

Damozel" (1850), a poem begun when Rossetti was eighteen and was heavily influenced by the work of Dante Alighieri, leans on "the gold bar of heaven" and makes it "warm" with her bosom. In "Jenny" (1870), another work started in Rossetti's early adulthood, a male speaker muses about the life and thoughts of the young prostitute whose head rests upon his knee as she sleeps: his speculations thus replace, or stand in for, more overt sexual acts between them. And *The House of Life* (1870), his sonnet sequence, undertakes to explore the relationship of spirit to body in love. Some Victorian readers found little Dante-like spirituality in *The House of Life*; the critic Robert Buchanan, for example, saw only lewd sensuality, and his 1871 pamphlet, "The Fleshly School of Poetry," treated Rossetti's poetry to the most severe abuse. Buchanan's attack hurt the poet profoundly and contributed to the recurring bouts of nervous depression from which he suffered in the remaining years of his life.

Rossetti and his artist friends called women such as Jane Morris "stunners." The epithet can also be applied to Rossetti's poetry, especially his later writings. In his maturity he used stunning polysyllabic diction to convey opulence and density. Earlier poems such as "My Sister's Sleep" (1850) are usually much less elaborate in manner and reflect the original aesthetic values of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in which Rossetti played a central and founding role. Just as Rossetti grew away from the Pre-Raphaelite manner in his painting, he also adopted a richly ornate style in his poetry. In both the early and the late phases of his art, however, many have viewed him as essentially a poet in his painting and a painter in his poetry. "Colour and metre," he once said, "these are the true patents of nobility in painting and poetry, taking precedence of all intellectual claims."

The Blessed Damozel¹

The blessed damozel leaned out
 From the gold bar of heaven;
 Her eyes were deeper than the depth
 Of waters stilled at even;
 5 She had three lilies in her hand,
 And the stars in her hair were seven.

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
 No wrought flowers did adorn,
 But a white rose of Mary's gift,
 10 For service meetly^o worn;
 Her hair that lay along her back
 Was yellow like ripe corn.^o

Herseemed² she scarce had been a day
 One of God's choristers;

1. A poetic version of "damsel," signifying a young unmarried lady. Rossetti once explained that "Blessed Damozel" is related to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (1845), a poem he admired. "I saw that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so

I determined to reverse the conditions, and utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven." The thoughts of the damozel's still-lover appear in the poem in parentheses.

2. It seemed to her.

15 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.

(To one it is ten years of years.
 . . . Yet now, and in this place,
 20 Surely she leaned o'er me—her hair
 Fell all about my face. . . .
 Nothing: the autumn-fall of leaves.
 The whole year sets apace.)

25 It was the rampart of God's house
 That she was standing on;
 By God built over the sheer depth
 The which is Space begun;
 So high, that looking downward thence
 30 She scarce could see the sun.

It lies in heaven, across the flood
 Of ether, as a bridge.
 Beneath the tides of day and night
 With flame and darkness ridge
 35 The void, as low as where this earth
 Spins like a fretful midge.

Around her, lovers, newly met
 'Mid deathless love's acclaims,
 Spoke evermore among themselves
 40 Their heart-remembered names;
 And the souls mounting up to God
 Went by her like thin flames.

And still she bowed herself and stooped
 Out of the circling charm;
 45 Until her bosom must have made
 The bar she leaned on warm,
 And the lilies lay as if asleep
 Along her bended arm.

From the fixed place of heaven she saw
 50 Time like a pulse shake fierce
 Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove
 Within the gulf to pierce
 Its path; and now she spoke as when
 The stars sang in their spheres.

55 The sun was gone now; the curled moon
 Was like a little feather
 Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
 She spoke through the still weather.



The Blessed Damozel (1875–78; detail). In the second phase of his painting career, Rossetti turned from the religious and literary subjects of his early work (see, for instance, his illustration for “The Lady of Shalott,” p. 151) to huge sensual portraits of women, often designed as companion pieces to his poems. For other examples of Rossetti’s visual art, see the frontispiece he drew for his sister Christina’s first volume of poems, p. 547, and his paintings in the color insert in this volume and in the NAEL Archive.

60 Her voice was like the voice the stars
Had when they sang together.³

(Ah, sweet! Even now, in that bird’s song,
Strove not her accents there,
Fain to be harkened? When those bells
Possessed the midday air,
65 Strove not her steps to reach my side
Down all the echoing stair?)

“I wish that he were come to me,
For he will come,” she said.
“Have I not prayed in heaven?—on earth,
70 Lord, Lord, has he not prayed?
Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
And shall I feel afraid?

“When round his head the aureole° clings,
And he is clothed in white,
75 I’ll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light;

3. Job 38.7.

As unto a stream we will step down,
And bathe there in God's sight.

80 "We two will stand beside that shrine,
Occult,^o withheld, untrod, *hidden, mysterious*
Whose lamps are stirred continually
With prayer sent up to God;
And see our old prayers, granted, melt
Each like a little cloud.

85 "We two will lie i' the shadow of
That living mystic tree⁴
Within whose secret growth the Dove⁵
Is sometimes felt to be,
While every leaf that His plumes touch
90 Saith His Name audibly.

"And I myself will teach to him,
I myself, lying so,
The songs I sing here; which his voice
Shall pause in, hushed and slow,
95 And find some knowledge at each pause,
Or some new thing to know."

(Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st!
Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
100 To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
Was but its love for thee?)

"We two," she said, "will seek the groves
Where the lady Mary is,
105 With her five handmaidens, whose names
Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
Margaret, and Rosalys.⁶

110 "Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
And foreheads garlanded;
Into the fine cloth white like flame
Weaving the golden thread,
To fashion the birth-robcs for them
Who are just born, being dead.

115 "He shall fear, haply,^o and be dumb; *perhaps*
Then will I lay my cheek
To his, and tell about our love,

4. The tree of life, as described in an apocalyptic vision in the Bible (Revelation 22.2).

5. A tangible manifestation of the Holy Spirit (Mark 1.10), frequent in Christian art.

6. Rossetti creates this list of Mary's handmaidens from various saints, historical figures, and allegorical characters.

Not once abashed or weak;
 And the dear Mother will approve
 120 My pride, and let me speak.

"Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
 To Him round whom all souls
 Kneel, the clear-ranged unnumbered heads
 Bowed with their aureoles;
 125 And angels meeting us shall sing
 To their citherns and citoles.⁷

"There will I ask of Christ the Lord
 Thus much for him and me—
 Only to live as once on earth
 130 With Love—only to be,
 As then awhile, forever now,
 Together, I and he."

She gazed and listened and then said,
 Less sad of speech than mild—
 135 "All this is when he comes." She ceased.
 The light thrilled toward her, filled
 With angels in strong, level flight.
 Her eyes prayed, and she smiled.

(I saw her smile.) But soon their path
 140 Was vague in distant spheres;
 And then she cast her arms along
 The golden barriers,
 And laid her face between her hands,
 And wept. (I heard her tears.)

1846

1850

My Sister's Sleep¹

She fell asleep on Christmas Eve.
 At length the long-ungranted shade
 Of weary eyelids overweighed
 The pain nought else might yet relieve.

5 Our mother, who had leaned all day
 Over the bed from chime to chime,
 Then raised herself for the first time,
 And as she sat her down, did pray.

Her little worktable was spread
 10 With work to finish. For^o the glare

because of

7. Guitarlike instruments.

1. The incident in this poem is imaginary, not autobiographical.