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Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lady Lilith and Related Poems: Legends, Sources, Meanings

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For a great many years, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1864–1868; see Fig. 1 and 1872–1873; see Fig. 2) has elicited widespread agreement on at least three counts: Rossetti's substitution of Alexa Wilding's head for Fanny Cornforth's in 1872–1873 was "disastrous";[1] its female figure is "the idea incarnate of faultless fleshly beauty";[2] and aspects of the painting such as "the diverse whites of Lilith's garments" and the "blossoms of strong and varied hues" surrounding her constitute the "charming elements of a fine coloration."[3] In more recent years, the figure of Lilith has been regarded as, among other things, a testament to the Victorian fetishization of women's hair,[4] an embodiment of the "New Woman,"[5] an image of "art in contemplation of itself,"[6] and, in a further shift towards postmodern reflexivity, a metaphor for the drawing power of art.[7] All of these interpretations are in varying degrees valuable and enriching, but there is something to be gained by returning *Lady Lilith*, its accompanying sonnet of the same title (written in 1867), and "Eden Bower" (written in 1869, Rossetti's lengthiest literary treatment of the Lilith theme) to their roots in Jewish legend and by examining them in light of their underlying Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic—an approach that, as will be seen, yields a fresh understanding of their sources and a fresh reading of a number of their signifying elements.

Fig. 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Henry Treffry Dunn, *Lady Lilith*, 1867, watercolor and body color. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo credit: ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The legendary figure of Lilith emerged from the disparity, not to say contradiction, between the accounts of the creation of the first woman in Genesis 1:26–27 and Genesis 2:21–22. In the former, God created the first "male and female" simultaneously, but in the latter, Eve is created by God out of one of Adam's ribs. This disparity prompted the authors of a number of rabbinical, mystical, and folkloric texts, most notably the expanded version of the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*[*ch*] (c. 700–1000) and the *Zohar* (c. 1280) —the most important and influential work of the Kabbala—to attach variants of the name Lilith (such as Lilis and Lilit) to the woman created in Genesis 1. In the ensuing centuries, various negative and sinister characteristics were attached to Lilith: she copulated with the devil; she carried off newborn infants;[8] she posed a threat to young men; and so on.[9] Since most of the early texts in which Lilith is described are written in Hebrew and therefore inaccessible to all but a few gentiles, the principal channels through which she entered British and European imaginary during the Renaissance and later were references to her in Latin and vernacular texts. Such is the case with the passing reference to "Lilis" by way of Cigona Strozzi's *Magiae Omnifarariae Theatrum* (1606) in "A Digression on the Nature of Spirits, Bad Angels, or Devils, and How They Cause Melancholy" in Richard Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): "[t]he Talmudists say that Adam had a wife called Lilis, before he married Eve, and of her begat nothing but devils."[10] Another source of Lilith legends is the chapter "De Spectris, Seu Nocturnis Larvis" in the "Historia Arabum" section of Abraham Ecchelinsis's *Chronicon Orientale* (1651), where "Lilit" is identified as Adam's first wife ("prima Adami coniuge") and said to have coupled with the devil and produced numerous offspring ("copulavit daemoni, cui peperit liberos quamplures") (168–169). In all likelihood, Rossetti would have known Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*,[11] and there is some evidence that Ecchelinsis's *Chronicon Orientale* had readers in the late nineteenth century,[12] so neither work can be excluded as influences on his conception of Lilith.

Fig. 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1864–1868, oil on canvas. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware. Photo credit: ©Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

Nor can another extensive account of her that was published in 1732–1734 and reprinted in 1742–1743 and 1748: *The Traditions of the Jews, or The Doctrines and Expositions Contain'd in the Talmud and Other Rabbinical Writings*, John Peter Stehelin's English translation of Johann Andreas Eisenmenger's antisemitic *Entdecktes Judenthum* (*Judaism Discovered* or, more sensationally, *Judaism Unmasked*) (1700). In Stehelin's translation, which has the more benign goal of persuading Jews to convert to Christianity by exposing absurdities in their religion, the traditions concerning Lilith are placed on view as evidence of the "fertile Inventions, and Fancies" that the "Rabbins [Rabbis] … relate" about her "in a most extravagant Manner."[13] Liberally quoting the *Sepher ben Sira* (*Alphabet of Sira*) and numerous other sources, *The Traditions of the Jews* relays a number of Lilith legends. That *The Traditions of the Jews* was available to Rossetti's contemporaries is evident from an account of "the Lilith tradition" by the medieval historian Ponsonby Annersley Lyons that William Michael Rossetti found among his

brother's manuscripts and published in *Rossetti Papers 1862 to 1870*.[14] Dated 18 November 1869, Lyons's account refers explicitly to the *Sepher ben Sira* and the *Zohar* and contains verbal echoes of Stehelin's translation;[15] however, it post-dates all of Rossetti's pictorial and literary depictions of Lilith,[16] so, unless William Michael's dating of it is incorrect, it cannot have informed his conception of her. It therefore remains merely an intriguing segment of the story of Rossetti's interest in Lilith.

Given the arcane interests of Rossetti's father Gabriele and his collection of arcane books to which, according to William Michael, his children had access,[17] it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that Rossetti knew, or had knowledge derived from, one or more of the works thus very briefly canvassed. It is also possible that he gleaned knowledge of them from oral sources such as the Jewish artist and sometime writer Simeon Solomon, who became part of his circle in 1858, and the erstwhile Jewish curiosity dealer Murray Marks, who became a close friend in the mid-1860s. Some support for these possibilities is lent by "Eden Bower," which appears to draw upon the legend that "*Leviathan*, that is to say, the Devil [or Satan]," can assume two forms of serpent: "the upright Serpent *Sammael*" (the "principal Devil") and "the crooked Serpent *Lilis*," and that, if "*Satan*" were to "lye with his Wife … *Lilis*," they would "beget many Souls of Devils and Idolaters."[18] Set on "the skirts of Eden" after Lilith "thence was driven," "Eden Bower" is largely spoken by her to "the Snake" (or, as Rossetti calls it, "the King-Snake … Old Nick himself,"[19] but in the introductory stanzas, which, as in other narrative poems by Rossetti (most notably "The Blessed Damozel"), provide a preliminary description of a principal character, the narrator characterizes her as "the wife of Adam" and as resembling "a soft sweet woman," though "Not a drop of her blood was human."[20] The later part of Lilith's narrative is a gleeful and gloating rehearsal of the events preceding and following the Fall that accords largely with the account in Genesis 3, with the difference that the temptation of Eve is instigated and accomplished not by the Serpent but by Lilith in his borrowed "shape." In the early part of her narrative, Lilith reiterates the legend that her couplings with Adam resulted in "bright babes … that coiled in the woods and waters, / Glittering sons and radiant daughters" and then, as she regales the Snake with her foreknowledge of the Fall and its consequences, makes aggressive and presumably successful use of her legendary physical appeal and seductive skill.[21] As a whole, "Eden Bower" is a remarkable concatenation of the occult and the orthodox.

Whereas "Eden Bower" is set in biblical times (however understood), *Lady Lilith* is set in the Victorian present. However, the painting's title evokes its legendary namesake, as do the opening and closing lines of the sonnet "Lady Lilith," which was inscribed on the picture frame and transcribed by Algernon Charles Swinburne when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1868:

> Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
>
> (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)
>
> That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
>
> And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
>
> …
>
> Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
>
> Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
>
> And round his heart one strangling golden hair.[22]

Strictly speaking, William Michael is correct in asserting in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer* that "[t]here is … in … [*Lady* Lilith] not anything to connect it with Lilith the first serpent-bride of Adam, nor to indicate a deep occult meaning of any kind,"[23] for in and of itself—that is, without the sonnet—the painting merely depicts the figure and her activities described in the second part of the sonnet's octave:

> 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.[24]

When the sonnet was reprinted in *Poems* (1870), it was simply entitled "Lilith," the reason being, Rossetti told Thomas Gordon Hake in a letter of 21 April 1870, that the original title "would present a difficulty in print without paint to explain it," adding that the painting "represents a *modern* Lilith" and agreeing with Hake that "the most essential notion of the sonnet" is "[t]he idea … of the perilous principle in the world being female from the first."[25] In 1868, *Lady Lilith* and "Lady Lilith" were fully interdependent, but by 1870 they had moved apart and in 1881 would do so even further, for in the final version of *The House of Life*, the sonnet is entitled "Body's Beauty" and serves as the counterpoint to the adjacent "Soul's Beauty."

From the emphasis on Lilith's "gold" hair in *Lady Lilith* and "Lady Lilith," there can be little, if any, doubt that Rossetti's pictorial and verbal conception and depiction of her were primarily shaped by her appearance in the Walpurgisnacht episode in Goethe's *Faust, Part 1* (1808, 1828–1829) and by Percy Bysshe Shelley's translation of it.[26] "Who is that yonder?" Faust ask in the translation, to which Mephistopheles replies:

> Lilith, the first wife of Adam.
>
> Beware of her fair hair, for she excels
>
> All women in the magic of her locks;
>
> And when she winds them round a young man's neck,
>
> She will not ever set him free again.[27]

"[F]irst wife of Adam," "fair hair," "magic … locks," and "young man's neck" all have close equivalents in Rossetti's sonnet that point to indebtedness,[28] but it needs to be remembered that the Lilith of *Faust, Part One* was not invented by Goethe but was, rather, an imaginative embellishment of the figure in the Kabbalistic tradition with which he was familiar through works by George Welling, Jacob Bruckner, and other scholars. Indeed, Goethe may well have known *Endecktes Judentum*, a copy of which was "part of the library of … [his] father."[29] Lilith's hair acquires "magic" and captivating qualities in *Faust, Part One* that Rossetti borrowed and made deadly in "Lady Lilith," but both figures have a common ancestry in Jewish legend.

Although the "locks" of Goethe's Lilith are a distinct presence in Rossetti's painting and sonnet, the activity in which she is engaged in *Lady Lilith*—brushing her hair while "subtly … contemplate[ing]" herself in a hand-mirror—may have been inspired by two other sources: Francis Leveson Gower's translation of *Faust*, which appeared in 1825; and an anecdote in "The Modern History of the Devil" in Daniel Defoe's *The Political History of the Devil* (1726), which was reprinted in 1819, 1840 and 1843, and 1854 and was known to readers of George Eliot as the book being read by Maggie Tulliver near the beginning of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). (To judge by the evidence, Romantic-Victorian interest in demonology had rekindled interest in *The Political History of the Devil*.)

In Gower's translation, Mephistopheles warns Faust to "beware" not only of Lilith's "flowing hair" but also of "Her glancing toilette" (toilette being, in one sense, "[t]he action or process of washing, dressing, or arranging the hair"[30]) because, "If with that guise the sorceress lure / The passing youth," she "holds him sure."[31] One of several anecdotes in "The Modern History of the Devil" is a "discourse" between the narrator and "a young beautiful lady" (the wife of one Sir Edward) that turns on the narrator's claim to possess a form of "second sight" that enables him to discern whether, despite her "beautiful appearance," a particular woman is a "devil."[32] After explaining to the lady that the Devil "form[s] beauties … to deceive and ensnare mankind," the narrator asks her to look at herself in a "magic looking-glass"—a trick mirror—where she will see her "own picture, not only as it was an angelic figure for the world to admire, but a devil also." Of course, the "magic mirror" reveals the "[e]xquisitely fine," "complete beauty" who is given to "vanity not a little" to be "the Devil indeed, dressed up like a fine lady." Moreover, she has a powerful and sinister effect on the narrator even when he sees her portrait: "she endeavours to kill me at a distance," he moans, "and indeed the poison of her eyes (basilisk-like) is very strong, and she has a strange influence on me." After recounting a

corroborative anecdote about another woman, the narrator concludes that "[w]e have a great many charming apparitions of like kind [who] go daily about the world in complete masquerade … wicked, dangerous, murdering devils that kill various ways; some … with their eyes; some, syren-like, with their tongues." The name of Sir Edward's beautiful, poisonous, and strangely affecting wife is not given, but Lilith is a plausible possibility.

In addition to asserting that "[t]here is nothing" in *Lady Lilith* to "connect" it with the Lilith of legend or with the "occult," William Michael insists that the "accessories" in the painting are merely those of an "ordinary modern tiring-chamber."[33] Are the flowers and furnishings surrounding Lady Lilith, then, merely, in the words of Roland Barthes in "The Reality Effect," "object[s]" that are "neither incongruous nor significant"[34]—objects appropriate to a realistic setting but devoid of symbolic significance? A preliminary answer is surely that the objects are *both* congruous *and* significant or, to adapt William Michael's description of a core component of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, small "actualities made vocal of lofty meanings."[35] In essence, this is Sarah Phelps Smith's reading of the painting in "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Lady Lilith' and the 'Language of Flowers'" (1979), an essay whose insights regarding its floral accessories have been widely accepted but warrant revisiting for the purposes of clarification and expansion.[36]

So widely accepted has Smith's reading of *Lady Lilith* become that the "Iconographic" section on the painting in the Rossetti Archive contains an unattributed and somewhat garbled version of her apercus:

The floral paraphernalia include a semi-coronal of white roses, which appear to signify cold sensuous love (according to legend, roses gained their red coloring only when Eve was created, at which point the rose blushed at the sight of her beauty); a crown of poppies on Lilith's lap (signifying sleep and forgetfulness); and a spray of foxglove on the bureau (signifying insincerity).[37]

Smith does not describe the white roses behind Lilith's head as a "semi-coronel" signifying "cold sensuous love," but she does state that, according to legend, the roses in Eden were white until they blushed at Eve's beauty, citing as the basis for this notion J.H. Ingram's *Flora Symbolica; or, The Language and Sentiment of Flowers. Including Floral Poetry, Original and Selected* (1869). Also on the basis of Ingram, Smith identifies the foxglove as an emblem of "insincerity," adding that it is "a beautiful flower but contains a deadly poison,"[38] a characteristic surely as important to Lilith as "insincerity."[39] Unlike the Rossetti Archive, Smith does not identify the flowers in the "crown … on Lilith's lap" as "poppies … signifying sleep and forgetfulness," but she correctly recognizes them as "daisies," which, she states (again citing Ingram), are emblematic of "innocence," cunningly worn by Lilith to "make her beauty seem harmless,"[40] a reading that is all the more compelling if, as appears to be the case, the daisies are made of seed pearls and mother of pearl and, as such, artificial.[41]

Curiously, Smith makes no mention of the red poppy in a glass vase that stands on a side table at the front right of the picture space in *Lady Lilith*. The reason for this may lie in the obvious and commonplace association of the red poppy with sleep; "for where / Is he not found," the sonnet asks, "whom … / … soft sleep shall not snare?"—a rhetorical question couched in a run of sibilants that nicely reinforces Lilith's lulling, hypnotic power. In the painting, Lilith's narcotic appeal is emphasized by the fact that the poppy in the glass vase is an Oriental poppy (*Papaver orientale*) and, hence, associated more closely with opium than the common or corn poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*). That the poppy is freshly cut and in a glass jar beside Lilith suggests that it may be a keepsake from a recently departed lover or client,[42] which would accord with her "combing out of her abundant hair" and with her voluptuous state of dishabille in what William Sharp describes as a "white underdress … and an ample chamber-robe of white fur."[43] Whether or not the "chamber-robe" is made of "fur" or, as seems just as likely, trimmed with "swan's down" (the "downy or soft under-plumage of the swan")[44] should not distract from its sexual suggestiveness: in its texture and close proximity to Lilith's body, it gestures towards the most intimate area of the female anatomy.

The difficulty with the readings of the flowers in *Lady Lilith* that Smith bases on Ingram is the fact that, as she readily concedes in a note, *Flora Symbolica* and the other Victorian texts that she cites were published after the painting was finished and therefore cannot have been the source(s) of its floral program. Nevertheless, she asserts, the texts "are compendia of earlier volumes of the language of flowers, and the[ir] meanings were compiled from numerous books published in the 1820s through 1860s."[45] This may well be true, but no book discovered by an extensive search of "earlier volumes of the language of flowers" supports the notion that (to quote the Rossetti Archive again) "roses gained their red coloring only when Eve was created, at which point the rose blushed at the sight of her beauty."[46] Indeed, nor does Ingram; rather, he states that "Carey fancifully ascribes …

[the rose's]

ruddy tint to the kisses of Eve,"[47] the reference being to the classical scholar John Carey's "Origin of the Red Rose," a poem much quoted in nineteenth-century "compendia" of floral lore:

> As, erst, in Eden's blissful bow'rs,
>
> Young Eve survey'd her countless flow'rs,
>
> An op'ning rose, of purest white,
>
> She mark'd, with eyes that beam'd delight.
>
> Its leaves she kiss'd: and, straight, it drew,
>
> From Beauty's lip, the vermeil hue.[48]

Whether the "hue" of the red rose was a response to Eve's beauty or the result of her kiss does not blunt the thrust of Smith's argument, which is that the roses in *Lady Lilith* are white because, like Lilith herself, they predate the creation of Eve in Genesis 2. On the basis of this interpretation, Smith suggests that the landscape reflected in the mirror at the rear of the picture space "represents Eden,"[49] a plausible reading that may have helped to generate the fanciful suggestion in the Rossetti Archive that the reflected "garden or natural scene … is an impossible imagination … as if the mirror … [has] magically preserved a memory of the Edenic garden which … [Lilith] fled," a reading repeated by McGann in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*.[50] It is notable that in describing *Lady Lilith* to Frederick Layton (its purchaser) on 9 April 1866, Rossetti simply describes it as a "landscape,"[51] that in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton in September 1866 William Michael states merely that the "looking-glass reflect[s] sunlit trees,"[52] and that in his description of the painting in the May 1894 number of the *Portfolio* Stephens says only that the "mirror … reflects a garden."[53]

While John Ruskin is known to have supplied some of the white roses from which Rossetti painted the background in *Lady Lilith*,[54] actual flowers may not have been his only contribution to the picture. As suggested elsewhere,[55] the theories of color harmony that Ruskin presents in his chapter "Of Turnerian Light" in *Modern Painters* 4 (1856) may well have influenced the incipient aestheticism of Rossetti's medieval watercolors of the mid-1850s and helped to shape the aestheticism of paintings of the ensuing decades, including *Lady Lilith*. As part of his discussion of "color-harmony" in the chapter, Ruskin is at pains to argue that "God has employed colour in His creation as the unvarying accompaniment of all that is purest, most innocent, and most precious; while for things precious only in material uses, or dangerous, common colours are reserved."[56] Yet, Ruskin concedes, there appear to be exceptions to the rule that "innocent things are [constantly] bright in colour": "I have often heard of brilliantly coloured serpents; and I suppose there are such,—as there are gay poisons, like the foxglove and kalmia—types of deceit."[57] Ruskin's identification of the poisonous "foxglove" (*Digitalis*) as a "type … of deceit" may be sufficient to account for its presence in *Lady Lilith*, whose accompanying sonnet identifies the capacity of Lilith's "sweet tongue … [to] deceive" as one of her dangerous characteristics.[58] Yet there may be more than this to the foxgloves in the painting.

Like many flowers that are poisonous if ingested in sufficient quantities, the foxglove was from Roman times regarded as medicinal if taken in small amounts, a property that towards the end of the eighteenth century led to the "discovery that digitalis was the active ingredient of foxglove, a plant traditionally used by herbalists for heart failure."[59] By the 1850s, the uses of digitalis (which gives the heart a stronger and slower beat) had been expanded by medical scientists and by theorists and practitioners of homeopathic medicine to include a variety of diseases and afflictions, including hydrocele (liquid on the scrotum) a condition from which Rossetti suffered from the mid-to-late 1860s onwards.[60] More to the present point, by the late 1850s, major practitioners of homeopathy in Europe and America had identified digitalis both as an aphrodisiac and as an

anaphrodisiac if administered in the correct quantities. In *The Homeopathic Guide in All Diseases of the Urinary and Sexual Organs* (trans. 1855), the German homeopath Wilhelm M. Gollmann identifies small amounts of digitalis as a cure for satyriasis (specifically "sexual excitement, with frequent and painful erections at night and in the day-time"),[61] and in a substantial chapter on digitalis in *A New and Comprehensive System of Materia Medica and Therapeutics* (1859), Gollmann's American translator and disciple Charles J. Hempel states that the chemical produces "extraordinary excitement of the sexual organs," adding that even "small doses of … [it] cause violent sexual excitement."[62] Whether or not Rossetti knew of the supposed aphrodisiacal powers of foxglove—and the possibility that he was "sexually impaired" or even "impotent" by the 1860s[63] increases the likelihood that he was—he appears to been very aware of an aspect of the plant that may have helped to fuel that supposition: the pink, tubular, and bell-like blossoms in *Lady Lilith* are unmistakably vaginal in hue and configuration. As if to alert the viewer to this aspect of the foxgloves, the keyhole in the chest below them is also evocatively vulvar.[64] No less suggestive of parts of the female body, it may be added, are the full-blown poppy and red-pink buds of the roses, most conspicuously the bud reflected in the wall mirror.[65]

Following the line that lists Lilith's flowers in the version of "Lady Lilith" that accompanied the painting in 1868, each of the flowers has a parallel property: the rose: "shed scent,"[66] the foxglove: "soft-shed fingers," and the poppy: "soft sleep." When Rossetti revised the sonnet for inclusion in *Poems* (1870), he omitted the foxglove and revised its attribute to "soft-shed kisses," a change to which H. Buxton Forman objected in *Our Living Poets: An Essay in Criticism* (1871) on the grounds that the deletion of "foxglove" "rob[bed] the sonnet of some pictorial beauty" and the revision of "soft-shed fingers" to "soft-shed kisses" "rob[bed]" it of "some of its masculine force in embodying a type of sensuous beauty as distinct from spiritual beauty."[67] At first blush, Forman's sense that the substitution of "kisses" for "fingers" diminishes the "masculine force" of the sonnet may seem baffling, but an explanation may lie in the use of fingers for sexual stimulation (a practice that Forman may have regarded as masculine). In any event, the word "fingers" surely contains a play on the shape of foxglove flowers, which lies behind the name of the plant in various languages. In the 1623 edition of John Gerard's *Herball* (1597) enlarged by Thomas Johnson, a copy of which was owned by Rossetti by 1866,[68] foxglove blossoms are described as "hang[ing] … downwards with the bottom upward, in forme long, like almost to finger stalkes, whereof it took his name" in "Latine": "Digitalis: in High Dutch, fingerhut [literally finger hut; hence, the German word for thimble] … in French, *Gantes Notre Dame*."[69]

In his account of Lilith, Lyons characterizes her as "the first strong-minded woman and the original advocate of women's rights," adding that "[a]t present she is a queen of the demons."[70] Such perceptions have led in recent decades to the embrace of Lilith as a feminist icon whose resistance to patriarchal domination was precisely the reason for her demonization. Rossetti's depictions of Lilith, especially in *Lady Lilith*, have served these perceptions well, while at the same time the painting has been regarded by many viewers

as one of several examples of his pandering to the male gaze by objectifying female bodies.[71] To an extent both of these, not unrelated, views are simplifications, for *Lady Lilith* is neither a poster for women's liberation nor the artistic equivalent of a woman in a window in Amsterdam's red-light district. Its glory lies in its richness and complexity—in its color harmonies, in its signifying flowers, and in the legendary and literary traditions and texts that are evoked by its title, by its accompanying sonnet, and by its sequel "Eden Bower." By depicting Lilith looking at herself in a mirror, Rossetti aligned her with conventional allegorical representations of Vanity, "Earthly Beauty," and the Contemplative Life;[72] and by surrounding her with emblematic and sexually suggestive flowers, adornments, and furnishings, he invites the viewer to puzzle further over the meaning of the painting—to look, with the help of the accompanying sonnet, beyond its aesthetically and sensually captivating surface for its signifying elements. The result is a painting that still stimulates the "[c]uriosity and the desire of beauty" that Walter Pater identified in the Postscript to *Appreciations* (1889) as important components of "criticism" as well as "art."[73] Perhaps, in the final analysis, the key to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* lies in the doubtless carefully chosen "white underdress" and furry or downy "chamber-robe" that drape and surround her body, revealing and concealing the source of the *femme fatale*'s power, and hinting at its ultimate origin.

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[1] Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882): A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols., Clarendon, Oxford, 1971, no. 205. The website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) contains an image of the Museum's copy of the 1867 gouache and watercolor depicting Fanny Cornforth as Lady Lilith (Fig. 1; https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/337500). A less than ideal image of the other version of the same picture can be found in Chiaki Kato, "(Re)Discovering Rossetti's Lady Lilith: The Stevenson Watercolour, Manuscript, Sonnet, and Unpublished Letters," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, NS 27 (Spring 2018), p. 57.

[2] Algernon C. Swinburne, "Part II," in William Michael Rossetti and Algernon C. Swinburne, *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1868*, John Camden Hotten, London, 1868, p. 46.

[3] F.G. Stephens, quoted in Surtees, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

[4] Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2009, pp. 77–83.

[5] Virginia M. Allen reiterates this without attribution in "'One Strangling Golden Hair': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*," *Art Bulletin*, 66, no. 2 (June 1984), p. 286.

[6] Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1957, p. 62.

[7] Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 2000, p. 133.

[8] As David Sonstroem suggests in *Rossetti and the Fair Lady*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, 1970, p. 117, and Allen reiterates without attribution in *op. cit.*, 293, the fact that Elizabeth Siddal gave birth to a stillborn daughter on 2 May 1861, may have helped to foster Rossetti's interest in Lilith, who has the "the power … to destroy Children whenever She pleaseth" and is especially dangerous in the days after birth; see Johann Andreas Eisenmenger, *The Traditions of the Jews, or The Doctrines and Expositions Contain'd in the Talmud and Other Rabbinical Writings*, trans. John Peter Stehelin, 2 vols., 1742; G. Smith, London, 1743, 2:111–113.

[9] See Per Faxnel's *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2017, pp. 55–63, for a useful account of the Lilith tradition and its presence in Romantic and Victorian literature and art, especially writing on women's rights. Unfortunately, Faxnel's comments on *Lady Lilith* are seriously flawed by error.

[10] Richard Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy: What It Is, with All the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostics, and Several Cures of It*, 2 vols., Longman, Rees, Orme, London, 1827, 1:177, and quoted in Surtees, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

[11] F.G. Stephens suggests, in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Seeley, London, 1894, p. 67, that Rossetti "got a hint of the subject" of *Lady Lilith* from the *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

[12] In *Legends of the Patriarchs and Prophets, and Other Old Testament Characters from Various Sources*, James B. Millar, New York, 1884, pp. 33–34, Sabine Baring-Gould provides a loose translation of the passage about Lilith.

[13] Eisenmenger, *op. cit.*, 2:110.

[14] Lyons's account appears to be a response to a query, not from Rossetti but from the editor of a journal—possibly, William Michael Rossetti surmises, the *Athenaeum*; however, it was not published there or, as far as can be ascertained, elsewhere until its appearance in William Michael Rossetti's *Rossetti Papers 1862 to 1870*, Sands, London, 1903, pp. 484–486.

[15] To quote only the best-known portion of the account of Lilith in the *Alphabet ben Sira* in Stehelin's and Lyons's versions: "She said, I will not lay under, nor be subject to thee; and he said, I will not lay Undermost, but be above, for it behoveth thee to be Undermost, and me Uppermost, and for thee to obey. Then said she, we both are equal one to the other; for we were both created of the earth" (Eisenmenger, *op. cit.*, 2:211); "Lilith refused to obey Adam, saying that they were both quite equal, for they were made from the same earth" (W.M. Rossetti, *Rossetti Papers*, p. 485). As is apparent, Lyons

bowdlerizes Stehelin, another example being the passage in Stehelin quoted in note 15 below, which reads in Lyons, "Lilith lived with … [Adam] against his will, and brought forth many devils" (W.M. Rossetti, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*).

[16] In a letter of September 28, 1869, Rossetti states that he has "finished 'Eden Bower,'" which he appears to have begun a week or so earlier; see Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William E. Fredeman, completed by Robert C. Lewis, Jane Cowan, and Anthony H. Harrison, 10 vols., D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2002–2015, 4:286 and 282.

[17] See William Michael Rosssetti (ed.), *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, with a Memoir*, 2 vols., Ellis and Elvey, London, 1895, 1:62.

[18] Eisenmenger, *op. cit.*, 1:37, 2:109, 259.

[19] D.G. Rossetti, *Correspondence*,4:299. Later in the poem, Lilith states that she will "grapple" the "Tree" with "these coils" and "stretch this crowned head forth by the apple," a description that recalls the carving in Rossetti's *Hamlet and Ophelia* (1858) in which the serpent, wearing a crown, encircles the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. According to John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 6 vols., 1843–1860, George Allen, Orpington, 1888, 2:307, "the serpent with the human head, and body twisted round the tree … was the universally-accepted symbol of the evil angel, from the dawn of art up to Michelangelo." Above and later, quotations from "Eden Bower" are taken from the text in Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Works*, ed. William M. Rossetti, Ellis, London, 1911, pp. 109–113.

[20] In explaining Lilith's statement that she was created "By the earth's will" to William Bell Scott in a letter of 9 October 1869, Rossetti writes that the "*earth*" molded her but was "unable to provide … [her] with a soul," and that only Eve was "completely human," comments that seem to suggest familiarity with Kabbalistic thinking about the two women (D.G. Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 4:299).

[21] See Eisenmenger, *op. cit.*, 1:46, where Lilith, "seeing the ruined and corrupted State of *Adam*, after the Fall, "laying with … [him] against his Will bore to him many Devils, hurtful Spirits, and Night-Apparitions." According to legend, such offspring include succubi, witches, and the "screech-owl" of Isaiah 34:14.

[22] Quoted in Swinburne, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[23] William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*, Cassell, London, 1889.

[24] Swinburne, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[25] D.G. Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 4:449–450.

[26] Shelley's translations of two scenes in *Faust* were first published in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Works, with His Life*, 2 vols., ed. Mary Shelley, John Ascham, London, 1834). Subsequently the translations were reprinted in several editions of Shelley's work, including an 1870 edition edited by William Michael Rossetti. In 1866, Rossetti himself translated part of Mephistopheles's description of Lilith: "Hold thou thy heart against her shining hair, / If, by thy fate, she spread it once for thee; / For, when she nets a young man in that snare, / So twines she him he never will be free" (D.G. Rossetti, *Works*, 541). "[H]er shining hair" is an apt translation of Goethe's "ihren schönen Haaren," Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust. Ein Tragödie*, J.G. Cotta'fchen Buchhandlung, Tubingen, 1808, p. 215. In his 1841 translation of *Faust*, which Rossetti, in requesting a copy of it from F.S. Ellis on July 5, 1870, pronounced "much the best I ever saw" (D.G. Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 4:507), Lewis Filmore renders Goethe's description of Lilith's hair as of "excelling beauty, / In which she shineth so surpassingly!" and his account of its dangerous effect as "When a young man she may with that ensnare, / She lets him not so soon again be free" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy*, trans. Lewis Filmore, Smith's Standard Library, W. Smith, London, 1841, p. 43.

[27] Shelley, *Works, with His Life*, 1:332.

[28] So, too, does Swinburne's inclusion of part the description of Lilith in Shelley's translation in his comments on *Lady Lilith* in *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[29] Klaus L. Berghahn, "Patterns of Childhood: Goethe and the Jews," trans. Sara B. Young, in Klaus L. Berghahn and Jost Hermand (eds.), *Goethe in German-Jewish Culture*, Camden House, Rochester, NY/Woodbridge, UK, 2001, p. 15 n21.

[30] *Oxford English Dictionary*. That Gower's Lilith is "glancing" also anticipates Rossetti's contemplative Lady Lilith. There can be no doubt that pictorially and thematically *Lady Lilith* is indebted to pictures of women engaged in similar activities by numerous other artists, most notably Titian, whose influence on Rossetti's single-woman portraits has frequently been observed, for example by Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 318–319. *Fazio's Mistress* (later retitled *Aurelia*) (1863) (Surtees, *op. cit.*, no. 184), which depicts a woman combing her hair, is a case in point.

[31] Goethe, *Faustus: A Drama*, trans. Lord Francis Leveson Gower, 2nd ed., 2 vols., John Murray, London, 1825, 2:52.

[32] Daniel Defoe, *The Political History of the Devil as Well Ancient and Modern, in Two Parts*, 1726; Thomas Tegg, Oxford, 1840, p. 273. All subsequent quotations are taken from pp. 273–278.

[33] W.M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 63.

[34] Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, ed. François Wahl, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1989, p. 142.

[35] William Michael Rossetti, "Introduction," in William Michael Rossetti (ed.), *The Germ*, Stock, London, 1901, p. 18.

[36] Sarah Phelps Smith, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Lady Lilith' and the 'Language of Flowers'" *Art Magazine*, 53, no. 6 (Feb. 1879), pp. 142–145. The acceptance of Smith's readings of the flowers was assisted by Allen, who repeats part of it, again without attribution, in *op. cit.*, p. 291.

[37] Jerome McGann (ed.), *Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Hypermedia Archive*, January–February 2020, http://www.rossettiarchive.org.

[38] Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

[39] In *Wild Flowers*, 2 vols., Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1852–1853, 2:137, Anne Pratt observes no less applicably that, "with its active properties and its stately form," the foxglove has long been an "Emblem of Cruelty and Pride."

[40] Smith, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

[41] William Sharp describes the crown as a "pearl-flowered diadem" in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study*, Macmillan, London, 1882, p. 209.

[42] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as a title, "Lady" is "[u]sed when speaking to or of a woman … of high social rank" and as "[a]n honorific title prefixed to names of goddesses, personifications, etc.," and it is frequently used by Rossetti in *The House of Life* to refer to a "woman who is the object of love or devotion." However, it is also a euphemism for a courtesan or a prostitute, most infamously in *Harris's List of Covent-Garden Ladies*, a compendium of prostitutes, their appearance, and their specialties that was published annually from 1757 to 1795. The euphemism is used throughout William W. Sanger's *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects Throughout the World*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1859, which includes two chapters on Great Britain (pp. 313–359).

[43] Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

[44] *Oxford English Dictionary*.

[45] Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 145 n28.

[46] In a short piece entitled "The Maiden's Blush," by "HAL," in the *King's College Literary and Scientific Magazine* 2 (1842), pp. 19–20, an annual containing material by students at King's College, London (where Rossetti's father taught Italian), Eve is depicted "twining a chaplet of the fairest flowers" in "one of Eden's bowers" after the fall but before the expulsion. There she receives a promise from the "Spirit of the Rose" that seeds from the chaplet will fall as a reminder of Eden. With this the "blushing rose became white." "[E]ven now," the piece concludes, it is "the maiden's pride to wear upon

her bosom the white rose, sweet emblem-flower of purity; while the kindred rose that, as it grew not in that bower, retains its former hue, to this day men call—'THE MAIDEN'S BLUSH.'"

[47] J.H. Ingram, *Flora Symbolica; or, The Language and Sentiment of Flowers. Including Floral Poetry, Original and Selected*, F.W. Warne, London, [1869], p. 25.

[48] Quoted here is the version of the poem published in the "Select Poetry" section of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 89, NS 12, no. 2 (July 1819), pp. 65–66, where it includes the byline "*West-square, July 12. Extract*." The piece was quickly reprinted in "Poetry. From the London Monthly Magazines," *Athenaeum; or, Spirit of the English Magazines* (Boston), 6, no. 1 (October 15, 1819), p. 88. Thereafter it appeared in numerous books and articles published on both sides of the Atlantic, including Frederic Shoberl's much reprinted and augmented *The Language of Flowers with Illustrative Poetry; to Which Are Now Added the Calendar of Flowers and the Dial of Flowers*, 1834, 8th American from the 10th London ed., Lea and Blanchard, Philadelphia, 1848, p. 121; Mary M. Griffin's *Drops from Flora's Cup, Or the Poetry of Flowers, with a Floral Vocabulary*, Oliver L. Perkins, Boston, 1846, p. 123; Robert Tyas's *Flowers and Heraldry; or, Floral Emblems and Heraldic Figures, Combined to Express Pure Sentiments, Kind Feelings, and Excellent Principles, in a Manner at Once Simple, Elegant, and Beautiful*, Houlston and Stoneman, London, 1851, p. 195; and Henrietta Dumont's *The Floral Offering: A Token of Affection and Esteem: Comprising the Language of Flowers and Poetry of Flowers*, H.C. Peck and Theo Bliss, Philadelphia, 1842, p. 83.

[49] Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 144. Smith may have taken her cue from Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 210, where the "garden" is seen as "a hint of that primal paradise where Adam and Eve loved."

[50] McGann, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

[51] D.G. Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 3:421.

[52] William Michael Rossetti, *Selected Letters*, ed. Roger W. Peattie, Penn State University Press, University Park, PA/London, 1990, p. 154.

[53] Quoted in Surtees, *op. cit.*, no. 205.

[54] For the sources of the white roses, see D.G. Rossetti, *Correspondence*, 3:149, 459, 460, 465 (from Charles Augustus Howells's garden) and 4:112 (from Ruskin's garden, and some "dog-roses" from Howells's). See also Surtees, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*, for Henry Treffry Dunn's account of collecting the white roses from Ruskin's garden.

[55] See D.M.R. Bentley, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blue Closet* and *The Tune of Seven Towers*," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, NS 23 (Fall 2014), pp. 37–39.

[56] Ruskin, *op. cit.*, 4:53, 51.

[57] Ruskin, *op. cit.*, 4:52. Ruskin also discusses the foxglove and the kalmia in *The Queen of the Air, Being a Study of the Greek Myths of Cloud and Storm*, 1869; Maynard, Merrill, New York, 1893, pp. 117–119, under the heading "Draconidae," a group of plants "more or less serpentine or dragon-like" in form whose "serpent charm" resembles "an evil spirit" in its "influence" on similar plants.

[58] Quoted in Swinburne, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[59] Jonathan Davidson, *A Century of Homeopaths: Their Influence on Medicine and Health*, Springer-Verlag, New York, 2016/Palgrave Macmillan, London/New York, 2007, p. 127. As Allen observes in *op. cit.*, p. 291, foxglove produces "digitalia, which is not only medicine but deadly poison."

[60] See Wilhelm Gollmann, *The Homeopathic Guide, in All Diseases of the Urinary Tract and Sexual Organs, Including the Derangements Caused by Onanism and Sexual Distress; with a Strict Regard to the Present Demands of Medical Science*, trans. Charles J. Hempel, Rademacher and Sheck, Philadelphia/William Radde, New York, 1855, p. 187, for digitalis as a cure for hydrocele; and, for Rossetti's hydrocele, W.M. Rossetti's evasive statement in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 1:265, now generally held to be a reference to the ailment, that "[t]owards the autumn of 1866" his brother became "subject to a complaint (I do not care to define it) which required surgical treatment from time to time."

[61] Gollmann, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

[62] Charles J. Hempel, *A New and Comprehensive System of Materia Medica and Therapeutics, Arranged upon a Physiologico-Pathological Basis, for the Use of Practitioners and Students of Medicine*, 2 vols., William Radde, Philadelphia/Otis Clapp, Boston, 1859, 1:458, 466.

[63] Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet,* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1999.

[64] In his letter of September 1866 to Norton, William Michael writes that his brother is "probably" going to "introduce … a white kitten on the white dishabille of the lady" (*Selected Letters*, p. 154), a plan confirmed by letters of 17 February 1867, and 17 January 1868, in which the painter asks his brother for "photos of pussey [*sic*] cats asleep" (and includes a sketch of one), and tells Frederick Richard Leyland that "[t]here is hardly anything to do to the Lilith now except the kitten" (*Correspondence*, 3:512 and 4:16). Like the sleeping cat in *Fra Pace* (1856), a sleeping cat or kitten on Lilith's lap would have indicated stasis (one meaning of "still she sits"), but it may also have brought with it the colloquial and slang meanings of "pussy": "[a] girl or woman exhibiting characteristics associated with a cat, esp. sweetness or amiability" and "[t]he female genitals; the vulva or vagina" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

[65] In addition to asking Charles Augustus Howells to send "branches" of "white roses" from his garden, Rossetti requested "plenty of leaves & red buds" (*Correspondence*, 3:459–60). More subtly suggestive than the buds is the only item of jewelry adorning Lilith: the single pearl, possibly a clitoral reference (as, of course, it is in *The Pearl*, which began publication in 1879), at the apex of a swag-shaped indentation in her orange-red bracelet. Hanging from the handle of Lilith's mirror close to her bracelet is a tassel whose bright red color and placement on her lap evokes passion, danger, and possibly menstrual blood.

[66] If, as seems likely, the silver and golden container on Lilith's dressing table or vanity is a perfume or eau-de-toilette castor, it would reinforce the theme of captivating scent articulated in the sonnet.

[67] H. Buxton Forman, *Our Living Poets: An Essay in Criticism*, Tinsley Brothers, London, 1871, pp. 202–203.

[68] See W.M. Rossetti, "Books Belonging to Dante G. Rossetti," Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.

[69] John Gerard[e], *The Herball or General History of Plantes. Very Much Enlarged and Amended by Thomas Johnson*, Adam Islip, Joice Norton, and Richard Whitakers, London, 1636, pp. 789, 791.

[70] Quoted in W.M. Rossetti, *Rossetti Papers*, p. 484.

[71] For reasons canvassed elsewhere, see my "'Curiosity and the Desire of Beauty': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Beloved*"). This essay has not gone down that very well-traveled path, but the point does need to be made in response to it that Lady Lilith is not merely a passive object of the male gaze but an active observer and cultivator of her beauty and femininity, a woman who shows every indication of being comfortable—indeed, relaxed—with her body and her sexuality. See D.M.R. Bentley, "'Curiosity and the Desire of Beauty': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Beloved*, and Some Contingent Aesthetic Considerations," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 88, no. 4 (Fall 2019), pp. 346–366.

[72] See D.M.R. Bentley, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*, *Sibylla Palmifera*, 'Body's Beauty,' and 'Soul's Beauty,'" *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, NS 13 (Fall 2004), p. 64.

[73] Walter Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style*, 1889; Macmillan, London/New York, 1910, p. 258.

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