

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: *VENUS IMAGINARIA: REFLECTIONS ON ALEXA WILDING, HER LIFE, AND HER ROLE AS MUSE IN THE WORKS OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI*

Jennifer J. Lee, M. A., 2006

Directed By: Professor William L. Pressly, Department of Art History and Archaeology

While much has been written regarding the associations of Dante Gabriel Rossetti with his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, and mistresses, Fanny Cornforth and Jane Morris, scholars have generally ignored, or at the very least, minimalized, the potential importance of his connection to Alexa Wilding. This thesis shall serve as a rudimentary biography for her through analysis of public records and private letters, and it will examine overlooked evidence in the search for the real woman behind Rossetti's most versatile face, and the influence of the artist on the model as well as the inspiration she gave to him.

VENUS IMAGINARIA: REFLECTIONS ON ALEXA WILDING, HER
LIFE, AND HER ROLE AS MUSE IN THE WORKS OF DANTE
GABRIEL ROSSETTI

By

Jennifer J. Lee

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Advisory Committee:
Professor William L. Pressly, Chair
Professor Meredith Gill
Professor Franklin Kelly

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the many wonderful souls who have helped me on my journey; but most of all, to Chris McCormick, who lent a sympathetic ear, brilliant insights, and helping hands innumerable times, providing a guiding light in even the darkest of hours - and to Gabriel and Alexa, for giving me a reason in the first place.

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Chapter 1

The Portrait

O Lord of all compassionate control,
O Love! Let this my lady's picture glow
Under my hand to praise her name, and show
Even of her inner self the perfect whole:
That he who seeks her beauty's furthest goal,
Beyond the light that the sweet glances throw
And refluent wave of the sweet smile, may know
The very sky and sea-line of her soul.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1869)

For decades, scholars of Dante Gabriel Rossetti have in turn proclaimed or denounced the statement that “the women in Rossetti’s pictures all look alike.”¹ However, it is interesting to note that even those in favor of such a proclamation have instantly begun identifying the different sitters, their relationships with the artist, and their personal influence on the way in which they were depicted. The truth is “a comparison of them in drawings and in oils will show that [the statement that they all look alike] is by no means the case.”² The faces most often discussed are those belonging to Rossetti’s wife, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal (photograph and *Beata Beatrix*, figures 1 and 2), his sometime lover and housekeeper Fanny Cornforth (photograph and *Found*, figures 3 and 4), and his mistress, Jane Morris (photograph and *La Pia de’ Tolomei*, figures 5 and 6), the wife of one of his closest friends. These are women with whom there is evidence (more in some than in others) to support the idea of a romantic relationship between each of them and Rossetti. And while much scholarship since the 1960s has focused on the autobiographical significance of Rossetti’s painting and poetry, many works have been overlooked due to the perplexing nature of one model’s own history. Little has been written about Alice (Alexa) Wilding (photograph³ and *La*

Ghirlandata, figures 7 and 8) as little is known about her. What has been said regarding her turns this lack of information into a confirmation of her unimportance to Rossetti.

This was not the case, either.

One might think that the mystery behind the face would have been enough to intrigue some student of Pre-Raphaelite lives sometime in the past forty years, but it appears that most scholars have preferred to take the road well-traveled - that of known letters and diaries, of rumored liaisons and illicit relationships. Because Alexa has not been connected to Rossetti in a salacious manner, she is generally thought to lack any and all personal importance to him, as if an amorous or sexual connection would be the only type meaningful to him. But, one must ask the question, how much sense does that really make? This is especially true considering the fact that “she ultimately sat for more finished paintings than any of Rossetti’s other models.”⁴ Is it even truly possible to believe that someone he would have used as a muse so often – in some of the works he considered to be his best and most important – someone with whom he worked for so long – that simply because there is no obvious or extant proof of a potentially erotic intimacy, this should be considered an indication of no significant relationship at all? Certainly not.

While much has been written regarding his associations with his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, and mistresses, Fanny Cornforth and Jane Morris, scholars have generally ignored, or at the very least, minimalized, the possible importance of his connection to Alexa Wilding. She has been easy to disregard because no one really knew anything about her, and no one bothered to search beyond what was commonly known. This shall serve as a rudimentary biography so that the facts of her life can no longer be disregarded

- ignorance can no longer be claimed - and she can no longer be ignored. This thesis will examine overlooked evidence in the search for the real woman behind Rossetti's most versatile face, and her role as the true embodiment of his idea of "Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views" (figure 9).

Chapter 2

The Three Graces

What masque of what old wind-withered New-Year
Honors this Lady? Flora, wanton-eyed
For birth, and with all flowers pranked and pied:
Aurora, Zephyrus, with mutual cheer
Of clasp and kiss: the Graces circling near,
'Neath bower-linked arch of white arms glorified:
And with those feathered feet which hovering glide
O'er Spring's brief bloom, Hermes the harbinger.

Birth-bare, nor death-bare yet, the young stems stand,
This Lady's temple-columns; o'er her head
Love wings his shaft. What mystery here is read
Or homage or of hope? But how to command
Dead Springs to answer? And how questions here
These mummers of that wind-withered New-Year?

- "For *Spring* by Sandro Botticelli," (1880)

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

One of the most popular approaches in Rossetti studies has been “the frequent recourse to Rossetti’s life for a key to his works, and vice versa.”⁵ David Sonstroem, in his 1970 work *Rossetti and the Fair Lady*, states that “almost everyone who has ever written about him, those who knew him and those who studied him, from Christina [Rossetti] to Watts-Dunton to Doughty [author of *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, A Victorian Romantic*] and Grylls [author of *Portrait of Rossetti*], has remarked on his habitual way of seeing events and people (in Miss Grylls’s phrase) *sub specie litterarum*.”⁶ In his own research, Sonstroem identified four feminine archetypes in Rossetti’s work: the Heavenly Lady, the *Femme Fatale*, the Sinful Woman, and the Victimized Woman.⁷ While there may be some crossover of the parts portrayed by the models under his system - Elizabeth Siddal is sometimes the Heavenly Lady, and at other times the Victimized Woman; Fanny Cornforth is the Sinful Woman and the *Femme Fatale*; Jane Morris is the

Heavenly Lady and the *Femme Fatale* – Sonstroem characterizes each woman based on her real-life relationship with Rossetti. None of the most often written about models (Lizzie, Fanny, or Jane) is ever found in all four of his categories.

Sonstroem's book, an extension of his dissertation, is only one example of the biographical interpretations that have been the basis for much Rossetti scholarship in the recent past.⁸ It may be a sound methodology (although certainly not the only one which should be utilized) – however, it omits the paintings of the model who posed for more finished works than any other. And while even a rudimentary biography of Alexa Wilding has not been available until now, it is important to look at the works featuring her alongside the traditional interpretations of those featuring his wife and two mistresses. But, one must first examine Rossetti's own philosophy of art and love, some of the other models' paintings, and the ways in which these works can be seen as reflections of these real-life women in Rossetti's often stereotyping eyes.

In his 1933 work, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Philosophy of Love*, Charles Richard Cammell suggests that Rossetti was driven by the theory that he could find the reflection of his own soul in the face of a woman:

The soul of a man is incomplete, and must seek out its complement, in the soul of the one woman, its affinity. Not by all men, in this pilgrimage of life, is the complementary soul found or findable; but somewhere in the infinitely mysterious passage of the human spirit to its Eternal Goal will the two half-souls meet and, uniting, create of themselves that Union with the Divine Essence which is the sum of Attainment...Rossetti, an Italian under an alien sky, taught his pre-Raphaelite friends to paint the souls of women, and to portray each his own soul in the pensive countenance of his Beloved.⁹

Rossetti's spirituality was a combination of the ethereal and the ephemeral, and he looked for divinity in the physical female form. The painter-poet's only prose work, "Hand and Soul" supports the conclusion that this is a conscious thought-process in his visual art. At the age of twenty-one, Rossetti composed this story for inclusion in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's periodical *The Germ*. While many scholars have interpreted it as a manifesto of the movement, it should be seen first and foremost as an expression of Rossetti's own personal ideals of Art and Love, and his (desired) relationship with them both. Using the characters of both Chiaro di Messer Bello dell'Erma, a fictitious late medieval artist, and a nameless nineteenth-century narrator as the embodiments of different aspects of himself, Rossetti connects past and present, art and viewer, body and soul.

"This Chiaro dell'Erma was a young man of very honorable family in Arezzo; where, conceiving art almost for himself, and loving it deeply, he endeavored from early boyhood towards the imitation of any objects offered in nature."¹⁰ The narrator constantly refers to art in feminine and lovingly romantic terms: "Sometimes it had even seemed to him to behold that day when his mistress – his mystical lady (now hardly in her ninth year, but whose smile at meeting had already lighted his soul,) – even she, his own gracious Italian Art – should pass, through the sun that never sets, into the shadow of the tree of life, and be seen of God and found good."¹¹ Utilizing details that harken back to the *Vita Nuova* of Dante Alighieri, Rossetti reminds the reader of his personal association with the Florentine poet, his namesake – while associating Italian Art with Dante's lady love, Beatrice.¹² In this manner, Rossetti is not only playing into a tradition of courtly love, and showing himself to be the successor of such in name and deed – but

he also points out the need for an ideal love, especially as the inspiration for great art. While some scholars (Rossetti's father among them) had claimed that Dante's Beatrice was simply an allegorical figure – perhaps poetry, perhaps Italy herself – Rossetti himself was convinced that Beatrice was a real person; specifically, Beatrice Portinari.¹³ As Dante Alighieri's ideal love was both an actual woman and an inspiration for verse, so must Dante Gabriel Rossetti seek out a woman (eventually women) who would play romantic roles in his life, and ideal embodiments of femininity in his art. Even the picture that he creates in "Hand and Soul" is one that will later manifest itself (although with key differences) in oil on canvas:

A woman was present in his room, clad to the hands and feet with a green and grey raiment, fashioned to that time. It seemed that the first thoughts he had ever known were given to him as at first from her eyes, and he knew her hair to be the golden veil through which he beheld his dreams....As the woman stood, her speech was with Chiaro: not, as it were, from her mouth or in his ears; but distinctly between them.¹⁴

"I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee. See me, and know me as I am....Seek thine own conscience (not thy mind's conscience, but thine heart's)....Set thine hand and thy soul to serve man with God....Chiaro, servant of God, take now thine Art unto thee, and paint me thus, as I am, to know me....Do this; so shall thy soul stand before thee always, and perplex thee no more."¹⁵

The tale ends with a return to the modern era, and the narrator's description of the painting, the attribution of which having only recently been established.

The picture I speak of is a small one, and represents merely the figure of a woman, clad to the hands and feet with a green and grey raiment, chaste and early in its fashion, but exceedingly simple. She is standing: her hands are held together lightly, and her eyes set earnestly open....You knew that figure, when painted, had been seen; yet it was not a thing to be seen of men.¹⁶

One gets the feeling that there might be more to this faceless narrator than meets the eye. He appears to have a vested interest in the work of art, even explaining how he “contrived, however, to find a place whence I could see *my picture*” [emphasis his].¹⁷ His similarity to Rossetti in the nineteenth century, as a young English student of art with a mystical intuition and an interest in late medieval painting, again suggests the possibility of reincarnation. This is meant to be seen in the story between the narrator and Chiaro, and between Rossetti and Dante in his own life.

The concept of a man painting the portrait of a woman as an interpretation of love is also illustrated by Rossetti’s drawing *A Parable of Love* (figure 10). This was drawn about the same time “Hand and Soul” was written. Despite the fact that this is supposed to be a lesson in which the young lady paints her self-portrait, the man’s grip on the paintbrush is stronger and more sure. It appears that, contrary to what one might at first believe, he is truly the one creating the artwork here, and, despite her place in front of the canvas, she is actually more the model than the artist. He gazes in the mirror to view his pupil. It is as if he cannot (or does not want to) see the actual woman, but requires reflection to manifest his vision, a possible reference to the line “it was not a thing seen of men” from “Hand and Soul.”

This work was created around 1850, about the time that Rossetti originally crossed paths with the first of his Three Graces, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal. Much ink has been spilled discussing their relationship, so only the briefest of details are required for the purposes here.

With the exception of Rossetti’s mother and sister, Lizzie was the first model with whom he had a personal connection. The daughter of a Sheffield cutler, she first posed

for his friends and other members of the PRB: Walter Deverell, William Holman Hunt, and, most famously, as Ophelia in John Everett Millais's work of the same name.

William Gaunt, in *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, paints an interesting portrait of her:

“Beautiful as the reflection of a golden mountain in a crystal lake,” said Ruskin, adding, with his sudden scratch of perception, “which is what she is to him.” ...She was passive....This passivity helped bring them together. She trailed slowly towards him, a melancholy doll, set in sluggish motion by the virile, expansive gestures of the warm Latin. His roar of laughter elicited from her a wan smile, his jests provoked a faint answering shade of humour, his ardour the ghost of passion. In the same contrary fashion, he loved her because she was so little responsive. No one knew what she was thinking of or if she thought at all. She had...the habit of “keeping herself to herself” which deepened into an unfathomable reserve on being introduced into a clever and freakish group of artists....In her mournful beauty, her natural silence, her frigid apathy, she was like a statue to be warmed into life, into which he could project, with that dangerous power of his, thought, emotion, and even genius.¹⁸

A Parable of Love can, in retrospect, be seen as Art imitating Life imitating Art.

Not only did Rossetti fall in love with Lizzie, but he also taught her to paint, encouraged her to compose her own verse, and saw her as his Ideal— the physical manifestation of his own Soul.

Gabriel, in his own way, felt the necessity most of projecting a thought, a symbol, an aesthetic explanation into this remoteness of being. The artist in him was a force that could contemplate dispassionately, or even as a victim, the person closest to him. It sprang at her like a metaphysical beast of prey and fastened unrelenting fangs in the white column of her throat. She was to be Beatrice, beloved of the poet, Dante Alighieri, as well as Lizzie Siddal. And he, of course, was Dante, the great Florentine, the author of the *Divine Comedy*.¹⁹

After their seemingly ill-fated relationship ended with Lizzie's death (now presumed suicide) in 1862, Rossetti memorialized her as both his and Alighieri's beloved in *Beata Beatrix* (figure 2). The death of Beatrice is not described in the *Vita Nuova*, so Rossetti created this scene:

It must be remembered, in looking at the picture, that it is not at all intended to *represent* Death, but to render it under the semblance of a trance, in which Beatrice, seated at a balcony over-looking the City is suddenly rapt from Earth to Heaven...She sees through her shut lids, is conscious of a new world, as expressed in the last words of the *Vita Nuova*.²⁰

Details of the composition can be compared with those found in descriptions of the painting in "Hand and Soul." In both works, the figures' hands are "held together lightly." The green and purple ensemble of Lizzie/Beatrice is similar to the "green and grey raiment" mentioned in the tale.²¹ However, the Soul of the tale stands – she is active, while this Beatrice sits, passively. She does not so much do as things are done unto her. Perhaps the greatest difference, though, is found in the eyes. The Soul is depicted with "her eyes set earnestly open," and evidence can be found in an early sketch (figure 11) for the painting that he originally intended Lizzie/Beatrice to be shown in much the same way. But in the finished work, the eyes are closed – the earthly windows of Lizzie's soul have been locked and barred forever.

As should only be expected, there are, of course, allusions to Beatrice herself, and one can see the other characters of Love (on the left) and Dante in the background. But the dove and poppy can be viewed as both universal and personal symbols. "The Dove" was one of Rossetti's terms of endearment for Lizzie;²² here it also indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit. Poppies were the source for the opiate laudanum, an overdose of

which was the actual cause of her death. However, in the “Language of Flowers,” which was very popular in Victorian England, it can be interpreted as “sleep” or “death.”²³

Both readings would be appropriate here.

While Rossetti saw Lizzie’s death as equal to that of Beatrice, he also imagined her life in terms more – or perhaps less – than those of the average mortal. In *Regina Cordium* (figure 12), he shows her as the Queen of Hearts. However, while she is idealized in character, there is also a certain amount of realism in the way he presents her. Although this was painted in the early days of their marriage, it was far from the early, hopeful days of their relationship. The road to the altar was roughly paved with her sickness, his betrayal, and their separation from each other. Lizzie, as the freshly coronated Queen of Hearts, does not meet the viewer’s eye, but gazes despondently to her right. Even her grip on the pansy (“thoughts,” in the “Language of Flowers”) seems weak and futile, as if to parallel her grasp on reality, her mental stability.²⁴

Shortly after completing *Regina Cordium*, Rossetti painted *Fair Rosamund* (figure 13), modeled on the figure of Fanny Cornforth, the second in his Trinity of Muses.

Fanny has often been described as a prostitute, although “her exact status among the myriad classes of women who operated in the world of commercial sexuality is not easy to determine, but she probably fell into the category of ‘doll-mop’ which...constituted a large group of clandestine prostitutes who supplemented meager earnings in other spheres such as...an artist’s model.”²⁵ She was first used for the head of the woman in Rossetti’s only moralizing work with a contemporary context, *Found* (figure 4). This illustrates the climactic moment when a once innocent woman, forced to

resort to prostitution in the vice-ridden city, is discovered by her former sweetheart from the country.²⁶ The traditional belief is that Fanny herself was a “fallen woman” as far as the public’s perception of her morality was concerned, but she appears to have been entirely without any of the feeling that she should go immediately and jump off a bridge the way proper (fictitious) fallen women behaved in Victorian literature.

The exact date of Fanny and Rossetti’s first meeting is unknown, but it did take place during the time of his long courtship with Lizzie. While it is also uncertain as to “exactly when she began to have sexual relations with Rossetti...a note in his [Boyce’s] diary of January 1859 suggests that he was already sharing her with Boyce.”²⁷ It was for this friend that Rossetti painted Fanny in a work called *Bocca Baciata* (figure 14).

Although the title originally came from a line in Boccaccio, “The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon,”²⁸ it is also an allusion to the mouth of Fanny herself, kissed by both artists. Arthur Hughes, another painter, wrote to the Irish poet William Allingham that the painting was “so awfully lovely. Boyce has bought it, and will I suspect kiss the dear thing’s lips away before you can come over to see it.”²⁹ As the physical manifestation of a woman whose sexuality is overtly expressed, Rossetti chose his own, sexually liberated mistress.

It is in these terms that *Regina Cordium* and *Fair Rosamund* can be seen as pendants to each other, two sides of the same coin. Rosamund was the mistress of Henry II, whose wife was insanely jealous of their relationship, and eventually succeeded in having her murdered. Rossetti’s own history showed his wife to be the one to die and his paramour to live, but these works were completed before that defining moment in 1862. The overall composition of *Fair Rosamund* is startlingly similar to that of *Regina*

Cordium, but as its reflection, its polar opposite. The hearts at the base of the window are identical to the ones he used for the Queen of Hearts. But in his own mind, Lizzie would always be the (legitimate) queen, and Fanny would always be the (illegitimate) mistress. Despite the fact that they wore the same necklace and shared the affection of the same man, they were set in their own particular roles in his life and his art and never the twain would meet.

The third of the Rossetti's female Triumvirate was the woman whose relationship with the artist has attracted much modern attention, perhaps because it is the least definable. Jane Burden Morris was the wife of his friend and colleague, William Morris. While there are certainly no still-warm sheets to confirm that their affection for each other was ever realized in physical passion, scholars remain divided on whether or not there is enough evidence otherwise to prove such was the case.³⁰

Like Lizzie and Fanny, Jane was from the working class, the daughter of an Oxford stablehand, with a rumor of gypsy ancestry in her blood. She first met Rossetti and the second Pre-Raphaelite movement in the summer of 1857, while the men were engaged in painting frescoes from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* on the ceiling of the Oxford Union. She was chosen as the model for Rossetti's "Guenevere" in *Sir Lancelot's Vision of the Sanct Grael* (figure 15). This may seem prophetic to later historians who believe she engaged in an extramarital affair with Rossetti. While Sir Lancelot dreams of the Holy Grail, or Sanct Grael, Guenevere blocks his view of it, symbolizing the way in which sin has blinded him, making him unworthy of finding the sacred chalice. She echoes the form of the apple tree at the center of the composition, a symbol of the Fall of

Man. On the far left, the “Damsel of the Sanct Grael,” hidden behind the all-too-distracting and adulterous Queen, was based on Lizzie.

Much of the correspondence between the two is no longer in existence, but there are bits and pieces left behind; most of which are from Rossetti to Jane. Much like Lizzie, Jane experienced bouts with an unknown malady and eventually went to take the waters at Bad Ems in Germany.³¹ In a letter Rossetti sent to Mrs. Morris while she and her husband were at the spa, he expressed his deepening feelings for her:

All that concerns you is the all absorbing question with me, as dear Top will not mind my telling you at this anxious time. The more he loves you, the more he knows you are too lovely and noble not to be loved; and, dear Janey, there are too few things that seem worth expressing as life goes on, for one friend to deny another the poor expression of what is most at his heart...I can never tell you how much I am with you at all times. Absence from your sight is what I have long been used to; and no absence can ever make me as far from you again as your presence did for years. For this long inconceivable change, you now know what my thanks must be.³²

Perhaps most famously, Rossetti portrayed Jane as *Proserpine* (figure 16), or Persephone, the goddess tragically caught in a loveless marriage. “Rossetti loved this legend, feeling that its theme – a woman granted only occasional periods of freedom from her husband – was analogous to his relationship with his model.”³³ By this point in time, Morris and Rossetti had a joint tenancy of Kelmscott Manor. Here, Gabriel and Jane could spend months together on their own, while her husband attended to business in London or journeyed to the bleak desolation of Iceland.

La Donna della Finestra (figure 17) signifies a return to Dantean subject matter, not that it ever completely disappeared from Rossetti’s *oeuvre*. In keeping with the tradition that characters in the *Vita Nuova* were based on real-life people, Rossetti

believed “La Donna” or “The Lady of Pity” to have been Gemma Donati, the woman Dante eventually married.³⁴ She “gazed down sympathetically on Dante from a window after the death of Beatrice....The compassionate lady is undoubtedly also a reference to Jane....in whom Rossetti sought solace after the death of Lizzie.”³⁵ It was a reversal of the original storyline: this Dante married his Beatrice, but not his Lady of Pity.

Still, there were those who believed Jane was truly the love of his life, and had been since the days of the Oxford Union frescoes. Hall Caine, a late-in-life friend and confidante, described him as “a man who, after engaging himself to one woman in all honour and good faith, had fallen in love with another and then gone on to marry the first out of a mistaken sense of loyalty and a fear of giving pain, instead of stopping....[A] man who realized that the good woman he had married was reading his secret in spite of his efforts to conceal it and thereby losing all joy and interest in life.”³⁶ Through this one is led from examining his La Donna back to a consideration of his Beatrice. Chronologically and narratively for Rossetti, the wheel turns, the past is the future, and the future is the past.

Thus were the three leading ladies upon his stage. He painted them as he loved them or pitied them – as he worshipped them or to expunge the guilt of his trespasses against them. He held them on pedestals as goddesses or saints, and rescued one from a fall in which she never truly believed she was Fallen. They were his muses and his marionettes. And while it has been argued that he never allowed them out of their assigned parts, it can also be said that this personal perception of them hindered his artistic expression.

Such was not the case with Alexa Wilding.

Chapter 3

Venus Imaginaria

ONE face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel—every canvas means
The one same meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

- "In an Artist's Studio" (1856)

Christina Rossetti

Originally inspired by Rossetti's professional and personal relationship with Elizabeth Siddal, "In an Artist's Studio" is, perhaps, even more appropriate regarding his paintings of Alexa Wilding. Considering the many ways in which he depicted Alexa on canvas, and as there is only the barest rumor of a personal romantic entanglement, the line "not as she is, but as she fills his dream" is especially apt. The group of works in which she figures prominently includes all types of his fantastic visions of femininity – both the idealistic and the nightmare, the positive and the negative. While he required separate models to portray such opposites in the past (as they occupied such disparate spheres in his own life), he was able to use Alexa to add to the depth of his works by using the same face to express such opposing ideas, both virtue and vice. In that way, her presence allowed him greater freedom of expression for his artistic ideas as hers is the face he placed in many of his most original compositions. While often the subjects for which he chose Elizabeth Siddal, Fanny Cornforth, and Jane Morris were from pre-

established stories and legends – Alexa is found in creations that are his and his alone – or as a new ideal, recasting an old form or covering someone else’s visage when the original was after a time found wanting.

It is because of her negative capability that she was so versatile to him. While she was by no means a meaningless body to Rossetti, as so many scholars would have one believe, she was also not typecast into particular parts – she possessed greater range as a model because she was not amorously involved with him as a woman. Her appearance was greatly significant to him, and it acted as a perfect vehicle for the expression of his ideas. His paintings of her reflect his fascination, fear, and admiration for the feminine in all its forms.

But who was she, really - the woman behind the face on so many of his canvases?

The most that has ever been written about Alexa Wilding is found in the original text of *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle* by Rossetti’s studio assistant, Henry Treffry Dunn, completed sometime before Dunn’s death in 1899. In the memoir, she is given an entire three and a half paragraphs of description. The *Recollections* were first published in a bowdlerized version in 1904 that eliminates all specific mention of the women in Rossetti’s circle.³⁷ But, in the unedited manuscripts one can find the description of the artist’s first meeting with the woman who would grace so many of his canvases.

It was quite by chance that he [Rossetti] met with such a face in harmony with the subjects he wanted to realize on canvas and by a lucky accident she came across his path. It was one summer evening that he was in the Strand³⁸ (figure 18) on the way to the Arundel Club of which he was then a member. Walking quietly along amongst the hurrying folk that thronged the pavement he became aware of a young girl by his side. He turned his head to look at her and was struck with her beautiful face and golden auburn hair. It was the very type of face he had been seeking for so long.

She passed him and got mixed up in the crowd in front. Rossetti followed her for a considerable distance before he could well get up with her. At last she turned down an almost deserted by-street. Rossetti did likewise and presently overtook his Quest. With some amount of nervousness, as he told me, he spoke to her, and explained that he was an artist and was painting a picture and her face was the very one that he required for the subject he was at work on, begging her to come to his studio and give him a sitting for the same, assuring she should be amply remunerated. At first she did not seem to understand the nature of his request but at last he made it clear to her and she gave a sort of consent and left him with a promise to call on the morrow at his Studio. The next day came and Rossetti made every preparation to receive her and make a study of her head for *The Blessed Damozel*.³⁹ His palette was set, the canvas on the easel and everything in readiness but she never came. This was a terrible disappointment to him, her face being so beautiful and so suitable for that subject.⁴⁰

The story does not end there, of course, but continues in a manner reminiscent of

Rossetti's own tales of predestination and fate.

Days and weeks went by, and he had given up all hope of seeing the young lady again and had even abandoned the picture, when one afternoon in company with Howell in the same part of the Strand, he again caught sight of her. He was then in a cab, telling Howell what he was going to do he stopped the Hansom at a side street, got out and darted after the girl and at last overtook her. He reminded her of the promise she had given him and told her of his disappointment at her not coming and at last persuaded her to enter the cab and drive with him to Cheyne Walk⁴¹ [Rossetti's home and studio] (figure 19).⁴²

The first of these two events probably took place in mid- to late 1864; the second in early 1865. The reason for this dating is a letter to Rossetti from Alexa which is more appropriate after the second encounter.

23 Warwick Lane, Newgate Market. 8 April 1865. Miss Wilding presents her compliments to Mr. Rossetti and will feel obliged if he will send any letters to the above address, as she has obtained her Mamma's permission to sit for any picture after the specified time of three weeks. I am, Sir, yours respectfully, A. Wilding. P.S. If you should require me to sit, let me know, and I will come if possible.⁴³

One wonders about the three-week delay. Why would such a thing be necessary?

According to the 1861 England Census, Alice Wilding, then approximately sixteen years of age, was living at 23 Warwick Lane with her grandmother, two uncles, and ten-month-old cousin. Her paternal uncles were butchers, probably with their own stall at nearby Newgate Market (figure 20), famous for its meat. Her grandmother, Mary Ann, was a fifty-nine-year-old widow, and it must be believed that she, and not Alice's mother, was the permission-giving "Mamma" mentioned in the letter. It is noted that the elder Wildings all hailed from Shrewsbury, Shropshire, while the soon-to-be model and her cousin, Robert Humphreys, were both born in Surrey (figures 21 and 22).⁴⁴ The only known extant example of her writing to have survived is housed at the University of British Columbia, as part of the Angeli-Dennis Collection (figures 23 and 24). The handwriting appears almost masculine to modern eyes, especially when it is compared with the more graceful script of Rossetti himself (as seen in figure 9). But, is this a show of strength on her part – or simply a sign of the weakness of her education?

Her life on Warwick Lane was probably not terrible by the standards of the time. She had obviously been taught to read and write, and observed a formal sense of propriety. Still, the reason she was walking in the Strand on both occasions when Rossetti saw her was most likely not for pleasure, but that she was a working girl, making her way home after the toil of a long day.

To the poor simple girl an Artist's Studio was a revelation. She had never heard of such a thing before, and to find that by simply sitting still in a comfortable room for an afternoon she could earn more money than in a week's work at her ordinary occupation of dress-making would bring was a great surprise to her. With very little persuasion she gave up her situation and at a liberal arrangement sat to him entirely.⁴⁵

While she may have entered the somewhat morally dubious profession of dressmaking, Alice, as she was then known, appears to have been rather more innocent than some of her sewing sisters. It is entirely probable that the reason she did not honor the first promise she made to sit to Rossetti was due to the reputation artists' models had in the nineteenth century. They were generally considered to be little more than prostitutes, and often one and the same. Of course, this has also been said of seamstresses and milliners of the time. And one should not forget actresses. The fact that ladies of the stage were often seen as ladies of the evening complicates the picture Dunn draws of her.

Hers was a lovely face beautifully moulded in every feature, full of quiescent soft mystical repose that suited some of his conceptions admirably, but without any variety of expression. She sat like the Sphinx [*sic*] waiting to be questioned and with always a vague reply in return; about the last girl one would think to have the makings of an actress in her and yet that was her ambition.⁴⁶

Perhaps she was unaware of the reputation of actresses. Or perhaps her new-found occupation gave her the confidence to attempt entering the arts on her own. Either way, though, there is no evidence that she was actually part of any production on a Victorian stage, unlike the evidence found in the work of Rossetti himself, testament to his belief in her universal feminine appeal.

Dunn commented on the importance of the look of a model for his master, "If a design were germinating in his brain it was all thought out and shaped into a pen and ink or pencil reality before he transferred the subject to canvas. When the sketch of the idea conceived was to his liking then would come the question of what model was best fitted for the subject and, exercising the same fastidiousness as when composing poetry, several drawings of the model's face would be made ere he was satisfied..."⁴⁷ The appropriate model was paramount to success of the creative process. These paintings were not

simply fill-in-the-blank exercises with whomever happened to be at hand. If the face was not part of Rossetti's vision, he would not use it. This speaks volumes, considering that Alexa was featured in more finished works than any of the other ladies who sat to him.⁴⁸ Dunn illustrates the importance of specific models to Rossetti in the example of what happened when Alexa first failed to arrive at the studio. "Days and weeks went by, he had given up all hopes of seeing the young lady again and had even abandoned the picture..."⁴⁹ In this example, at least one conceptualized work would never have been realized if he had not found her again.

It was, with one notable exception, rare for Rossetti to recast the roles of Lizzie, Fanny, or Jane from one to another. This excludes the character of Beatrice, in which he painted the former and the latter, but never in the same context or general setting. However, he painted Alexa in roles that had earlier been given to his wife, calling into question the statement that Rosalie Glynn Grylls, Lady Mander, made in describing her as an understudy for Jane.⁵⁰ Perhaps he perceived her as a replacement figure for Lizzie – they were the only redheads, after all – but there is no evidence that she was in anyway viewed by him as similar to Jane.

Two paintings at different points in Alexa's career are similar to compositions in which he had originally used Lizzie. The first finished picture for which Alexa sat was *Regina Cordium* (figure 25), a revisitation of the work Rossetti completed of his wife shortly after their wedding (figure 12). While the title is the same and the composition is that of a single-figure, holding a flower, and standing behind a parapet, the end result produces a vastly different effect. Alexa's Queen gazes straight out at the viewer, as one who seems confident and sure of her place in this environment. Her grip on the scepter-

like iris is relaxed, but there is no fear here that she will drop it. Unlike the married Lizzie, the unwed Alexa's royal role is more reserved. Her hair is pulled back and the background features unripened cherries⁵¹ and a "heart-shaped medallion of a cupid in a blindfold" allowing "Rossetti to depict a beautiful young woman with emblems of love, contrasting nature and artifice."⁵² At the same time, the space does not close in around the figure the way it does in the 1860 version. This is a more idealized, less realistic Queen. She is a fresh-faced young player, new to the game of love, still separated from the roses ("love" in the Language of Flowers), and protected behind her wall.⁵³ No matter what Alexa's actual reality was, she is presented in a manner that makes one feel this *reine d'amour* will have far fewer difficulties to overcome than did her predecessor.

Another painting in which Rossetti used Alexa as the same character in which he had first cast his own bride is that of the "Damsel of the Sanct Grael" (figure 26). The original watercolor composition (figure 27) dates from the time he met Jane and was involved with painting Arthurian scenes in the Oxford Union. They are both products of their time, and emblematic of the styles associated with Rossetti during these periods. The earlier work is more medieval in style; the limitations of the paper's edge press in around the figure, although the ends of her hair have escaped and disappeared. However, it is the movement of her tresses and the fluttering of the dove (which can, again, be seen with a double meaning) that give motion to this Damsel, as if she has just descended from Heaven. Alexa's Damsel is more subdued – she looks away from the viewer, while Lizzie is far more confrontational. It is the opposite of what can be seen in the facial positioning for *Regina Cordium*. In the later version of the *Damsel*, there is more importance on the fabric than the figure. Rossetti has dressed her in a sumptuous robe,

far more befitting a Venetian courtesan than a Gothic saint alluding to his spiritual belief in a unity of body and soul.⁵⁴

Not only as a “new Lizzie” did Rossetti use Alexa, making old compositions over again, he also cast her in the part of the “Blessed Damozel,” perhaps more of a tribute to his dead wife than even *Beata Beatrix*, and the iconic image associated with his most popular poem. The plot of the ballad itself is similar to Edgar Allan Poe’s “Annabel Lee.” However, in the Englishman’s tale, the dead beloved is the main speaker, yearning for the heavenly presence of her earth-bound lover.

Her seemed she scarce had been a day
One of God’s choristers;
The wonder was not yet quite gone
From that still look of hers;
Albeit, to them she left, her day
Had counted as ten years.⁵⁵

As with so many seemingly fated events in his life, work on *The Blessed Damozel* (figure 28) began about ten years after Lizzie’s death. Unlike most of his paintings of Alexa where her features are clearly discernible, this is a combination of Alexa’s reality and Lizzie’s spirit. The heavy-lidded eyes of Miss Siddal, praised so often by the Pre-Raphaelites and their circle, can here see and be seen. It is as if Rossetti again tries to atone for his guilt in closing her eyes, both literally and figuratively, in *Beata Beatrix*. This painting is an expression of what he hopes will be the case; that Lizzie will have forgiven him, and be waiting just beyond the “gold bar of Heaven” for him to join her.⁵⁶ Because of her resemblance to his dead wife, combined with the lack of an intimate relationship that would have clouded his perception of her otherwise, Rossetti is able to find in Alexa the means to produce such a *tour de force* of emotion, and give a face to one of his most timeless original creations.

While her association with Lizzie can be seen in a light that speaks highly of his wife, and by transference, Alexa herself, her pictorial connection to Fanny is not nearly as laudatory for the part of Miss Cornforth. This mistress-*cum*-housekeeper was the model for an early study of *Venus Verticordia* (figure 29). Several drawings were made of her for this role in the years soon after Lizzie's death. Eventually, another woman was used, according to the artist's brother, "a handsome and striking woman, not very much less perhaps than six feet high...He spoke to this person who turned out to be a cook serving in some family in Portland Place, and from her he painted his large *Venus Verticordia*."⁵⁷ But that was not the end of the story. Rossetti had scratched out the head of the cook and repainted it with Alexa's by 1868.⁵⁸ This was the first time Rossetti replaced the head of one model with that of Alexa – but it would by no means be the last.

In keeping with the various roles in which he usually saw the people in his life, *Venus Verticordia* (figure 30) makes sense as a "Fanny-painting" considering that she is a *femme fatale*, and one of his few attempts at a nude figure. Rossetti composed a sonnet for the picture, warning of a dangerous price, should love be accepted from this goddess:

...If she give the fruit that work her spell,
Those eyes shall flame as for her Phrygian boy.
Then shall her bird's strained throat the woe fortell,
And her far seas moan as a single shell,
And through her dark grove strike the light of Troy.⁵⁹

Her stance and facial expression can be compared to that of *Regina Cordium*, full-frontal and confident, although here there is a new haughtiness. Of course, that would only make sense. This is a painting of the (immortal) Goddess of Love; the earlier work was of the (mortal) Queen of Hearts. The Queen wears the arrow of love around her own neck but is walled off from the roses symbolizing the emotion of which she is the

sovereign; the Goddess is surrounded by her floral-emblem, and offers a dangerous-looking dart to her suitor (the viewer) in communion with the Apple of Discord.⁶⁰ The first is a romantic ideal from the courtly love tradition; the second is a powerful pagan deity whose love comes at the highest price imaginable. Lizzie was once cast in the role of *Regina*, and Fanny as *Venus*, but, in the end, Rossetti used Alexa to portray them both.

However, Venus was not the only potentially dangerous woman in Rossetti's imagination. There was also Lilith - the first, and perhaps, ultimate *femme fatale*, beautiful and yet damned for all eternity, who brought the dangers of love to men at the dawn of time, even before the Fall. Also entitled *Body's Beauty, Lady Lilith* (figure 32) was originally modeled on Fanny (figure 31). The sonnet Rossetti composed for this work, like that for *Venus Verticordia*, details the hazards of partaking of this woman's favors.

And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
And, subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright net she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold...
Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thing, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.⁶¹

While his idea of a glorious afterlife included a Blessed Damozel whose "bosom...made/The bar [of Heaven] she leaned on warm," he also believed in aspects of human sexuality that were soul-less and could be used for evil.⁶²

His own commentary for this painting was that it,

Represents a *modern* Lilith combing out her abundant golden hair & gazing on herself in the glass with that self-absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle. The idea which you [Dr. Hake] indicate (viz: of the perilous principle in the world

being female from the first) is about the most essential notion of the sonnet.⁶³

Several years after he had delivered the painting to his patron, Frederick R. Leyland, Rossetti decided that it still needed some work. He wrote to its owner, “when in town you *must* at last get the *Lilith* sent to me, as I’ll make it a trice richer in tone than it is now...”⁶⁴ He had received the painting and was preparing to begin work by the end of 1872. “I have a model who just suits me for the complexion – all that remains is to do it – so I shall soon be able to announce its completion.”⁶⁵ While he only mentions changing the coloring of the work and complexion of the figure, he actually painted over the original head. The end result was that Rossetti replaced Fanny with Alexa as the most infamous of all vixens.

On the opposite end of this spectrum was *Sibylla Palmifera*, or *Soul’s Beauty* (figure 33) - the beauty of the Soul which increased the beauty of the Body, producing the unity of flesh and spirit that Rossetti sought so desperately in his own life. Although Lady Mander states that Alexa was called in as the model for this work due to Jane’s illness, there is no evidence that such was the case, especially as all studies for this painting feature the face of Miss Wilding.⁶⁶

In discussing the title with his patron, George Rae, Rossetti explained that “the name *Palmifera* (palm-bearer) I have bestowed on the lady to mark the leading place which I intend her to hold among my beauties...neither in oil nor water have I ever produced the design, nor anything like it, before.”⁶⁷ This was a completely new creation. Unlike “Lady Lilith” whose story originates in Talmudic legend, “Sibylla Palmifera” was an invention all of Rossetti’s own.

Contrasting with the “perilous principle” of *Lilith*, the artist described this image of femininity as “that of beauty the Palm-giver, i.e. the Principle of Beauty, which draws all high-toned men to itself, whether with the aim of embodying it in art or only of attaining its enjoyment in life.”⁶⁸ According to Rossetti, both “principles” have the ability to attract men, but one is a virtue and one is a vice.

Under the arch of Life, where love and death,
Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw
Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,
I drew it in as simply as my breath.⁶⁹

He links the two compositions with their single figures through the inclusion of the rose (“love”) and the poppy (“death”) in both works. Love and Death are often united in Rossetti’s philosophical and spiritual beliefs. Both can be viewed in positive and negative ways, just as “Lilith” – the Body who gazes inward upon herself, and “Sibylla” – the Soul who gazes out at the viewer and the world, can be seen as opposites ends of the same spectrum. While scholars can accept the traditional symbolic similarities between the two, at least one critic has proclaimed that, “Wilding’s image complicates our reading of the painting [*Lady Lilith*] because hers is also the face modeling the companion picture to “Soul’s Beauty” [the poem], *Sibylla Palmifera*.”⁷⁰ Why should this complicate the reading, instead of illuminating it? In the past, Rossetti would have required Fanny as the Body (and he did, originally) and Lizzie as the Soul. But with Alexa he was able to use one face to convey both, exploring the complexities and contradictions of his own ideals. In this way, he also shows her visage to embody the ideology behind his aptly-named sonnet written for *The House of Life*:

A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals
The soul, - its converse, to what Power ‘t is due: -
Whether for tribute to the august appeals

Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,
It serve: or, 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,
In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death.⁷¹

The relationships behind Rossetti's paintings of Lizzie and Fanny have already been discussed, leading one to wonder if Alexa had amorous adventures in her own life. There is no documentation to suggest that she ever married, but that does not mean that her life was completely lacking in romance. It seems that Rossetti's studio assistant, Henry Treffry Dunn, for one, was not immune to her charms. Gale Pedrick (son of the editor of the *Recollections* and great-nephew of Dunn himself) in his 1964 *Life with Rossetti or No Peacocks Allowed* makes interesting claims regarding the nature of Dunn's relationship with Alexa:

It was in Cheyne Walk he thought himself in love with the delectable Alicia; Alicia Wilding (known also as Alexa or Alice), whose face looks out upon the world in *Veronica Veronese*, *Monna Vanna*, and *The Blessed Damozel*. Harry's trouble was that he was not a man who could take easily to discipline in any form. He liked to go his own way; and although hands were held, kisses exchanged, and verses written, and it is unlikely that Harry wasted the long journeys to "escort" Miss Wilding to Kelmscott and other Rossetti sanctuaries, Alice, all in all, was probably better off without her adoring Harry.⁷²

While this passage presents more questions than answers, it also creates further confusion regarding her choice of name. The fact that Pedrick uses "Alice," "Alicia," and "Alexa" interchangeably does not help the situation. He is the only author to use the name "Alicia" at all. It is also problematical in that he provides no sources for his narrative. He mentions in his acknowledgments that much of his information comes from documents within the family. Perhaps it is in some personal papers still held by them that the details of Dunn's romance with Alexa are given light.⁷³ Pedrick continues, "He never married, but he had a number of women friends. None made such an impression on him

as did Alexa Wilding – who was always Alice to him...If ever Harry was in love with any woman, it was with Alice Wilding.”⁷⁴

The only other obvious flash of flirtation for Alexa can be found in a letter from Rossetti to Dunn from 1874. While much of the correspondence between the artist and his assistant is centered around the ins and outs of keeping a household on task and paying bills, other bits of news filter through the pounds and shillings. It is also through an analysis of these letters that one can observe the change in Rossetti’s relationship with her, from the earlier, more formal days when she is referred to as “Miss Wilding” then as “Miss W.” and “Alice W.” to later days when she is simply and familiarly called “Alice.” “I suspect she is in a fix and disposed to go to the devil with this probably good-for-nothing fellow of hers. You see if she hasn’t a house of her own she probably couldn’t receive him, and this may be the real reason she sticks to housekeeping.”⁷⁵ Perhaps one must take “housekeeping” in this instance to be more along the lines of what is now commonly called “house-sitting.” But who this “fellow of hers” was and how she was “disposed to go to the devil” with him is never revealed.

While modern scholars have dismissed the idea of a liaison between Rossetti and Alexa out of hand, it does not appear to have been such an obvious non-event to his contemporaries. An 1872 letter from George Hake to William Bell Scott questions her possible influence on the artist’s mental state.

The Hakes, however, remained concerned about “the female complication,” on which they were only partly informed. On 10 August, George promised Scott “all the latest news about DGR and also of JM and Alexa whoever she is! We send the letters back to Brown unopened; but ask to be let into the secret.”⁷⁶

This missive expresses the concern about Rossetti's health from one of his friends to another. While many modern historians have cited Robert Buchanan's attack on Rossetti and his friends in *The Fleshly School of Poetry* as the cause of his mental breakdown in 1872, the documents of the time tend to point the finger of blame in the direction of Gabriel's romantic interests, specifically his affair with Jane Morris. Although most of his circle were aware of his illicit relationship with (or at least impassioned feelings towards) Janey, there was enough of a mystery around his connection to Alexa that George Hake thought it, too, might be partially responsible for Rossetti's illness.

However, some of the greatest support of a possible romantic interest comes from Rossetti's former Pre-Raphaelite Brother, Frederick George Stephens. While the PRB was dissolved in 1852, many of its members remained life-long friends. Rossetti and Stephens continued their comradery until Rossetti's death in 1882. As an art critic for *The Athenaeum*, Stephens was able to promote the painter and poet's work through the press, adding to the mystique of an artist about whom much was said, but few of whose works were ever actually publicly displayed. In 1899, Stephens penned a *Portfolio* monograph about his old colleague.

So many differently inspired versions did Rossetti give us of the beauty of Alice Wilding. Nevertheless, I dare say, not a little of her charm existed mostly in the passionate heart of the painter; yet I well remember that nothing he drew of her, diverse as the delineations were, seemed less than an exact likeness. Of course, one saw her through the mood of the artist and it has sometimes appeared to me that the ardent sonnet he called *The Portrait* referred, however generally, yet chiefly, to her, when he described how, when "my lady's picture" was finished, he exclaimed – "Lo! it is done. Above the long, lithe throat
The mouth's mould testifies of voice and kiss,
The shadowed eyes remember and foresee.
Her face is made her shrine. Let all men note
That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!)
They that would look on her must come to me."

Did ever lover, poet and painter write of his mistress more finely than thus?⁷⁷

While these statements present a seemingly endless array of possibilities for the Wilding-Rossetti relationship, they have only functioned thus far as a will-o'-the-wisp of potential, as none of Stephens's comments have been supported by another contemporary.

However, it does appear that at least one person with a vested interest in Rossetti's affections was concerned about his connection to Alexa. Fanny Cornforth's modeling days had passed by the time Alexa became fully ensconced in the artist's studio. Yet, she had now taken over the role of "housekeeper" in name if not in actual duty, and relied on Rossetti's monetary generosity more than ever. This was a potentially tenuous position, and it would have been a bad thing indeed, had Rossetti no longer needed any of her services. With that being the case, Fanny was rather paranoid as Rossetti spent more and more time away from her, in the company of Jane Morris. Alexa and Dunn appear to be the only employees allowed to visit Kelmscott Manor, the house leased jointly by Rossetti and his friend, William Morris. Morris was rarely present at the manor, but his wife was in residence with their two children at the time Rossetti was living there. When the model and assistant returned to London, they brought news of the goings-on in the country. While the exact topic of conversation is never revealed, a letter from Rossetti to Fanny from August 1873 shows both how nervous Fanny was about her place in Rossetti's life in general, and her sneaking suspicion that perhaps there was more to his relationship with Alexa than met the eye.

My dear Fan,
I cannot understand how Miss W. could be so stupid as to repeat such a pack of lies to you, wherever she may have heard it. I am very sorry you should have been annoyed about it, but you must always remember that nonsense is always being talked about everyone, and you know very well

that I am quite certain not to neglect or forget so good and dear a friend as your self at any time. It is painful to me not to see you oftener, but this cannot be helped at present, and you may be certain that it is always in my mind to try and serve your interests in every way...

As for my making Miss W. handsome presents when I sell my pictures of her, I gave her something extra on *two* occasions only, and you know what I pay her regularly at present is not so much as I used to pay her when we made the arrangement.

Take care of yourself, dear Fan, and believe me ever,

Your affectionate,
R.⁷⁸

Was Rossetti actually being honest here? Or was he trying to cover up his activities away from home? Had it been a later point in time, perhaps he would have found use for the Oscar Wilde maxim - "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about" - to deflect and dismiss her concerns.

While Rossetti used Alexa as a replacement for the now-dead Lizzie and to cover the visage of his once-upon-a-time mistress, Fanny, he does not appear to have used her to replace Jane, but as an alternative. This is especially evident during the time when the two of them were living together at Kelmscott. If Jane had really been the preferred muse, why does she not figure more in the works he completed when she sat at his side? At a time when Rossetti was almost always in need of money, he paid the extra expense of continuing to keep Alexa on retainer while she was London, and sending for her to travel to Oxfordshire.⁷⁹ Many scholars have stated that this was because Jane was often unwell and could not sit for him. This seems rather unlikely as Rossetti reports of the goings-on in the countryside to many of his friends, often noting the illness of his sister and Alexa herself, but with little said about Jane's health.⁸⁰

After his mental breakdown and attempted suicide in 1872, when Rossetti returned to work, he did so with a renewed spirit – and a desire to revisit some of his

earlier works. It was during this time that he began repainting many of the faces on his old canvases, several of which were already in the hands of their new owners. It is certain that *Lady Lilith* was granted her face-lift at this time, and some undetermined work was performed on *Monna Vanna*, which also has the features of Miss Wilding. His brother, William Michael, speculated that this was the time *Venus Verticordia* was altered,⁸¹ but later scholars have conjectured that this occurred several years earlier.⁸²

However, this was not simply a time in which the artist only went back over his prior works; there were new creations, as well. *La Ghirlandata* (figure 34), another completely original composition like *Sybilla Palmifera*, saw its genesis during the time Alexa spent at the Manor.⁸³ Even with the earliest interpretation there is some uncertainty as to Rossetti's intention with this work. "I suppose he purposed to indicate, more or less, youth, beauty, and the faculty for art worthy of a celestial audience, all shadowed by mortal doom," was William Michael's thought on the matter.⁸⁴ And more recently it has been read, "that she is a goddess of art, love, and death."⁸⁵ Unlike many of the paintings of Alexa, this does not have an accompanying sonnet. Perhaps it is because here the idea of music is expressed in place of poetry.

One of the paintings also retouched in 1873 was *The Beloved* or *The Bride* (figure 35), which "is usually considered the finest production of Rossetti's life and art...which is indeed a very apotheosis of feminine beauty."⁸⁶ In his monograph on the artist, Rossetti's friend, F. G. Stephens, commented,

The Beloved, a noble picture which I regard as Rossetti's masterpiece...dates its origin from 1863, and as regards its splendor and colour and the passion of its design, need not fear comparisons with the greatest works of the sixteenth century in Venice. In these respects this *chef d'oeuvre* is a superb and ardent illustration of the Song of Solomon, "My

Beloved is mine, and I am his; let him kiss me with the
kisses of his mouth for thy love is better than wine.”⁸⁷

The model for this work has always been given as Marie Ford, a professional model who also sat to him for *Belcolore*.⁸⁸ One can see her features (figure 37) as the work looked shortly before it was completed and given to George Rae in early 1866 (figure 36).

However, there is something that seems to have escaped everyone’s notice since that time. Although it has been often commented that the painting was reworked in 1873, and all have stated that the head of the bride was “idealized” during this period, no one has mentioned the fact that it is no longer strictly the face of Marie Ford on the canvas – but one now inspired by Alexa Wilding (figure 38).

While there is no extant letter from Rossetti stating that such was the case, there are hints of what was in his mind. In late 1872, he wrote to George Rae, “some day...send me the *Beloved* here, I’ll work on it to good purpose and make it as good in tone as *Palmifera*.”⁸⁹ Changing the tone was exactly what he said he was going to do with *Lady Lilith*, and in the process he painted Alexa’s head over the original. Much of the early commission agreement for *Sibylla Palmifera* involved Rossetti’s attempt to sell the composition as a pendant to *The Beloved*. Upon completion of *Sibylla Palmifera* (the second to be finished) new matching frames were made for both paintings. *Sibylla Palmifera* was first and foremost, a figure based on Alexa. So, in reworking *The Beloved* would he not have tried to make them even more similar? This is especially considering that many of the works he proposed as pendants had Alexa as the model in both.⁹⁰

During the time in which Rossetti worked on *The Beloved* while at Kelmscott, often his letters to Dunn make requests for that painting, immediately followed by questions regarding Alexa.

I am wanting a big showy looking jewel of the diamond kind (or yellowish would do, but I suppose glittering white would be best) to paint...in the *Beloved*. I daresay a theatrical jewel such as you could get for a few shillings in Boro Street would do quite well. It would be nice to have it heart shape, but that might be hard to find...I suppose I shall immediately be sending for Alice W. now in good earnest to begin a picture from her. Her last account of herself was "ill in bed." Do you know how she is now?⁹¹

Some critics might say that this proves nothing definitive. But it does show that he was thinking about them at the same time, and in the same terms – as a need for certain props to complete his work.

Perhaps the best evidence can be found in the work itself. If *The Beloved* is examined beside *La Ghirlandata* (figure 39), which also dates from the same time that the biblical painting was retouched, the faces of the main figures appear quite similar. Could it be that because no one knew anything about Alexa Wilding it was never even considered that hers might be the face looking out from one of Rossetti's most lauded pieces? This can be seen as indicative of her critical reception as a whole. Far more than Lizzie, she truly came to embody Christina Rossetti's "nameless girl in freshest summer-greens," unnoticed as herself for decades.

While Alexa has been overlooked and often "nameless" in Rossetti scholarship, her name presents questions in her own story, as well. There is no simple answer to the how and when of Miss Wilding's first name being changed. There is not any definite evidence that she was known as anything other than "Alice" outside of Rossetti's circle. Some scholars speculate that it was Rossetti who dubbed her the more glamorous "Alexa," but that seems unlikely as he always referred to her as "Alice" in his later letters to Dunn. If he had been the one to create the name, he certainly would have been the

first, and perhaps the most consistent, to call her that. Yet there is no proof that he ever used it. It is generally accepted, however, that her desire for a new appellation was driven by her desire to trod the boards.⁹²

However, while it was written after the artist's death, one of the first times she is mentioned in the literature surrounding Rossetti's *oeuvre* is in his brother's memoir. William Michael Rossetti calls her, in 1895, "Miss Alexa Wilding," and refers to her as "a damsel of respectable parentage."⁹³ What exactly had he heard about her heritage? He describes her as having "a head of fine and rather peculiar mould, eminently strong in contour and also capable of much varying expression, which he regarded as almost a *sine quâ non*."⁹⁴ The fact that both Rossetti brothers obviously felt she possessed the capability of great expression is rather ironic in the context of later commentators (Dunn included) who proclaimed one of her main attractions for the artist was found in her impassive demeanor.

In fact, use of the name "Alexa" is a rarity in the documentation from Rossetti's lifetime. She is known by that name in one letter by George Hake, Rossetti's doctor, and in diaries kept by George Price Boyce, a friend and fellow artist. While Rossetti held claim over Alexa as a professional model (he paid her a retainer of £1 a week), he would, on occasion, allow his artistic compatriots to utilize her services. Boyce made several drawings of her head and a finished portrait of her (figure 40), which was sold in 1869. It is in Boyce's diaries that one can find evidence of Alexa's embellishment of her own life – or perhaps she was simply trying out a part. "1867 May 15...Miss Alexis [*sic*] Wilding came to sit for me for the 2nd time...Her father was a pianoforte maker. She has no brother or sister. Lives with an aunt. Her uncle is a compositor. She brought me a *carte-*

de-visite of herself.”⁹⁵ It *could* be that her father had been a piano maker in Surrey. It *could* be that her uncle had changed occupations since 1861, but for him to suddenly take up a new profession at age 37 does not seem likely. However, one must admit that such a history would potentially give her more acceptability in the world of intellect and art where she now found herself. It certainly sounds much better than saying one came from a long and proud line of butchers.

Unfortunately, the original manuscript for Boyce’s diaries was destroyed during World War II; the only available copy is a reprint of the severely edited portions published in the *Old Water-Colour Society’s Club Nineteenth Annual Volume* of 1941. However, it provides at least a snapshot of Alexa outside the studio of either artist. “1866 August 3....Went on to Cremorne (R[ossetti] having to go and dine at Hon. Mrs. Cowper’s). Met Miss Wilding there and had a pleasant dinner with her. She was with a girl friend and her mother and brother.”⁹⁶ There is just enough to tantalize, and make one wonder if there were any other meetings. Certainly Boyce thought Alexa was beautiful; he mentions it often enough. But did other sentiments fall casualty to the *blitz*?

Even while there are only hints at anything otherwise, it is quite obvious that Rossetti himself was possessive of Alexa as a model, at the very least. During the time of his employer’s mental illness and recovery, Dunn corresponded with William Michael Rossetti regarding the day-to-day household dealings.

As Rossetti shows this desire to return to his work again do you think it will be wise to pay off Miss W.? It will annoy him terribly to find she has been sitting to others. Please let me know as early as possible what you think about this because you see she will be most anxiously sought for by Millais and that lot if they find her free.⁹⁷

Her importance to him is evidenced in Rossetti’s own letters to his faithful assistant.

About A. W. you do not say what she has said as to her immediate troubles and how soon she will need tin [i.e. money]. Please keep any eye on her, for I don't want her to skeedaddle.⁹⁸

Yes, theirs was a working relationship. There has never been any doubt of that. But it is also apparent that there was something special about her, at least as far as Rossetti was concerned.

An 1873 letter from Rossetti to his mother has been the most damning regarding Alexa's place of importance in his life. Mrs. Rossetti and her daughter, the poetess, Christina, were to visit Gabriel at Kelmscott at the same time Alexa was to be sitting to him.

About the model, it would be Miss Wilding, who is a *really* good creature, fit company for anyone, and quite ladylike, only not gifted or amusing. Thus she might bore you at meals and so on (for one cannot put her in a cupboard)...but of course there would be no need of doing things in a hurry [inviting other guests] unless you thought that the presence of others might make poor Miss W. bearable. Let me know. You see, out here one has to live with one's models as they cannot come to sit and then go home. But she is the most retiring and least self asserting of creatures and would not be much in the way, at least not more than was unavoidable.⁹⁹

For a man who was known to have a sense of humor, and was also given over to a bit of exaggeration when the mood struck him, this letter has been taken as absolute proof of his innermost thoughts and feelings about Alexa. Dunn and Boyce did not find her boring in the least. It has never been considered that he might be more cautionary than perhaps necessary when broaching the subject of the female members of his family partaking in the company of a model. His wife was first his model, and there is some indication that his family never fully approved of the match.¹⁰⁰ While there is nothing to indicate the same path was Rossetti's intention with Alexa, he would have also wanted to make certain no one had any thoughts that such was the case. His mother and sister were

gentlewomen and no matter how polite and “ladylike” Alexa was, she was still from the working class.

Rossetti’s fears about this meeting were completely unfounded, however. Mrs. and Miss Rossetti thoroughly enjoyed their time with Miss Wilding. Rossetti shared this revelation with Dunn in a letter from July 1873. “Alice W. has also shown more faculty for enjoyment than I ever saw her display before. She and my mummy and sister have got on very well together and like each other much.”¹⁰¹ However, he goes on to discuss the only problem that seems to be in any real evidence throughout the relationship of the artist and model: “Alice has sat daily almost and much better than last time, though the first day she looked alarmingly ill.”¹⁰² He described the situation more fully in another letter to his assistant.

My picture from A. W. goes on swimmingly (in spite of two November days created on purpose for the start of it) and will be the best I have done of her. She sits well, though on the day of her arrival she looked so deadly pale I thought she could not sit at all. She has evidently been very ill.¹⁰³

While she was staying at Kelmscott, and despite the new “faculty for enjoyment” Rossetti saw in her, she must have spent some of her time there under the influence of an unspecified illness. As he informed Dr. Hake’s son, George, “My mother, sister, and Miss W. will leave on Wednesday. I am glad Miss W. can go at the same time, she being able-bodied. The improvement in Christina has continued steadily and is most noticeable.”¹⁰⁴ This sounds as if both his sister and his model had been unwell during their stay in the countryside – unwell to the point that travel would not have been possible earlier. This appears to be confirmed by a letter to Dunn two days later: “My mother, sister, and Miss W. leave to-day. The last named has sat very well, and is to look you up for sittings as soon as she gets to London. She has greatly benefited in health I think by

her stay here.”¹⁰⁵ In many of his letters to Dunn both before and after this trip to Kelmscott, Rossetti asks questions after the health of Alexa, as it seems to have been an issue that caused her to miss scheduled sittings.

This leads one to speculate about the course Alexa’s own life took. Censuses have provided no definite information after 1861. But a search of later English records provides a fascinating possibility. In 1881, an Alice Wilding, age 34, was recorded as living at 33 Redcliffe Road, Kensington (figures 41, 42, and 43) She is listed as the head of the household with two children, Charles and Nellie, ages four and three, respectively. Her occupation is listed as “let lodgings.” While at first glance this may seem to be a document completely irrelevant to the subject at hand, further investigation indicates that such may not be the case.

The age given at this time is a few years off of what it should be according to the 1861 census. However, it is not uncommon, even in the twenty-first century, for women to take a few years off of their age, or it could be that her uncle gave the government official incorrect information for the first document. Unless the children were illegitimate, they could not be her son and daughter (as they are listed to be) since they all have the surname of “Wilding” which was Alexa’s maiden name. Also, the marriage records of this time do not show that she ever wed – and if she had, it would have had to have been to a man with the same last name. But, as shown in the 1861 census, Alexa did have an uncle named “Charles,” who had moved to Brighton and gotten married by 1871 (figures 44 and 45). Neither he nor his wife Maria appear in census records after that year. It is possible that an unfortunate accident may have befallen them, and Alexa

took in their two children, just as her other uncle Richard had done with her and her cousin Robert.

The other item of interest is the mention of her position as a landlady. Being a property-holder was quite impressive for anyone at this time, much less a girl who had grown up in the meat stalls of Newgate Market and now held property in one of London's most pleasant neighborhoods. Rossetti himself never even owned his own home in Chelsea, which was very close to Redcliffe Road. And while the manner in which she became a homeowner remains a mystery, it does not appear that Alexa's lodging situation was completely without problems. As early as 1873, Rossetti wrote to Dunn, discussing her housing issues.

That blessed Alice writes me in a fix. All I can possibly send is £5. Indeed, this is a difficulty. Will you consult with her about her d---d house. Surely she *must* get rid of it. I have paid her, I find by my cheques, nearly £60. over what was due to her since we re-opened accounts in September 72, and there is of course no prospect at all of her ever being otherwise than far behind. Perhaps if she had lived in lodgings she would have had these £60. by her now.¹⁰⁶

While it is apparent that Rossetti did not approve of this house as any sort of money-making investment for Alexa, she seems not to have been dissuaded from keeping it. In a letter to Dunn written in the latter part of 1873, Rossetti again expressed his hope that the House Question will be resolved by Alexa, and his way of describing her in this postscript is enough for one modern Rossetti scholar to declare it expressed his true feelings for her during their entire relationship.¹⁰⁷

P.S. Surely A. W. will now get rid of this mad house of hers. But how could even she be ninny enough to get such a set in at all? Surely the whole thing must have been a plant of some sort. Did she get her money?¹⁰⁸

While much of the vagueness of these letters leads one to wonder exactly what is being discussed – how could Alexa’s housing problems be a “plant”? what was the address of this issue-ridden abode? – there is certainly enough to show that she was in possession of a house.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti departed this life April 9, 1882. The last piece of information truly known about the woman who was once his model was recorded by the faithful Dunn. “She was one of the few Maries of the sepulchre who journeyed down to Birchington-on-Sea when she could ill afford it so that she might place a wreath on Rossetti’s grave.”¹⁰⁹

The only other document which lends itself to an interpretation that the Alice Wilding of 33 Redcliffe Road was indeed the Alexa Wilding of Rossetti’s studio comes from a death in 1884. While there were many women named “Alice Wilding” at the time, there is only one record for an “Alexa Wilding.”¹¹⁰ A death certificate was issued for Alexa Wilding who died April 25, 1884, at the same address as the 1881 census, and with the correct age for that Alice Wilding. The cause of her demise is listed as peritonitis for six days and eventual exhaustion.¹¹¹ She had been diagnosed sixteen months prior with a splenic tumor.¹¹² She was thirty-seven-years old (figures 47 and 48). Could this be the disease that had manifested itself all those years before in fits of illness and the inability to keep her sittings with Rossetti? Is it possible that, like some ancient pagan queen’s conversion to Christianity, she made a deathbed declaration that she was forever after to be known as “Alexa”? And could it be that, somehow, William Michael Rossetti learned of this and thus used that name in his memoir, ensuring that Rossetti scholars who followed would do the same, thus perhaps honoring a dying wish, but

hiding the real woman, and giving future generations only her mute performance in her first and last role as Rossetti's muse?

Chapter 4

Venus Victrix

Perhaps Alexa Wilding never became the actress she wanted to be – or perhaps she became such a great (literally silent) actress, that since Dante Gabriel Rossetti's death in 1882, she has only been seen through his eyes. She has been the face of diverse visions of femininity, truly a Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her from different views. She played a wider variety of roles and appeared in more finished works than any of his other models, despite the fact that they actually had close personal ties with him.

Yet, that closeness hindered him where the other models were concerned. He could only ever see his wife and two mistresses as his wife and mistresses. But because there were no real romantic associations with Alexa, his work with her could take on more original forms, his imagination and ideology could be more freely expressed as there were no rules for what she could or could not be. He did not have to project himself as the male counterpart to her fair maiden role, creating both a real and artistic history. Instead, he could use her face as a reflection of his soul, and its many feminine aspects.

It is not that her own life story is unimportant – quite the contrary. Through analysis of the documentation that is available, one can see the strides she made in her own life, to better herself, not just financially, but socially and artistically as well. Rising from what at best might have been the lower middle class to a certain level of independence as a property holder and dying as a “gentlewoman,” while still remaining a single (and not fallen) woman was no small accomplishment, especially in the nineteenth century. One wonders what her life would have been like had it not been cut short at such a young age. Would she have become an actress? Would she ever have had an art

form outside of her own self-created life story, now remembered only through the bits and pieces of others' memoirs?

However, it is her negative capability in Rossetti's mind that makes her the perfect muse for him. Unlike the real-life entanglements he experienced with Lizzie, Fanny, and Jane, his relationship with Alexa was much more like that of the original Dante and his Beatrice. Instead of being typecast into one particular part, she could be all things to him – her face that of goddesses and *femmes fatales*, and, most importantly, the icon of his own designs.

While Alexa's tale is not yet finished, one can at least begin to realize the multifaceted aspects Rossetti saw in her – and the ways in which they inspired and influenced each other. For that, perhaps, the most appropriate of his poems is not one inscribed on a frame housing her visage, but buried deep within *The House of Life*.

Could Juno's self more sovereign presence wear
Than thou, 'mid other ladies throned in grace?—
Or Pallas, when thou bend'st with soul-stilled face
O'er poet's page gold-shadowed in thy hair?
Dost thou than Venus seem less heavenly fair
When o'er the sea of love's tumultuous trance
Hovers thy smile, and mingles with thy glance
That sweet voice like the last wave murmuring there?
Before such triune loveliness divine
Awestruck I ask, which goddess here most claims
The prize that, howsoe'er adjudged, is thine?
Then Love breathes low the sweetest of thy names;
And Venus Victrix to my heart doth bring
Herself, the Helen of her guerdoning.

“Venus Victrix,” *The House of Life* (1871)

-Dante Gabriel Rossetti

¹ Grylls, "Rossetti's Models," *Apollo* 78 (1963), p. 18.

² Ibid.

³ This is the only known photograph of Alexa. It was taken by J. R. Parsons, the same photographer who took the many pictures of Jane in 1865. One could assume they were taken at the same time. If this is true, then Rossetti instantly recognized the usefulness of his new model. However, this dating may have been done based on the time that Jane's were taken, and this picture of Alexa could have been from a completely different time. This image has only (to the best of my knowledge) been formally discussed and published in one book *The Victorian Art World in Photographs*; the author of which, Jeremy Maas, died several years ago, unfortunately leaving his methods a mystery.

⁴ Jiminez, *The Dictionary of Artists' Models*, p. 569.

⁵ Sonstroem, *Rossetti and the Fair Lady*, p. 5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., pp.3-4.

⁸ Jan Marsh, Griselda Pollock, and Susan P. Casteras, to name but a few, are some of the many scholars who have taken this approach.

⁹ Cammell, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Philosophy of Love*, 14, 19.

¹⁰ Rossetti, "Hand and Soul," p. 5.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹² Like the age of Italian Art – the literary character of Beatrice was almost nine when Dante first met her, according to the *Vita Nuova*. She is often said to be a "perfect nine" – a triple trinity.

¹³ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. By D. G. Rossetti, p. 3.

¹⁴ Rossetti, "Hand and Soul," pp. 13-14.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

¹⁸ Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁰ *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 5, ed. Fredeman, p. 42.

²¹ It is also interesting to note how similar this ensemble is to that found in *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* of 1857. That work combines both the green and grey of "Hand and Soul" and the green and purple of Beatrice, seen first in his *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies Him Her Salutation* for which Lizzie was also the model, in 1851.

²² Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*, p. 216.

²³ Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: a History*, p. 189.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

²⁵ Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, pp. 106-107.

²⁶ Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, plate 4.

²⁷ Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 107.

²⁸ Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: a Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 68.

²⁹ Cited in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 2, ed. Fredeman, p. 278.

³⁰ One hundred and seventeen letters from Rossetti to Jane were deposited at the British Museum to be held in reserve until January 27, 1964. Rosalie Glynn Grylls, Lady Mander, and three assistants were on hand early the morning of their release to copy each of them, and try to solve the mystery of this relationship. She was unable to prove anything definitively.

³¹ Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*, p. 260.

³² *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 4, ed. Fredeman, p. 217.

³³ Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, plate 32.

³⁴ Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. D.G. Rossetti, p. 78.

³⁵ Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, plate 39.

³⁶ Cited in Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, pp. 125-126.

³⁷ Gale Pedrick, Sr. was the editor of this first edition. Dunn was his wife's uncle and while her family expressed little interest in their black sheep artist relation, Pedrick was fascinated. He asked William Michael Rossetti, Dante Gabriel's brother, to write an introduction and allowed him to eliminate any portions he did not feel were appropriate to print. It is most likely the case that he felt the names of the

women in Rossetti's circle should be omitted, especially any mention of Fanny, due to her less than pristine reputation. See the 1984 Mander edition of Dunn's *Recollections*, p. 7.

³⁸ This was a bustling part of London – full of publishers, bookshops, clubs, and theatres. Lizzie had been discovered while working in a millinery shop nearby.

³⁹ There is some debate about the painting for which she was first to have sat. Most scholars agree it was for the unfinished *Aspecta Medusa*, as *The Blessed Damozel* was not begun until the early 1870's.

⁴⁰ Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle*, ed. Mander, pp. 45-46.

⁴¹ Cheyne Walk is right along the Thames, in Chelsea, an area that became known as a residence for bohemian artists during the nineteenth century.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴³ *Rossetti Papers: 1862 to 1870*, ed. W. M. Rossetti, pp. 95-96.

⁴⁴ This may not, however, have been the case. The English Censuses, while providing some invaluable information, are also fraught with errors. An example of this is the 1871 Census where Charles Wilding is said then to have been born in London, as opposed to the aforementioned Shrewsbury.

⁴⁵ Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle*, ed. Mander, p. 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁴⁸ Jiminez, *The Dictionary of Artists' Models*, p. 569.

⁴⁹ Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle*, ed. Mander, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Grylls, *Portrait of Rossetti*, p. 125.

⁵¹ Phelps, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Flower Imagery and the Meaning of His Painting*, p. 106.

⁵² Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, plate 20.

⁵³ Phelps, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Flower Imagery and the Meaning of His Painting*, p. 106.

⁵⁴ It is well worth noting that by the time Rossetti painted the second *Damsel* he had already published the volume of his poetry which was blasted by critic Robert Buchanan in "The Fleishy School of Poetry," and that he believed in a spirituality that was closely linked with physicality.

⁵⁵ D. G. Rossetti, "The Blessed Damozel," *Rossetti's Poems*, p.11.

⁵⁶ Writing to Mrs. Gilchrist, wife of the author of the *Life of Blake*, in the production of which both Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti were involved, he expressed his sentiments: "Of my wife I do not dare to speak now, nor to attempt any vain conjecture whether it may be possible for me, or I may be found worthy, to meet her again." [cited in *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, Gaunt, p. 127]

⁵⁷ Cited in Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 99.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ D. G. Rossetti, "Venus Verticordia," *Rossetti's Poems*, p. 159.

⁶⁰ This is the award presented to Venus at the Judgment of Paris. It is also sometimes called the "Apple of Eris," after the goddess who created it.

⁶¹ D. G. Rossetti, "Lady Lilith," *Rossetti's Poems*, p. 158.

⁶² D. G. Rossetti, "The Blessed Damozel," *Rossetti's Poems*, p. 12.

⁶³ *The Correspondences of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 4, ed. Fredeman, pp. 449-50.

⁶⁴ *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 5, ed. Fredeman, p. 215.

⁶⁵ *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 5, ed. Fredeman, p. 303.

⁶⁶ Grylls, *Portrait of Rossetti*, p. 125.

⁶⁷ *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Fredeman, vol. 3, p. 378.

⁶⁸ Cited in Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 112.

⁶⁹ D. G. Rossetti, "Sibylla Palmifera," *Rossetti's Poems*, p. 158.

⁷⁰ McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p. 14.

⁷¹ D. G. Rossetti, "A Sonnet," *The House of Life, Rossetti's Poems*, p. 226.

⁷² Pedrick, *Life with Rossetti or No Peacocks Allowed*, p. 42.

⁷³ Many attempts have been made to track down the descendants of Gale Pedrick, a writer for the BBC, who died February 23, 1970. Thus far, no one has been located.

⁷⁴ Cited in Pedrick, *Life with Rossetti or No Peacocks Allowed*, p. 128.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

⁷⁶ Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, p. 448.

⁷⁷ Stephens, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 74.

⁷⁸ *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Doughty and Wahl, vol. 3, pp. 1205-1206

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- ⁷⁹ Pedrick, *Life with Rossetti or No Peacocks Allowed*, p. 42.
- ⁸⁰ *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Doughty & Wahl, vol. 3, p. 1186.
- ⁸¹ W. M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*, p. 45.
- ⁸² Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 99.
- ⁸³ As are *Veronica*, *Veronese*, *La Bella Mano*, and *Sancta Lilius* – all of which were modeled on Alexa.
- ⁸⁴ W. M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*, p. 87.
- ⁸⁵ Phelps, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Flower Imagery and the Meaning of His Painting*, p. 122.
- ⁸⁶ H. M. M. Rossetti, *The Life and Work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 28.
- ⁸⁷ Stephens, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, pp.58, 60.
- ⁸⁸ Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 104.
- ⁸⁹ *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 5, ed. Fredeman, p. 364.
- ⁹⁰ *Lady Lilith* and *The Loving Cup* were also considered pendants to each other; as were *A Sea Spell* and *Veronica Veronese*. These all feature Alexa Wilding as the main figure.
- ⁹¹ Cited in Pedrick, *Life with Rossetti*, p. 146.
- ⁹² Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, p. 314.
- ⁹³ W. M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Family Letters with a Memoir*, p. 242.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁵ *Diaries of George Price Boyce*, ed. Surtees, p. 47.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- ⁹⁷ Cited in Pedrick, *Life with Rossetti or No Peacocks Allowed*, p. 119.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- ⁹⁹ *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Doughty and Wahl, vol. 3, p. 1174.
- ¹⁰⁰ Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*, p. 47.
- ¹⁰¹ *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 3, ed. Doughty and Wahl, pp. 1188-1189
- ¹⁰² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 1186.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1192.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1196.
- ¹⁰⁶ Cited in Pedrick, *Life with Rossetti or No Peacocks Allowed*, p. 152.
- ¹⁰⁷ Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, pp. 314-315.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- ¹⁰⁹ Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle*, ed. Mander, p. 45.
- ¹¹⁰ This is until a baby girl was born in 1984 and given the name “Alexa Dione Wilding.”
- ¹¹¹ Peritonitis refers to an inflammation of the peritoneum, which covers the abdominal organs. It is still considered a life-threatening illness and often manifests symptoms of nausea, vomiting, and fever. The exhaustion was probably a result of being so violently ill.
- ¹¹² A splenic tumor is not often considered to be a fatal malady in the twenty-first century. Often they clear up on their own. However, such was apparently not the case, and the tumor in question may have been the catalyst to bring on the peritonitis that was Alexa’s eventual downfall.

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