or if the narrator, filled with desire, transforms into one who loves. In either reading, it is the Lady who nurses the relationship from the first inklings of desire between the couple and is able to immediately see the potential for love.

Whereas Dante focuses on the spirituality of his relationship with Beatrice and the manner in which she elevates his soul, Rossetti seeks to represent the male and female relationship in reality. A sense of Beatrice looms through much of Rossetti’s verse, but especially in the poetry from *The House of Life*. The portrayal of a love boarding on obsession further shows Dante’s influence on Rossetti’s poetry. However, while Dante sets his lovers in the public sphere of the market, in “Bridal Birth,” the scenario remains firmly rooted in the domestic sphere through the use of the mother and child metaphor. This technique allows Rossetti to

discuss topics like desire between couples and leave room for his female lead to be viewed as pure. When reading Rossetti's works, the autobiographical connections present throughout his verse cannot be overlooked, as his personal life and professional life frequently collided. With his future wife, Elizabeth Siddal, as a repeated model and muse for the entire Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti showed a continual interest in women and worked to portray in his verse a depiction of this relationship. With Lizzy as a major force in his life, motivating him into marriage seven years after their courtship began, Rossetti began to represent women as the creators of life and love. Just as females are beginning to gain power within the eyes of the law, Rossetti allows his female lovers a new sense of status in his verse by giving the woman agency, in terms of their relationship.

Not all critics were receptive to Rossetti's sexualized verse. Robert Buchanan published his reaction in 1871 to Rossetti's 1870 volume of poetry, the pre-cursor to Rossetti's *The House of Life*, and proceeds to explain his outrage at the man who would knowingly write in a sensual manner about life and love, noting, "It is quite different, however, when a grown man, with the self-control and easy audacity of actual experience, comes forward to chronicle his amorous sensations, and, first proclaiming in a loud voice, his literary maturity, and consequent responsibility, shamelessly prints and publishes such a piece of writing" (27). Buchanan responds to some of the more popular verses which Rossetti had published including "Nuptial Sleep" and "The Blessed Damozel." However, the lines Buchanan finds offensive are no more sensual or sexual than the lines already presented in this chapter. Images of extended physical affection and descriptions of the narrator and his lover as, "still their mouths, burnt red / Fawned on each other when they lay apart" (Buchanan 27). "Nuptial Sleep" is no exception to Rossetti's placement of sexuality as within the domestic space as he even describes the relationship as

“Their bosoms sundered, with the opening start / Of married flowers” (Buchanan 27). Rossetti continually reminds the audience of his setting as being appropriately placed in the private space of a married couple, where female sexuality is safe to be displayed by stressing the married nature of the metaphorical flowers. The amorous verse which Buchanan objects to serves more as a reflection of Rossetti’s autobiographical style and the Pre-Raphaelite tendency to follow in the tradition of the early Italian masters. While Buchanan saw this method as isolating and inappropriate, Rossetti’s reliance on male-female relationships through his sexualized verse actually worked to re-envision popular Victorian ideals of ennobling daily life. James Swafford examines the relationship between Rossetti and Dante in terms of Rossetti’s verse and notes that, for Rossetti, “the theme of love, death, and the reunion of lovers in another life remained for him the core of the poem” (56). Rossetti pushes the boundaries of Dante’s verse in that he identifies female sexuality and elevates the physical relationship between men and women. To soften the sensual nature of the material, Rossetti chooses a domestic and maternal setting.

The representation of love as an infant becomes more powerful when desire is dropped from the metaphor, proving the Lady has succeeded in transforming desire into a companionate relationship. As “Bridal Birth” continues, the narrator describes the pleasure his Lady takes in having vanquished these desirous thoughts:

Born with her life, creature of poignant thirst
 And exquisite hunger, at her heart Love lay
 Quickening in darkness, till a voice that day
 Cried on him, and the bonds of birth were burst. (5-8)

Whereas Dante bears the weight of love entirely upon himself in *Vita Nuova*, Rossetti places the agency upon women, as the love shared between the couple is described as “born with her life.”

The description of this blooming relationship with phrases like “poignant thirst” and “exquisite hunger” show that the narrator maintains a focus on physical desire and passion instead of love. At this point, the image of the nurturing female becomes necessary to develop this relationship into one of companionate love. Without the female lover, this transition would be impossible as the narrator stresses only, “At her heart Love lay.” With the bursting of the bonds of birth, the relationship seems to be sufficiently nurtured by the Lady and is now strong enough to belong to the couple as a whole instead of the female individually. But Rossetti’s poem does more than re-imagine a common trope of love and women. As Ruth Wallerstein notes, “Rossetti’s obscurity arises often from the use of special symbols bound up with his view of life; more often from the fact that although a sonnet takes its inceptions from some specific and personal experience, the poet generalizes and allegorizes it in such a way as to imply the personal experience and still give us no clue to it” (492). Wallerstein thus emphasizes the importance of exploring Rossetti’s background and personal life—both of which include Dante Alighieri and a tumultuous relationship with women. Rossetti’s version of reality revolved around Lizzy Siddal, his wife of two years, although the two were betrothed for seven years, who served as inspiration for the dual nature of *The House of Life*. Mirroring Dante’s techniques in his *Vita Nuova*, Rossetti’s early verse exemplifies similar themes of passion, love, and spirituality.

The House of Life and the encompassing sonnets portray the male-female relationship in terms of desire and love. Once “Bridal Birth” establishes the transformation of desire to and passion to love, the narrator discovers the holy path to which this love will lead. After the birth of love occurs and the maternal female lover nurtures their relationship, she serves a similar purpose to that of Beatrice in *Vita Nuova* as she leads her male lover closer to God. “Bridal Birth” ends with allusions to God, Death, and marriage, as Rossetti writes:

Together, as his fullgrown feet now range
 The grove, and his warm hands our couch prepare:
 Till to his song our bodiless souls in turn
 Be born his children, when Death's nuptial change
 Leaves us for light the halo of his hair. (12-14)

The relationship of the couple takes the persona of a male “fullgrown” and fully able to leave the domestic space as the poem describes him as able to “range the grove.” However, Love does not reside solely in the male, nor does it belong to the masculine sphere, so Rossetti delivers it back to the feminine private sphere as “his warm hands our couch prepare.” Rossetti repeats his earlier language of birth, but now the lovers are united and born together as “his children.” Initial passion and desire have led the narrator to a spiritual awakening and redemption as a result of his lover when Death’s “nuptial change” will occur and deliver them to “light the halo of his hair” in Heaven.

Similar themes are present in Dante’s works as he tells the story of his love for Beatrice and the passion he feels for this intangible woman. Even though she is presented to Dante in the public sphere, she remains pure because of her inaccessibility, allowing her to lead Dante to a similar spiritual redemption. Anthony Viscusi sees passion in Dante’s work as “a continually replenished desire, a continually objectified will, and almost sensual apprehension of blessedness, and a joyful acceptance of one’s role in the general motion of entire creation, an acceptance coupled to knowledge, defines heavenly life” (445). Noticeable in “Bridal Birth” is the same joyful acceptance of one’s role in life. Desire does not disappear in the presence of love; instead, it continues to be replenished in the form of a heavenly life. In this passage, Viscusi hits upon a key idea in Rossetti’s work: the cycle of desire as a continuum throughout

life into the spiritual afterlife. It was not necessary for his Victorian audience to understand the nuances of his technique to appreciate the beautiful images and metaphors present in Rossetti's verse which contributed to building up his reputation as a love poet.

Rossetti's re-envisioning of the story of Beatrice and Dante within the Victorian sphere intensifies when examining Rossetti's biographical link to Dante. Alison Milbank explains the attraction to Dante's work as affecting the entire Rossetti family. What begins with the family patriarch, Gabriele, ends with every one of his children publishing on Dante and his works at some point during the nineteenth century. Milbank muses the Rossettis were drawn to Dante and his themes as a result of their family background, noting, "The Rossettis are a family of Italian immigrants to England, perhaps precisely because of their marginality they can be seen to register more acutely the pressure both of Dante, their national poet, and British aesthetic contradictions" (118). While Gabriele Rossetti chose to focus on the inherent allegorical nature of Dante's works, his son preferred to focus on the romantic courtships present in Dante's poetry and situated his work within the realms of the Victorian private space. Milbank acknowledges the bridge between Beatrice and Victorian artists, stating, "The figure of Beatrice, met only in the public arena, mediates between the 'public' woman and the 'private' wife" (109). The relationship as described by Rossetti depicts one of a private wife, but continues to draw on Dante's story of Beatrice in the public sphere to accommodate this love trope. The difference between the two men's works seem to be Dante's insistence on Neoplatonic love and his rejection of physical intimacy. Rossetti is able to inject more sexuality and passion as the relationships he portrays occurs within the realm of the private space. This issue continues to arise when reading and comparing the works of Dante and Rossetti.

Experiencing the evolution of Rossetti's verse through *The House of Life* sonnet cycles, the connections to Life and Death, as portrayed through women, and the influences of Dante Alighieri demonstrate the nuances of Rossetti's verse. While his poetry has been criticized for its "flowery" verse and ambiguous metaphors, among other things, Rossetti presents complicated themes of love and growth which explore the relationship between art and the domestic space. Through this means he accomplishes the goals of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and shows Victorian values through his placement of the narration within the domestic sphere. Rossetti "re-envisions" these traditional elements to construct a genre more nuanced and illuminating than simple romantic poetry. This placement creates an intimate space and contributes to the poet's ability to build a connection with the readers. Rossetti proves the boundaries between reality, where the poets' life ends and the poetry begins, are more malleable than thought as his verse directly reflects many aspects of his personal life. As R.L. Mégroz explains, "He deliberately confuses physical life with psychic life because the most urgent experience he knew of love was that the soul and body were not strictly to be separated. Why should he distinguish between them, if love of a woman's body set his heart on fire?" (186). The love Rossetti felt for Lizzy and the loss that struck him after her suicide haunts him and shows up time and time again in his verse. *The House of Life* proves no exception as Rossetti veils love, sexual imagery, and death beneath layered metaphors involving women and the domestic sphere.

“Nowhere but here she is”: Places and Domestic Spaces in “A Day of Love”

The development of love and the woman's loving presence as felt within the domestic setting is the focus of Rossetti's, "A Day of Love." While Rossetti's emphasis on "places" can come across as a vague idea of where love resides, when coupled with the ideas presented in works

such as Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem, "The Angel in the House," the argument emerges that the places Rossetti describes as lonely and empty without a woman are intended to be representative of the domestic space. While Patmore was not the first to publicize and portray the female as an "angel in the house" and view women as subservient, this highly popular poem pairs well with Rossetti's works, as Patmore published during the same time frame as Rossetti and dealt with a similar subject matter. Written in 1870, "A Day of Love," placed toward the end of Part 1 of *The House of Life*, portrays a more fully developed relationship than that of "Bridal Birth," as the lovers have transformed their relationship from that of passion and desire to one of companionship.

In "A Day of Love," Rossetti explores spaces deemed both appropriate for females and a sexual relationship. The ambiguity present in the beginning of the poem serves to force the implicit connection between women and the domestic sphere, stating:

Those envied places which do know her well,
And are so scornful of this lonely place,
Even now for once are emptied of her grace:
Nowhere but here she is: and while Love's spell
From his predominant presence doth compel. (1-5)

The association with women and the home as a place which would "know her well" and would be "emptied of her grace" without her physical presence are reminiscent of Patmore and his reinforcement of Victorian norms. In this section, Love again compels the male narrator to leave behind his masculine public sphere for the sake of his lover. A key line in "A Day of Love" which also points to the domestic space as being the ambiguous places hinted at in the opening, reads, "Nowhere but here she is" (4). As women were generally discouraged from being visible

and present in the public sphere, the domestic would have to be the space where Rossetti's female narrator is constantly present. The power of women in society outside of the domestic sphere continued to increase during Rossetti's lifetime as the road to reform in Victorian England began in the 1830s and lasted through the 1870s with various women's rights bills being enacted. In the role of care-taker, Rossetti gives power and agency to feminine characteristics stressing the ability for women to create love in the same way they create life. Without the woman in his life, spaces she embodied are described as "lonely" and "emptied of grace." In the same way women physically create life, Rossetti shows females as constructing a sense of life in the domestic space. Through the proposed ability to create love, Rossetti reimagines the Victorian male-female relationship as he draws upon Dante for the inspiration to his verse.

The Victorian association and placement of women within the domestic space began to take hold and set into the minds of nineteenth-century artists through popular literature. One example which further propels these ideas of how women should behave occurs in Coventry Patmore's publication of the poem, "The Angel in the House." Patmore's poem underscores the male perception that women "bring a more than moral purity to the home that she at once creates and sanctifies, for which her mate consequently regards her with a sentimental, essentially religious relevance" (Christ 146). While Patmore praises women for their passive nature, Rossetti gives his female characters agency in the form of personification in *The House of Life*. Rossetti in particular focuses the vast majority of his sonnets in *The House of Life* on love and women with their traditional nature as a care-taker and nurturer emphasized. Carol Christ details the necessity for women to be placed within the private sphere as opposed to the public, writing, "Religious doubt and the viciously competitive atmosphere of business combined to threaten the stability of many traditional religious and moral values. Many Victorian writers relocated those

values in the home and in the woman who was its center” (146). As a result of this shift from the public to the private, married woman, who were no longer virgins or pure, were described with the same wholesome traits and maintain the ability to enact a similar scenario to Dante Alighieri’s courtly love trope.

The ability for a poet to equate his lover with a deity is seen in Dante Alighieri’s portrayal of Beatrice upon their meeting. In *Vita Nuova*, Dante writes, "I heard it spoken after me: See how that lady has distressed his person and being named, I realised that he was speaking of her who had been placed in the straight line that started at the most graceful Beatrice" (Kline 15). In this passage Dante describes the overwhelming presence of Beatrice. At first, she remains unnamed, making her seem like a power too great to comprehend, almost as a deity. When Dante reveals her name, he calls her "the most graceful Beatrice." Simply saying her name would not be sufficient to describe her. Instead, Dante feels the need to lift her up, just as Rossetti does with the women in *The House of Life*.

Similarities between Rossetti and Dante Alighieri multiply when exploring their mutual fascination with women as a result of the tragedy they both experienced. Dante lost Beatrice prematurely, and Rossetti experienced a similar loss with his wife, Lizzy Siddal, two years after their marriage. This extreme emotion Dante displayed when writing *Vita Nuova* is the same type of writing which led to Rossetti's effeminate stigma. Julia Straub argues, "Biographical anecdotes tend to stress Lizzy’s position as Rossetti's female counterpart, in a tragic, almost uncanny reenacting of Dante [Alighieri]'s doomed love relationship with Beatrice" (155). Dante's love story began in the year 1275 when he first laid eyes on Beatrice—she is eight years old and he is nine. Straub states, "From that moment on Dante tries to see Beatrice whenever he can until she finally gives him her decisive greeting in 1283. Her death in the year 1290 leaves Dante and

the whole city of Florence overcome with grief" (153). Dante and Rossetti both wrote to illuminate the love they experienced and lost prematurely; however, as Rossetti grew, his poetry became less jaded and more rooted in reality.

Upon closer inspection, Rossetti's poetry reveals a complex vision of the domestic space and Victorian life. In *The House of Life* Rossetti explores themes of passion and love encompassed in the everyday domestic sphere. As the emphasis on places and the domestic space continues in "A Day of Love" the narrator describes the "lonely places" when his love is with him, remembering:

The hours of Love fill full the echoing space
 With sweet confederate music favourable.
 Now many memories make solicitous
 The delicate love-lines of her mouth, till, lit
 With quivering fire, the words take wing from it. (7-11)

The hours of Love that fill the echoing space tie back into "Bridal Birth" with the idea of the woman as the nurturer who has spent hours filling the domestic space with the feeling of love. The creation of love is synonymous with art in these lines as "The hours of Love fill full the echoing space / With sweet confederate music favourable" (7-8). This music, similar to the spell which compels him in the opening of "A Day of Love," remains clear and sweet to him without his Lady's physical presence.

Whereas in "Bridal Birth," love was just beginning to take shape, the relationship and a companionate love has clearly been established at this point in "A Day of Love." Love, not only between a man and a woman, but the love that exists between a mother and her children is present in these lines as the narrator reminisces on the "delicate love-lines" which surround the

woman's mouth—a clear indication that his lover has aged, but an equal reminder of their lives together which now stay etched on the woman's face. As in all of Rossetti's sonnets, romantic ideals burgeon on the surface; however, each sonnet contains more facets than may be apparent upon a first reading. According to Mégroz:

The sensual aspect of eroticism is an important element of human experience and demands expression in art quite as insistently and justifiably as any other element. Rossetti, as all healthy people tend to do, passed through an especially sensual phase, in his quickly ripened maturity, after the death of his wife. (192)

Clearly addressed by Rossetti in *The House of Life* is the sensual element of human existence to which Mégroz refers. "A Day of Love" written in 1870 after the death of his wife, Lizzy, seems to look back on a life winding down.

The setting for the couple in the poem becomes more pronounced after the Volta occurs when the narrator remembers, "As here between our kisses we sit thus / Speaking of things remembered, and so sit / Speechless while things forgotten call to us" (12-14). A simple life spent together is a far cry from the imagery of "poignant thirst" and "exquisite hunger" for one another described in "Bridal Birth," but Rossetti's portrayal of love within the private sphere is more fitting in "A Day of Love." Rossetti limits sexuality to stolen kisses between bits and pieces of remembered conversation which shows how the narrator has grown through the careful nurturing of their relationship to take part in a type of companionate love. The sensual aspect of his poetry was best conveyed through the use of autobiographical material in Rossetti's verse, which provides material for closer analysis than reading the poetry without Rossetti's personal life in context. By using his personal life as inspiration, Rossetti works to incorporate Victorian values of ennobling daily life within the domestic space, as his life was unfolding with his wife

within this private sphere. Dante provides a simple vehicle for Rossetti to explore his family's passion for the Italian tradition in combination with his ability to highlight current Victorian trends and re-envision traditional ideas of purity and sexuality from the security of the domestic sphere.

Mirroring in *The House of Life* and Re-envisioning in “Newborn Death”

While Rossetti's verse has been noted for vivid imagery and extensive description, readers may have trouble seeing beyond the pictorial metaphors to discover the ways Rossetti worked to place male and female sexuality at the forefront of his poetry. Rossetti mirrors techniques used by Dante in his works, but re-imagining the male-female relationship as existing within the domestic space, and removes sexuality from the public sphere, thereby imagining a sexually experienced but simultaneously pure lover. Rossetti's obsession around love and death mirrors Dante's works before him and the rising trend in Victorian literature to focus on death. Not all credit is owed to strictly Victorian influences for Rossetti's obsession with death, as Norman Kelvin explains, "Gabriel's spiritualized love is the result of a circular process: the love the woman inspires is inherently spiritual- like Dante [Alighieri] encountering Beatrice, Gabriel experiences immediately the spiritual, in the material, when he loves" (240). This circular process is evident not only in “Newborn Death” but in the whole of *The House of Life* as the relationship between a man and a woman is continually reinvented and portrayed in various metaphors.

In the sonnet cycle “Newborn Death,” Rossetti presents themes of life and death as the narrator comes to grip with his own mortality mirroring the grieving process Dante describes in *Vita Nuova*. Women represent the life cycle within these sonnets—they both give life and take it

away. In this way, “Newborn Death” replicates a relationship from birth to death and summarizes the whole of *The House of Life* in a single sonnet. The opening to “Newborn Death” Sonnet II mirrors the language used in “Bridal Birth” but a shift occurs, both in the setting of the poem and in the narrator’s attitude. Just as “Bridal Birth” began with language referencing desire and love, “Newborn Death” begins, “And thou, O Life, the lady of all bliss, / With whom, when our first heart beat full and fast” (1-2). Lady and life are once again aligned and the image of a newborn, as hinted upon in the title, is presented with “our first heart beat full and fast.” The lady is described as the one who developed the relationship and has given birth to something more than desire. Instead of allusions to passion and lust, the narrator lifts up his lover as Life, personified.

This sonnet cycle, which appears at the end of “Change and Fate,” places a strong emphasis on the inevitability of Death as the fears realized by the narrator in “Bridal Birth” come full circle. Biographically, Part II, “Change and Fate,” represents a time of development and loss for Rossetti in his personal life, and these events are noticeable when reading the second half of *The House of Life*. Whereas Dante’s *Vita Nuova* takes place within the world and ventures outside of the domestic sphere, Rossetti makes it a point to confine the narrator and his lover to the tangible world his audience knew in order to stress the connection with his Victorian readers between the private space and the growing reformation of female power. Sonnet II in the “Newborn Death” cycle continues on from Sonnet I, as if the narrator takes only a breath and continues to look to Life, “with whom our first heart beat full and fast” to explain the situation he finds himself in the last lines of the previous sonnet, as the narrator presumably mulls over his own death.

The narrator continues by commenting on his wandering and the fortunes they brought to him. Namely, through this wandering the narrator discovers his love:

I wandered till the haunts of men were pass'd,
 And in fair places found all bowers amiss
 Till only woods and waves might hear us kiss,
 While to the winds all thought of Death we cast. (3-6)

As a re-envisioning of traditional values, Rossetti makes this newfound love unknown. In accordance with traditional Victorian values, Rossetti tends to situate these scenarios within the domestic sphere; yet, the narrator in "Newborn Death" rejects everything he sees as he, "found all bowers amiss" as a result of this poem taking place in the public sphere. This technique helps Rossetti to further re-envision Victorian ideals. The narrator searches "in fair places" and cannot settle "till only woods and waves might hear us." Here, the narrator attempts to create a private space in the public sphere which would be suitable for their love. Solace is not found within the "fair places" of the world or the small abodes along the way, but within the private sphere. Once the narrator abandons the cities he casts "all thought of Death" to the winds. Rossetti alludes to Sonnet I and the image of the "pale wave" when he writes of "woods and waves."

While musing on the idea of "the pale wave," the narrator simultaneously finds himself swept away by the bliss and hope offered by his ambiguous love. The shelter offered to the narrator through the waves and the woods proves to be a temporary means of survival and serves as a reflection of life, not reality. Short-lived is the relief the narrator experiences from Death as he laments:

Ah Life! and must I have from thee at last
 No smile to greet me and no babe but this?

Lo! Love, the child once ours; and Song, whose hair

Blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath. (7-10)

The narrator addresses Life and wonders, "must I have from thee at last / no smile to greet me?"

In this line death inadvertently reappears in the poem in the form of their relationship. Ambiguity in the lines make it unclear as to if his lover has died or if their love has simply been lost. The proceeding sestet before the Volta functions only for the narrator to reflect on happier times such as "A Day of Love." Being that the narrator has traveled away from the private sphere, the "child once ours," or the love described in the previous sonnets, have been lost. Passion is still present in this verse as the narrator reminisces on their relationship which originally "blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath." As the narrator begins to realize passion, like flames, is a fleeting feeling.

The personified Death and the title of the sonnet cycle, "Newborn Death" takes on additional layers of meaning with the lines, "no babe but this? / Lo! Love, the child once ours." The ambiguous nature of the narrator creates confusion, as Rossetti does not state if Love, the personified being, is the "child once ours" or if the "child once ours" was an actual infant. If the latter, then "Love" may be a reference to the woman with whom he created the baby which situates "Newborn Death" within the previously explored imagery of a mother-child relationship as a metaphor for love. With this conclusion in mind, each element of art Rossetti personified is done in the form of a woman. Life is personified as the creator of all beings; Love is shown as the woman with whom the narrator produced a child; and, Song is defined by her blowing, sensual hair.

Just as a woman, personified as Death, controls the narrator's fate in "Newborn Death," Beatrice holds sway over Dante Alighieri's life. In *Vita Nuova*, Dante reflects on Beatrice after

her death and mourns for the loss of his love, while simultaneously noting the amount of control Beatrice held over his life and happiness. The narrator conveys his feelings through the use of personification, a strategy often used by Rossetti, as Dante writes:

The sight of that lady created such a strange state in me that I often thought of her as a person who pleased me too much: and I thought of her like this: That is a gentle lady, beautiful, young and wise, and perhaps she appears by Love's will, so that my life can be at rest. (Kline 118)

The narrator places all power upon the woman to control his life. His life will not be at rest until she has entered it once again. The same power works within Rossetti's verse to create a powerful female character who dominates the narration. Christina Rieger details Rossetti's focus on the feminine spectator and explores the connection among Dante and Rossetti through her focus on women, stating, "The distinct figure in Rossetti's [works]: The Victorian woman who exercises her own powers of perception. In each instance, she forces her masculine observer to confront anxiety about his own artistic identity" (42). The life cycle applies not only from the birth to the death of the writer, but also to the career of the poet.

The females in both Dante's and Rossetti's works maintain control over the men in their lives and consequently hold power over the perception of the poet as he creates. Rossetti's obsession with death in his sonnet cycle, "Newborn Death" reflects the anxiety Rieger describes. Dante's reference in the above passage to a "person who pleased me too much" relates back to Rossetti's poetical unease as emotions become "too much" for his narrator to handle. With the passing of notable bills such as the "Married Women's Property Bill" in 1857 (becoming the Married Women's Property Act of 1870) and the revival of reformist activity by the feminist movement in the 1860s the feelings of unease in the narrator may reflect the changing times

(Holcombe 13). Lee Holcombe explains the hold-up for Victorian audiences to acknowledge women as separate entities from their husbands, capable of owning property and acting as sexual beings, and argues, “Emancipation was not only a matter of fact, but also, perhaps above all, a state of mind” which took women some time to process psychologically (27). Rossetti’s poetry reflected the reformation occurring around him as he chose to focus on women, almost exclusively, in *The House of Life* and showed women in a new light, different from his predecessor in key ways. Instead of displaying female sexuality and desire on the streets, like Dante’s meeting with Beatrice in *Vita Nuova*, Rossetti’s verse places women within the private sphere where they can be seen as objects of sexual desire but also as “angels in the house.”

The grieving process Rossetti experiences in his personal life plays out in his verse as he attempted to grapple with the line between life and death. The struggle presented in “Newborn Death” mirrors the personal grieving process Dante experiences at the sudden loss of Beatrice. In *Vita Nuova*, Dante composes a *canzone*, or a song of mourning, to his beloved Beatrice, and writes, "And I will speak of her, weeping, / since she has gone suddenly to Heaven, / and has left Love grieving with me" (Kline 100). Just as Rossetti does in his verse, Dante personified Love as grieving alongside him over the loss of Beatrice. The narrator finds himself so distressed that he can only speak of her while weeping.

The narrator in *Vita Nuova* utilizes similar techniques to make grief a tangible reality for the audience. Just as Rossetti begins to pull out individual physical characteristics, so does Dante, who writes, "I cannot hold my heart firm in its distress. / I cannot keep my wasted eyes / from gazing at you continually" (Kline 115). Dante's narrator describes his grief through his mind, heart, and eyes. McGann explains both Rossetti's and Dante's vivid descriptions through his view on Pre-Raphaelite ideals. As McGann states, "Art serves as the means of taking humans

beyond the confusions of a mortal and veiled existence" (339). In his attempt to re-envision Victorian ideals, Rossetti lifts his narrator above the "veiled existence" of life by elevating him through art. The image of the hair which "blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath" paints a powerful picture for the audience, making the image almost tangible. As Richard Stein points out: "In much Pre-Raphaelite art, the expression of powerful feelings is not merely a means but an end in itself; the emotional impact of their pictures is part of their meaning and not simply an accidental side-effect" (128). Through the lens of achieving this Pre-Raphaelite means of art, Rossetti's verse creates a broader impact, as he does not write in physical details for the sake of beautiful imagery. Instead, Rossetti's end goal is to incite an emotional response within his reader.

Various critics view Rossetti's poetry as a reflection of his own life experiences and see Rossetti himself as the narrator of his works. While Rossetti may not be equated to the narrator in all of his works, exploring the history of reforms in the Victorian era in conjunction with a biographical reading proves valid when considering Rossetti's influences, such as Dante's *Vita Nuova*. This projection of the poet onto the narrator mirrored the experience of Dante's works as R. W. B. Lewis describes the "confessional" aspects behind *Vita Nuova* and explains how the poems that comprises it explicitly reflects Dante's commitment to Beatrice (74). This extreme level of commitment is mirrored in Rossetti's writing. Dante's deep influence over Rossetti's works become more apparent when delving into the connection between both poets and their relationships with women. Rossetti re-envisions and transforms the level of obsession that Dante experiences following the death of his beloved after his wife commits suicide. Straub explains, "For Rossetti, Beatrice, or 'woman', is an end in herself and not a guide who will lead him to divine love" ("Morphing" 154). Apparent in these lines is Rossetti's all-encompassing obsession

with his lover. She consumes him completely as his thoughts turn to those of death in hopes of reaching her once again. Instead of leading Rossetti to the divine, women serve as nurturers, allowing love to grow out of lust, and maintaining that love in the same manner mothers care for their children. In this relationship, the female lover seems to take on a godly position in the eyes of the narrator. To put it as Straub does, "He [Rossetti] moves beyond Dante's vision and creates his own transvalued version of Beatrice; his love for her replaces his love for God" ("Morphing," 154). Rossetti's placement of Lizzy and women as a whole on the same level with God may also add to the list of ways Rossetti works to straddle the fine line between shock and awe for his Victorian audience.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Through his allusions to religion and placement of his female characters within the domestic sphere, Dante Gabriel Rossetti created images of empowered and physicalized women that could extend the boundaries of the Victorian idealized woman into transgressive territory. In order to soften these transgressions, Rossetti places them within more acceptable images of the domestic. As such, Rossetti accomplishes the strategies of Victorian poets Erickson describes when he writes, “The enabling audience is to be found in the love of another or of God and not in the public marketplace. The special private audience is preferred because it gives the artist access to spiritual insight and a sense of identity obtainable nowhere else” (46). Rossetti places his verse within the private, domestic space so he is able to empower his audience, especially the voices of females, as the blend of the spiritual and the sensual allows for a new sense of identity “obtainable nowhere else.” Rossetti must situate his sexualized verse within the domestic space in order to be received well by his Victorian audience. With the changing reform laws in the Victorian era, coinciding with Rossetti’s poetical career, there was a noticeable impact on the literature produced. The sonnets in *The House of Life* reflect these changing times.

Indeed, Rossetti’s own choice of the sonnet form of Petrarchan sonnets plays with this very idea social concerns and identity. These concerns are described by John Holmes, who writes, “These sonnet sequences were characterized, individually and collectively, by attempts to develop a poetry of selfhood. Their preoccupations—religious belief and doubt, sexuality and gender relations—were those of late Victorian identity” (vii). Rossetti saw this art form as thematically appropriate as well as a challenge when composing *The House of Life* (Helsing 246). Through the use of carefully crafted verse, purposeful meter, and rhetorical devices

Rossetti creates *The House of Life* which attempts to embody a relationship between a man and a woman. Within Rossetti's form, he celebrates the woman and places her, poetically and pictorially, in an interior but sexualized space that is as physical as it is spiritual. The reader watches the couple come together, grow together, and fall in love only to come to the realization that love and life are fleeting. For the narrator, the love the couple feels transcends time and physical life. Her presence resides within him continually, and the two will never be separated. Passion and desire help to create love and sustain a relationship, but corporeal beauty is momentary. Spirituality and the soul extend beyond the temporality the narrator struggles with as he, at last, finds solace at the idea of a reunion in the everlasting.

In this thesis, I have situated Rossetti's *The House of Life* within various contexts that show the complex strategies Rossetti used to re-envision Victorian ideals of female sexuality. I have described how Rossetti and Christina pushed the boundaries of women, traditional religious values, and sexuality in their verse. While Knittel sees the realms of the aesthetic and spiritual as coexisting to further the other but unable to stand on their own, I have suggested that Rossetti successfully blends religion and desire in order to empower women as redeemers. While the two categories of religion and aesthetics do overlap, in "The Choice," Rossetti clearly re-imagines his Pre-Raphaelite notions of the natural in favor of religious imagery combined with sensual language. This fusion of sexuality, religion, and love, in turn, emphasizes the importance of Rossetti's biographical influences and his connection to Dante Alighieri's works as applied to his verse. In the opening sequence of *The House of Life*, Rossetti follows in the Italian tradition of lifting women up through praise to the status of deities. Although many critics view Rossetti's poetry as a reflection of his own life experiences and equate Rossetti himself as the narrator of his works, I have examined Dante Alighieri's deep influence over Rossetti's works to show not

only that Rossetti's connections with women stems back to his failed relationship with Lizzy Siddal but also how this relationship was pivotal in the composition of *The House of Life*.

Indeed, as Nassaar indicated, Lizzy had a larger than life personality that clearly comes across in the painting Rossetti produces of her. Nassaar goes on to describe Siddal, noting, "Her swan-like neck, dreamy large eyes, and long golden hair came to dominate his canvases" (51).

Rossetti, in contrast, had small, feminine features and was unable to build a respectable reputation among the Victorian public because of his feminine nature. In part, this negative perception may have contributed to the decline of critical attention Rossetti's work received.

Warwick Slinn comments on the ever present nature of desire in Rossetti's poems in relation to his masculine desire, noting, "What becomes a defining feature of this masculine desire therefore is not only its location of feelings and value in an external source but also its willingness to settle for a lack of fulfilment" (56-7). The continual push of Rossetti's narrator to find fulfilment for his desire and passions may have spurred the prominent placement of femininity in his verse and the continual emphasis on women as the nurturer, allowing love to grow out of lust, and maintaining that love in the same manner a mother cares for her children.

This same focus on empowered and embodied women should now encourage scholars to examine Rossetti's *House of Life* sonnet cycle in more detail. By further viewing Rossetti's work in conjunction with his biographical and historical context, the magnitude of various life events and personal connections creates new dimensions in his verse. As the interest in the female body and the female voice continues to grow and expand, critics can access a new sphere of study by examining Rossetti's treatment of female sexuality within the domestic sphere. With the influx of feminist criticism reviving female poets, such as Christina Rossetti, the need remains to look back to this pivotal moment in Victorian England and see how reformation influenced poetical

verse. Through the examination of Rossetti's ability to blend the sexual aspects of the private sphere with religious imagery and the emphasis placed on the female role within *The House of Life*, I have established the need for Rossetti's sonnet cycle to be further studied critically.

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