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She "felt no fear at all"? : the Virgin Mary and the Feminist Voice in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*

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She “felt no fear at all”? The Virgin Mary and the Feminist Voice in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*

As it is widely known, Dante Gabriel Rossetti has never been a feminist critics’ favorite. He has been frequently criticized for indulging in a way of looking known as “the male gaze,” where the woman is depicted as a lifeless object of contemplation and a thing to be possessed rather than an individualized, thinking human being. Alternatively, his art – both poetic and pictorial – has been critiqued for stripping strong and autonomous women of their femininity.¹ Finally, some of his poetic texts – the literary ballad “Eden Bower” or his sonnet “Body’s Beauty” are good examples here – are overtly misogynist in tone, as they locate the origin of the fall in female sexuality and go on to present it in monstrous, grotesque tones.

However, after closer scrutiny, it seems that Rossetti does not deserve such harsh criticism. The present paper aims at partial rehabilitation of the leading member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood by showing his art as protofeminist. To do so, I intend to look closely at two famous early paintings by Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (The Annunciation) and *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* as well as at two sonnets that accompany the latter painting in order to see how the allegedly anti-feminist artist makes a claim against silencing, objectification, and marginalization of women. The Virgin Mary, a paradigm of subservience and virtue as well as an exemplary female for the Victorians, in Rossetti’s view becomes a victim of circumstances and stands for many Victorian girls, against their will forced to become passive angels in their homes, at the mercy of their husbands or fathers.

When Dante Gabriel Rossetti submitted his painting *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 1) to the Free Exhibition in London in 1849, his work was one of the first pictures to carry the mysterious initials PRB, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, heralding the advent of a new movement in art which was to dominate British painting for the next decades. With its historicist, medievalist approach; rich symbolism; and red, blue, and green colours, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* is indeed one of the most widely recognized Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Moreover, to the frame of the picture Rossetti attached a gold-faced sheet of paper with two sonnets, one of them being an elucidation of the symbolism of

1 See for instance an essay by Griselda Pollock and Deborah Cherry “Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elisabeth Siddall,” in Pollock’s *Vision and Difference*, or Martin A. Danahay’s article “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Virtual Bodies” (1998).

the painting, the other – an ekphrastic interpretation of the scene portrayed.² With these two sonnets Rossetti initiated what was to become his characteristic strategy – creating so-called “double works of art.” As Brian Donnelly claims, “While Sonnet I provides a narrative of sorts for the scene depicted in the painting, Sonnet II addresses the symbols included in the design. Together the sonnets articulate the complex array of visual and verbal strategies Rossetti utilizes to construct meaning” (478).

Rossetti’s interest in the topic of the Virgin’s education is first of all historicist. He comments upon other artists’ attempts to represent it, stating that those endeavors were inadequate, “since they have invariably represented her as reading from a book under the superintendence of her Mother, St. Anne, an occupation obviously incompatible with these times, and which could only pass muster if treated in a purely symbolical manner” (*The Rossetti Archive*). Instead, Rossetti chooses to represent the Virgin as embroidering a lily under the guidance of her mother, St. Anne, while her father, St. Joachim, can be seen in the background of the picture pruning vine. As Rossetti makes clear in the accompanying sonnet, the painting operates through a number of symbolic details. Mary’s embroidery is, of course, an appropriate occupation both for the future mother of Christ and for any 19th century young girl. The subject of embroidery is not accidental either – the lily is the chief symbol of purity and innocence in the painting. What is more, Mary copies from nature, emulating chief principles of Pre-Raphaelite art, which claimed that faithfulness to nature is a test and end of art. The books on the floor represent the virtues of the soul – charity, faith, and hope. Other symbolic details include the palm on the ground, prefiguring the Palm Sunday (Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem), the red cloth – clearly suggesting Christ’s passion, and the dove – the typical representation of the Holy Spirit. The small angel presages the inclusion of Gabriel in the *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* picture (Barringer et.al. 43) The sonnet tells us that the moment when Mary finishes her embroidery will mark her readiness for the sacred impregnation: “She soon shall have achieved / Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord / Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son” (“Girlhood” I, ll.12–14).

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin is a daring reinterpretation of a subject drawn from the legendary history of the life of the Madonna, but its novelty is more artistic than



Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*

2 As Rossetti wrote two sonnets to accompany his painting but did not give them individual titles, I follow the usual critical practice of distinguishing between them by numbering them, respectively, I and II.

ideological. Technically, Rossetti's picture represents a revivalist style that draws on early Renaissance painting from Northern Europe and Italy. The composition is experimental: the carefully constructed foreground with the condensed and flattened middle ground and distance. What is more, the vanishing point of the picture is placed just above the little angel's right wing, which "turns the properly positioned viewer into a reflection of that heavenly witness to the scene" (Barringer et al. 43). Moreover, as Jerome McGann notes, "[a]lthough it [the painting] shares many characteristics of the highly detailed, even naturalistic style of Hunt and Millais, the picture is anything but an exercise in Pre-Raphaelite realism. It is far too literal in its handling of its subject and its accessories, as the constellation of the young angel, the watered lily, and the books most dramatically show" (*The Rossetti Archive*).

On the ideological level, however, the painting on its own does not say anything radical: quite on the contrary, it represents Mary as a pious, diligent, humble, hardworking young girl. Her upright posture, her modest dress and her being engrossed in the embroidery all communicate her submission to parental instruction and, therefore, they point to her future acceptance of the divine calling. Rossetti's sonnet seems to say the same, as the poet elaborates on Mary's virtues:

Her kin she cherished with devout respect:
 Her gifts were simpleness of intellect
 And supreme patience. From her mother's knee
 Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;
 Strong in grave peace; in duty circumspect.
 So held she through her girlhood; as it were
 An angel-watered lily, that near God
 Grows, and is quiet.
 ("Girlhood" II, ll. 4–11)

No wonder this poem did not meet with feminist acclaim: Rossetti seems to perpetuate a model that defines the proper role of a young girl in relation to the allegedly "feminine" virtues such as patience, devotion, respectfulness towards her family members, discipline, selflessness, dutifulness and, primarily, "simpleness of intellect." The ideal young girl should not exercise her mental abilities too much, and therefore it is probably not accidental that Rossetti does not decide to picture Mary studying from a book, but he chooses to portray her training in handiwork instead. Moreover, by comparing her to a lily that "near God / Grows, and is quiet," he hints at the Victorian family model, which did not give much voice to women and children, making girls an ornament instead. Rossetti's vision can be easily contextualized by other texts from his epoch, literary as well as non-literary. Similar views on femininity were voiced in a renowned book for and about women in the 19th century, Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England: Their Social Habits and Domestic Duties*:

In order to ascertain what kind of education is most effective in making woman what she ought to be, the best method is to inquire into the character, station, and peculiar duties of woman throughout the largest portion of her earthly career; and then ask, for what she is most valued, admired, and beloved? In answer to this, I have little hesitation in

saying,—For her disinterested kindness. [...] Never yet, however, was woman great, because she had great acquirements; nor can she ever be great in herself—personally, and without instrumentality—as an object, not an agent. (63–64)

Sarah Stickney Ellis maintains that only perseverance, dutifulness and selflessness can give women’s life meaning. The perfect woman does not need learning or acquirements. By nature, woman’s sensibility and weaknesses mark her as inferior. What is more, any woman has to struggle all the time against her innate vices, in order to justify her existence:

[I]t is necessary for her to lay aside all her natural caprice, her love of self-indulgence, her vanity, her indolence—in short, her very *self*—and assuming a new nature, which nothing else than watchfulness and prayer can enable her constantly to maintain, to spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs. (45)

Female innate *very self* is thus opposed to the assumed one; the latter needs to be maintained with effort and prayer lest the woman lapses into her natural vices. However, this effort is crucial to meet the demands of femininity as socially constructed: officially, the only woman worthy of worship was a monument of selflessness, with no existence beyond the loving influence she exuded as daughter, wife and mother (Auerbach 185).

Coventry Patmore shared Ellis’s views on woman’s mission, as his famous long poem, *The Angel in the House*, testifies:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman’s pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings her breast [. . .]

She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone.
(Canto IX, “The Sahara,” ll. 1–4, 21–24)

The Angel in the House gave rise to the traditional vision of the ideal angelic woman in 19th century England – cloistered in the shelter of her own home, bent on giving, and not receiving pleasure, eager to fulfill other people’s expectations, submissive, diligent, innocent, responsible, charitable, and obedient.

The connection between such a view on femininity and Rossetti’s picture is not hard to find. The Virgin Mary is to become the angel in the house. Dutiful, obedient, and humble, she has already been assigned the place in God’s house, where, after the fulfillment of her calling, she “[g]rows, and is quiet.” However, Rossetti seems to record his own uneasiness with this concept. First of all, when he conflates the lily with the young woman, the artist operates within the well-established Judeo-Christian tradition which uses the lily as the symbol of maidenhead or purity. In Rossetti’s use of the symbol, however, the lily “has strong sexual overtones too – of purity, no doubt, but of purity awaiting its destiny, its alteration into another state” (Cruse 172). This meaning unfolds when one

decides to look at Rossetti's poem in the context of the picture meant as a natural companion, or a sequel to *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin – Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (The Annunciation; fig. 2). It is only after viewing both of these paintings at the same time, together with the re-reading of the accompanying sonnets, that we can no longer be convinced of Rossetti's anti-feminist bias.

It seems that with the *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* Painting, Rossetti flows in the face of accepted conventions. The first unconventional element is the placing of the Virgin Mary in bed, in her private bedroom. Secondly, while in typical Annunciation scenes the Archangel Gabriel appears while Mary is praying, Rossetti makes him come and wake the young woman up. As a result, Mary is pictured in her nightgown, an unprecedented fact in the history of art. Next, the presentation of Gabriel delivering the news is also striking: the Archangel has no wings, and we can easily glimpse the outline of his naked body beneath the robe he is wearing. The lily, the traditional iconographic symbol of innocence, is pointed, quite menacingly, at Mary's womb. The lily is visibly phallic in shape.

The space and colour work together to create a disturbing, ambiguous effect. The perspective of this painting is visibly skewed:

The painting's use of perspective, or rather lack of it, attracted most criticism at the time. Even the PRBs were unsettled. Both Millais and Hunt offered to lend a hand correcting it. Rossetti refused though. With his innovative use of empirical rather than scientific perspective, like true Pre-Raphaelite he was paying homage to those "Flemish Primitive" he so admired, such as Rogier van der Weyden, whose own Annunciation he had recently seen in the Louvre. (Pollitt)

Clearly, Rossetti does not intend this picture to be realistic. Even the window in the background does not show the outer world (which would have undoubtedly increased realism and added depth to the picture), but it projects the view of the sky and a tree instead. Furthermore, the scene is very claustrophobic: with the monumental presence of Gabriel there is hardly any space left in the room. Next, the pervading whiteness of the painting shows it as sterile and impersonal. Mary's purity and innocence seems almost oppressive. Moreover, instead of meticulous, loving attention to the minutest detail, so characteristic of early Pre-Raphaelite style and earning the Pre-Raphaelite paintings the label of studies in realism, Rossetti's picture is virtually bare, devoid of any additional elements other than an oil lamp on the shelf behind Mary (a typical object in annunciation

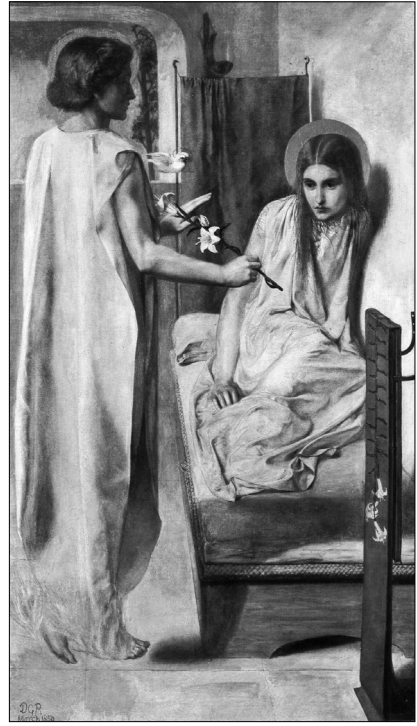


Figure 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*

scenes, signaling the presence of the Holy Ghost) and the embroidered lily, now finished and displayed on a red stand at the feet of the bed. The embroidery is obviously symbolic: it bridges the gap between the past, depicted in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, and the present scene and points to the fact that the “fullness of the time has come,” as the sonnet tells us. Mary is ready for her role as the mother of God, at least physically.

Mary’s verbal response to the event is “Ecce Ancilla Domini! – “Behold the Handmaid of the Lord,” a traditional sign of humble submission to the will of God. However, what does her body language communicate? The Virgin, slouched in her bed, visibly tries to avoid immediate contact with the muscular, very corporeal, and rather threatening figure of Gabriel. With her knees drawn up close together, Mary pushes herself into a corner and her body language spells out her disquiet. Moreover, in Rossetti’s picture Mary is a shy adolescent girl – not a coy or openly inviting Virgin of Luca Giordano, Rubens, or Raphael Mengst. Even compared with the paintings that directly influenced Rossetti – Fra Angelico’s *The Annunciation* (1438) and Botticelli’s *The Annunciation* (1490), *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* presents the most ambiguous response on the part of Mary towards the news of her forthcoming sacred impregnation. Disturbed in her sleep, the Virgin is disoriented and vulnerable, almost defensive, as if shielding her body from (unwanted?) intervention. The picture is rife with psychosexual overtones.

In the sestet to his sonnet accompanying *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, Rossetti anticipates the moment of Annunciation, and describes Mary’s future reaction to Gabriel’s message in such a way:

Till one dawn, at home,
She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
At all,—yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed;
Because the fullness of the time was come.

(“Girlhood” II, ll. 11–14)

Mary experiences apprehension and awe, yet, as Rossetti declares, “no fear.” However, why does she cry till sunshine? The artist invites us to inspect his meaning closely. The fullness of the time – in the *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* signaled by the completed embroidery at the feet of her bed – must have been not only awe-inspiring, but overwhelming and threatening for the very young, possibly adolescent, Virgin. Moreover, not only does it come as a total surprise, but it is going to alter her future life drastically. Yet, Mary has not been consulted on the matter – rather she has been arbitrarily chosen by the all-knowing God as a vessel fit to fulfil his plans for mankind. Put in this way, the scene acquires even more uneasy overtones and makes us wonder how many of Victorian girls similarly learned that their future has been decided by their fathers, brothers, or husbands?

In the present article, I have attempted to re-examine two famous paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the poems accompanying them in order to elucidate the way they comment on the position of women at the time. It can be suggested that the fervent these works produced can be, at least partly, explained by what they had to say about the role and rights of women in Victorian society. The Virgin Mary, the icon of female virtue, Rossetti seems to claim, has been probably forced into her role of the mother of God. What is more, she has been actively trained into submission. If we want to believe

that, as the sonnet spells out, she “had no fear at all” and was simply “awed,” we deceive ourselves: it is enough to look at the painting to see how visibly it contradicts the verbal message. The clash between the visual and the verbal that Rossetti employs is his powerful artistic means to describe, and object to, the silencing and objectification of women during the Victorian era.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł jest próbą ukazania pro-feministycznych przekonań prerafaelskiego malarza i poety. Autorka analizuje dwa wiersze i dwa obrazy Rossettiego, skupiając się na innowacyjności przedstawienia bardzo tradycyjnego tematu – dzieciństwa oraz zwiastowania Najświętszej Marii Panny. Poprzez zestawienie słowa i obrazu, które wchodzą ze sobą w polemiczny dialog, Rossetti poddaje krytyce tradycyjną wizję roli kobiecości w dziewiętnastym wieku. Artysta podkreśla uprzedmiotowienie kobiet we współczesnej mu Anglii i pozbawienie ich prawa decydowania o własnym życiu. Maria, matka Jezusa, nie jest dla Rossettiego ikoną cnót kobiecych, chwaloną za posłuszeństwo i oddanie, ale młodą dziewczyną, obdarzoną misją, która wzbudza w niej lęk i której do końca nie rozumie.