

LEGITIMIZING THE SENSUOUS FEMALE:
A RE-ASSESSMENT OF THE BABYLONIAN
GODDESS IN D.G. ROSETTI'S *ASTARTE
SYRIACA* (1875-77)*

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RESUMEN

Desde una perspectiva revisionista ligada a un análisis interdisciplinar, la presente contribución pretende desestigmatizar la imagen femenina mostrada en la obra pictórico-literaria *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77), a menudo vinculada erróneamente al mal o como alusiva a la prostituta babilónica descrita en el Apocalipsis (17:5). Pretendemos demostrar que la diosa rossettiana actúa como representación positiva de las fuerzas místicas ligadas al encuentro sexual. Apuntaremos igualmente que el pintor y poeta empleó una serie de referencias bíblicas y clásicas de calado distinto al volumen mencionado para construir un aparato legitimador que sirviera de apoyo a sus bases programáticas: es en este esquema que la mujer planteada por Rossetti se convierte en una entidad nodal que permite a su mensaje artístico cobrar pleno significado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Estudios de la mujer, Prerrafaelismo, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Jane Morris, Astarté.

ABSTRACT

Adopting a revisionist disposition and following an interdisciplinary pattern of analysis, this paper attempts to unstigmatize the female profile in the double work *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77), often deviously regarded as allusive to evil or to the pagan harlot depicted in section 17:5 from the Book of Revelation. Our inquiries seek to demonstrate that the goddess rendered by Rossetti functions as a positive representation of the mystic forces bound to sexual intercourse. We will also specify that the painter-poet employed a set of biblical and classical references other than the aforementioned volume as a legitimizing apparatus which would serve his own creative and programmatic tenets: it is within this scheme that the Rossettian woman proves a primary nodal entity allowing the aesthetic message to gather full meaning.

KEY WORDS: Women studies, Pre-Raphaelitism, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Jane Morris, Astarte.



ON THE FUNCTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ROSSETTIAN WOMAN

In recent years, the academic sphere has experienced a new surge of interest in the visual and literary works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which has materialized in volumes such as Bullen's *The Pre-Raphaelite Body* (1998), Marsh's *DGR: Painter and Poet* (1999) and McGann's *DGR and the Game that Must be Lost* (2000). However, for the most part of the twentieth century, Rossetti's figure and artistic corpus seemed condemned either to abuse or ostracism. This has favoured the proliferation of critical commentaries that tend to disregard both his programmatic aims and the links between the poetic and pictorial components in his works. This state of affairs has hindered the development of a sound analysis of the so-called «Rossettian female». Actually, this type of woman has quite often been defined just on the basis of external features such as her ruby lips, curly tresses, dreamy gaze, elongated neck and bony fingers. While this has made Rossetti's style easily recognizable, the fetishistic potential of these traits has also prevented critics from attempting to go beyond the surface and assess the contents expressed through these presences.

In our view, to unveil the meaning behind this mask of sensuousness we need to take into account the status of the iconic female as a construct within Rossetti's inspirational and creative course of action. Until finally brought to full eclosion in the third period of his career, this profile was primarily understood in mystical terms, somewhat trailing behind the stilnovist *donna angelicata*. Woman appeared as an enlightening presence between two layers of reality which could be defined as an adaptation of the Neoplatonic distinction between the «sensible» and the «intelligible» realms. It was early in Rossetti's career, during his formative years (1847-1854), that this type came to be defined, additionally, as an alter-ego of the artist's creative soul, this being a conceptualization adopted from works such as Poe's «Ulalume». All in all, this cluster of contents proved a fruitful culture medium which Rossetti adopted and re-evaluated in order to give expression to the nature of inspiration together with the truth and sense of fulfilment which he aimed to find in art at a time of self-definition. Hence, we may assert that the Beatricean and the Gothic were the first two codes which he fused as one in order to bring about a female character who could adopt the roles of «muse» and «beloved». The maiden ultimately became a nodal entity between the earthly and the transcendent allowing Rossetti to link the concepts of «love», «life» and «art». Within this scheme, the last step upwards into a higher state of perception was to clutch at the lady's hand and follow her advice on the true objective of aesthetic life. Since she was regarded not just as the representation of an ideal but also as the materialization of the sensitive soul, we may assert that, in theoretical terms, by engaging in a communicative scheme with this female presence, the artist actually got to know about himself

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and the plan ascribed to his existence. It is in this sense that his seminal short story «Hand and Soul» (1850) defined this mystical presence in terms of mystery, fascination, revelation and identity:

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 him as at first from her eyes, and he knew her hair to be the golden veil through which he beheld his dreams (...) And as he looked, Chiaro's spirit appeared abashed of its own intimate presence (...) He felt her to be as much with him as his breath. He was like one who, scaling a great steepness, hears his own voice echoed in some place much higher than he can see¹.

During Rossetti's medievalist period (1854-1868), mainly based upon Malory's and Tennyson's writings, the values and functions of this maiden were given expression through the «Grail damsel» type: an icon of virtue and spiritual perfection featured in works such as *Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael* (1857), *The Attainment of the Holy Grail* (1857-1864) and the first version of *The Damsel of the Sangrail* (1857). In all these, Rossetti projected the physical traits of his, by then, fiancée Elizabeth Siddal upon those of the chalice bearer, just as he had done in the mid-1850s when casting her as Dante's beloved in a study for the forthcoming *Beata Beatrix*, which he completed after her death and so has been deviously regarded exclusively as a *memento mori*. We cannot elude the fact that this type of projections confirmed Miss Siddal's status as Rossetti's main muse and also as an iconic portal into art's mysteries. Contrariwise to this atmosphere of spiritual achievement and insight, Rossetti felt interested as well in portraying a female referent bound to temptation and bodily issues, and this he carried out along various renderings about the illicit, destructive liaison between Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenevere. This perspective was continued in comparative terms in the canvas *Helen of Troy* (1863) or the stained glass *Tristram and Iseult Drinking the Love Potion* (1862-1863)². Basing ourselves on these evidences, we may argue that the construct known as the «Rossettian female» commuted at the time between the two poles of a dichotomy. This spoke out loud of the difficulties that Rossetti was experiencing to reconcile two main notions: the exaltation of the spiritual, derived from the basic tenets of early Pre-Raphaelitism, and the expression of carnal desire, which he had learned to regard with suspicion on the basis of the strict religious education he had received from his mother, Frances Polidori.

However, this point of view was bound to change as a result of personal experience during the late 1850s and early 1860s: as his formerly idyllic relation with Elizabeth Siddal became more and more demanding with particular regard to marriage issues, the couple experienced spasmodic fits of attachment and emo-

¹ J. McGANN (ed.), *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Poetry and Prose*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 314.

² The scene on *Tristram and Iseult* was repainted in watercolour around 1867.



tional distance. In autumn 1857 Rossetti made the acquaintance of Jane Burden, who would later on marry his friend William Morris. Not without some initial objections, she finally accepted to sit as a model for him within a period of ten days following their first, unexpected meeting in Oxford. Far from the graphic monomania developed around the figure of Elizabeth Siddal during the early and mid-1850s, Rossetti was now starting to feel the call of temptation and, in this way, he projected Jane's features upon the character of Guenevere in the aforementioned panel *Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael* (1857); in it, unsurprisingly, Miss Siddal was cast as the angelic maiden of the Grail —indeed meaning to contrast. Even though Rossetti did not apply his own features to Lancelot, we may think that he was actually giving expression to the clash of forces taking place within himself by then. Nevertheless, although Jane and himself would actually lead an illicit relationship at a later stage of their lives, we must specify that she was not the woman who led him more directly to adopt a perspective shift regarding bodily matters. It was during the aforementioned period of instability in respect to his relation with Miss Siddal that Rossetti met Fanny Cornforth at the Royal Surrey Gardens, during a fireworks exhibition:

As they passed each other on the path, she cracked a nut between her teeth and threw the shell at him: an interesting style of soliciting. She herself gave a different story, in which she was chaperoned by an elderly cousin and accidentally bumped into Gabriel and his friends, thus dislodging her magnificent hair, but this rings less true than the tale of the nutshell³.

Fanny, whose real name was Sarah Cox, was soon invited to pose for Rossetti. Undoubtedly, the most important work for which she modelled was *Bocca Baciata* (Kissed Mouth), painted between 1858 and 1859. The title was adopted from Boccaccio's *Decameron*: the seventh tale narrated on the second day tells how Alatiel, a beautiful Babylonian princess craved by many men, is captured several times on her journey to marry the King of Garve and so gets to experience the mysteries of flesh at first hand. Once rescued and sent back to her father's court, the princess stitches a more or less believable story together to preserve her honour, so that the sultan and her potential husband, both certain that she is still a virgin, may resume the wedding arrangements. Bearing this in mind in unison with the fact that, as Bullen states, «the figure in Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata* is not Alatiel... [although both women] speak of the infinite self-regenerative aspects of human desire»⁴, we may precise that Fanny indeed became a referent of Rossetti's de-dramatization of sexual intercourse, presumably on the basis of personal experience. By inscribing on the back of the image's panel the motto, also from the tale, «bocca baciata non perda

³ J. MARSH, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*. London, Quartet, 1998 (1st ed. 1985), p. 142.

⁴ J.B. BULLEN, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry and Criticism*. Oxford, Clarendon, 1998, p. 91.

ventura, anzi rinova come fa la luna»⁵, Rossetti was indeed celebrating «her sensuality and capacity for love», as Treuherz declares⁶. The painting, hung at the 1860 Hogarth Exhibition, and Rossetti's newly gained confidence with bodily matters did not pass unnoticed: his Pre-Raphaelite fellow William Holman Hunt stated that the canvas awakened in him the memory of the Venetian school, which Victorians had learned to regard as blatantly, or even infamously, sexual. Others considered that Rossetti had somewhat given up his Pre-Raphaelite origins in order to embrace the manners of Tintoretto, Giorgione or Il Veronese, and so, «had turned from painting after nature to painting as a decoration»⁷. We may understand that the amount of criticism received on account of this revision of Venetian patterns led Rossetti into a new type of anxiety for, in fact, he did not intend to portray an icon of moral degradation. In our view, he was rather detaching himself from the dichotomy experienced during his medievalist period between the virginal muse and the tantalizing female. But, in order to succeed along this new perspective upon bodily matters, he could not disregard artistic cohesion and expressive coherence in respect to his whole creative corpus.

The answer to this dilemma came under the form of a re-definition process during his last creative stage (1860-1882): first of all, the artist labelled himself as «painter-poet», following a semi-Blakean course of action, so that most of his works during these two decades should be regarded as «double», that is, consisting of interrelated visual and literary components. Secondly, setting a precedent for late 19th century aestheticism, Rossetti engaged in the description, through his double works, of a sublime concept of beauty, which he regarded as the main force (or *anima*) behind art. By situating this abstraction within the realm of the transcendent, the function of the Rossettian female as an intermediary (or *mediatrix*) between the sensible and the intelligible proved particularly useful to secure the artist's path to revelation: just like the muse-like lady descends from above to drag the creative subject upwards, the latter must make an effort first to go beyond his perceptive limitations, bound to the sensible realm. By disappearing within himself and getting to know the maiden as a representation of his creative soul, the artist psychically moves from «encloisterment» into «expansion». Once woman introduces him into the elevated sphere of beauty, the artist has access to a set of flashing visions which could be read as a variety of perspectives upon the same abstraction. Our view, in this sense, runs consonant with McGann's appreciations about Rossetti's interest in the early 1870s in developing a visual work tentatively entitled *Venus Surrounded by Mirrors*:

⁵ (My translation) A kissed mouth does not lose its fortune; it rather renews itself like the moon.

⁶ J. TREUHERZ, E. PRETTEJOHN and E. BECKER, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. London, Thames & Hudson, 2003, p. 184.

⁷ J. MCGANN, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 126.



Although he never executed that picture, the idea grew luxuriantly around him, not least in his many remarkable portraits and drawings of women (...) Beauty is reflexively presented in the form of visual images (...) women holding mirrors, standing before mirrors, looking into reflective pools (...) Rossetti's desire to achieve multiple perspectives in a single picture seems more Modernist than Pre-Raphaelite⁸.

This apparatus finally allowed Rossetti to reconcile the bodily and spiritual by regarding them as two main forces in constant tension which made up for the ideal balance that he perceived in beauty, whose main referent of stability could be defined as a central point ruled by a harmonious conjunction between them. We may ask ourselves, nonetheless, why Rossetti's works do not always show this integrative tendency. The answer could prove quite simple: he regarded beauty as an elusive reality to which he had access only under the form of a multitude of visions mediated by a female intercessor. As a consequence, women in his oils and poems appear as individual representations along the line between the bodily and the spiritual poles. But, as a group, they can be organized as a full set of interrelated truths, that is, as a dialectics —of beauty. Rather than being classified as essentially ethereal or radically fleshy, the Rossettian female is regarded in terms of potentiality between both notions: the painter-poet came to mistrust both, excessive spirituality and chaotic passion. In respect to the former idea, his revised version of *The Blessed Damozel*⁹ depicted an emparadised woman in terms of lack within a context of divine indifference to her prayer: in it, she verbalized her eagerness to meet her lover again in the afterlife, thus stressing the emptiness of an exclusively celestial context. When addressing chaotic passion, Rossetti focused on female icons such as *Lady Lilit* (1864-70) who, encloistered within herself as she looks at her own image in the mirror, does not display the slightest sense of sincerity regarding her potential lovers, thus transforming her seductive game of appearances into the ruin of those who may fall prey to a merely formal exercise of beauty.

Given the growth of Puritanism among mainstream Victorians in the 1870s, as a restrictive follow-up to the openness of the previous decade, we may assume that spirituality was easier to defend than desire or even sexual intercourse. However, Rossetti aimed to reconcile both aspects and, most importantly, legitimize them in equal terms. After the first step taken with *Bocca Baciata* (1858-59), the painter-poet developed this notion in *La Bella Mano* (1875-77), which acquaints us with a lady dressing up for an amorous rendezvous: as she washes her hands, the poem establishes a parallel between the purity of water and that of the woman, who is compared in terms of grandeur to a Botticellian Venus. Most importantly, a consonant equation is drawn between the crystalline element and sexual desire in terms of humidity. But the final movement, drawn towards the idolization of seduction and intercourse on the basis of sincerity and compromise between the

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 105-6.

⁹ The original version was composed about 1848.

members of a couple, is carried out through the use of several Marian references in the double work. Thus, the maiden is transformed into a «Marian Venus»¹⁰, that is, a sensual referent bearing the same level of legitimacy as a religious icon of spiritual perfection. This pattern, as a ritualistic appraisal of positive, sincere sexual attraction and complementation between the male and female sexes would be definitely glorified through the double work *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) which, nonetheless, has sometimes been regarded in negative terms, even as an incarnation of evil. In our view, this opinion reflects not only a misunderstanding of this double work: it seems derived as well from a tendency to project impressionistic or prejudiced opinions upon it on the basis of assumptions previous to any sound analysis of the work. Most importantly, these approaches tend to disregard its double nature and programmatic implications. Adopting as a basis this introduction on the genesis and evolution of the Rossettian damsel, the following section will now proceed to provide an answer from the field of interdisciplinary women studies which may contribute to counteract these stigmatization processes.

1. ISSUES OF GENDER COMPLEMENTATION UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE ASSYRIAN VENUS

The majestic female presence in *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) looms up before us as a nebulous beauty in the midst of a dream, both threatening and tremendously suggestive. Rossetti employs the idea of a supernatural encounter with the goddess as a basic cohesive device allowing him to display a set of intertwined contents and readings which unfold along three main paths of expression: the oil rendering, for instance, may be read as a definite tribute to the sensuous presence of Jane Morris, who was Rossetti's main muse at the time. However, as soon as we assess its textual counterpart, we experience a movement from a formulaic description of Astarte's features into a more precise account of the forces within sexual attraction and intercourse. The interesting thing about these ideas is that they will be effectively foregrounded if we consider the links between the pictorial and literary components of the double work and, most importantly, providing that we regard these contents as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Very much like *Bocca Baciata* (1858-59), which we already commented upon, Rossetti's rendition of Astarte did not escape controversy. Its first owner, Clarence Edmund Fry, saw it as a representation of the Babylonian harlot depicted in the Book of Revelation (17:5):

The woman was wearing purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls. She held in her hand a gold cup that was filled with the abominable

¹⁰ J. MARSH, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999, p. 489.



and sordid deeds of her harlotry. On her forehead was written a name, which is a mystery, «Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth»¹¹.

The cult of Astarte, which involved ritualistic prostitution¹², was indeed an integral part of the cult of fertility practised in ancient Syria and Palestine. Thus, the goddess could have served as a basis for the apocalyptic female in the quote above. However, Fry's view should not be taken to the root, least it should ruin the ultimate meaning of the work, because it does not actually reflect Rossetti's unconventional rendering, but rather projects upon it a set of prejudices and stereotypes belonging to mainstream Victorian thought. In our view, his opinion was mainly based on connotative impression and negative references outside the double work, so that he proceeded to catalogue Astarte as a sinister, nightmarish profile. Unfortunately, this sort of accounts are still being uttered today. In fact, few consider that, just as he had done when preparing other works such as Proserpine or Pandora, the painter-poet had used as a documentary basis Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary*, which defines Astarte as the exotic alter-ego of a Roman Venus¹³. This was the sense Rossetti intended for the painting, as can be derived from the following account:

On March 1876, Jane Morris visited Rossetti at Aldwick Lodge near Bognor Regis in Sussex. It was here that he painted her as Venus, as we can see in his pastel portrait of her now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, transformed into Astarte Syriaca of 1877, now in the Manchester Art Gallery¹⁴.

The double work was initially planned as a compendium of contents bound to the field of human love and passion, which could be more easily defined as a field sanctified by the Assyrian goddess of fertility rather than as the exclusive domain of the «mother of pagan abomination». The artist attempted to offer a perspective withdrawn from the harlot label promoted by Judaeo-Christian tradition and closer to her ancient value. Hence, in the same terms as a myriad of damsels allowed him to develop a dialectics of beauty, Rossetti understood that different cultural manifestations could have referred to similar concepts throughout history; it is in this sense that drawing a parallel with Venus proves more effective. However, he had

¹¹ *Et mulier erat circumdata purpura et coccino, et inaurata auro et lapide pretioso et margaritas, habens poculum aureum in manu sua plenum abominationibus et immunditiis fornicationis eius; et in fronte eius nomen scriptum, mysterium: «Babylon magna, mater fornicationum et abominationum terrae».* (*Apocalypsis Ioanis*, 17: 5)

¹² R. MARTIN, *Diccionario de la mitología clásica (Dictionnaire culturel Nathan de la mythologie gréco-romaine)*. Madrid, Espasa. 1998 (1st ed. 1992).

¹³ «A powerful divinity of Syria, the same as the Venus of the Greeks [*sic*]» (J. LEMPRIERE, *A Classical Dictionary: Containing a Copious Amount of All the Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors*. London, Routledge, 1900 [1st ed. 1812], p. 87). The author repeats the same equation on p. 637.

¹⁴ A.C. FAXON, «Pre-Raphaelite pleasures: The search for the real Rossetti». *The Review of the Pre-Raphaelite Society*, vol. 2, núm 1 (1994), p. 9.



already depicted the Roman goddess, with quite a different implication, in the painting *Venus Verticordia* (1868). In 1871, the poem «Venus Victrix» provided a more positive view of the deity. We may suppose that the introduction of Astarte allowed for a certain cosmetic variety within the notion of artistic unity. Rossetti's reevaluation of Astarte reflects his reappraisal of Venetian manners in procedural and supportive terms: both were used to serve his intention of praising and locating the flesh at a level equal to that of spiritual majesty.

Despite these considerations, *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) still seems deviously connected to the Book of Revelation: the word «mystery», on the forehead of the Babylonian harlot, indeed opens and closes Rossetti's sonnet. In our view, however, he employed it as a playful device allowing him to reflect upon the power of appearances, a topic which had already been dealt with in *Venus Verticordia* (1868) and *A Sea Spell* (1870-77): both works function as a warning against too obvious references and offerings which might seize the senses and lead us into error. In Rossetti's case, this routine of distraction always leads the spectator away from the concept of beauty he was addressing and that its double works intended to portray from various perspectives. *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) sets out this same idea on the basis of referentiality: the word «mystery» evokes fear and apocalyptic connotations because the reader or spectator is not actually looking at the canvas but somewhere else. However, if we dare to solve the riddle expounded by the author, we would see that the term actually points inwards, reinforcing the double work's self-referentiality and the links between the pictorial and the textual. Furthermore, the word «mystery» opens and closes up the sonnet not just to replicate a circular pattern of completion but also to state that the enigma expressed in symbolic terms in the oil will be unveiled in the corresponding poem, whose contents are literally encircled by this enigmatic term. Again, as we were saying, the double work points at itself.

The sonnet states that the «mystery» we are aiming at stands between the sun and the moon: if we simply have a look at the corresponding oil, we would notice that Astarte is crowned by a double aureole including both spheres: in this sense, the goddess' attributes are depicted as intrinsically related to the force they portray¹⁵. Most importantly, the sun and the moon are set in terms of a partial lunar eclipse which determines a certain interaction between the two. Since both celestial spheres were usually employed during the 19th century to refer to the masculine and the feminine principles¹⁶, we may reach at the idea that Astarte's power and the type of mystery depicted by Rossetti is essentially bound to inter-generic conjunction. It is at this point that the oil work calls our attention towards

¹⁵ This visual rendering seems based on traditional accounts related to Astarte's Assyrian alter-ego, the goddess Ishtar, who was usually represented between the solar and moon deities, Sin and Samash (check C. VILLAR RODRÍGUEZ, *Diccionario de las Religiones [Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Traditions]*. Madrid, Espasa, 1992, p. 123).

¹⁶ B. DIJKSTRA, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 122-127.



a central graphic element in the goddess' halo which combines a reddish circle of sanctity with a heart inscribed in an eight-pointed star also known as «octogram». Rossetti employed this motif as a cluster of symbolic meanings: stars are usually regarded as sources of mystical illumination¹⁷ just like haloes refer to sanctity. Then, we may find it surprising, at first sight, that the painter-poet should use ascribe both components to his portrait of Astarte rather than to a referent of spiritual achievement. However, it is in this sense that they become especially powerful: Rossetti is actually reusing them for the purpose of legitimizing the mysteries of the flesh which, due to this transmutational process, can now hold upon an apparatus parallel to that of spiritual exaltation, thus entering a whole new dimension.

The heart in the symbolic cluster, as a reference to the amorous impulse, supports our previous mention to the portrayal of inter-generic conjunction, which is finally sealed by means of the eight-pointed star as a symbol of regeneration, thus becoming a more or less direct reference to fertility issues. Accordingly, Astarte's crown identifies her as a patronizing intermediary within a deified conception of sexual intercourse. Furthermore, owing to Rossetti's eclectic tendency to grasp elements from various currents and traditions to frame his own message, we may add that the bright halo of the goddess points back to the force of passion embodied by Venus and Aphrodite, which Martin defines as «the omnipotent creativity of desire, to which every single living creature is subject, without exception (...) Both seductive and threatening, it is one of the essential forces in the world»¹⁸.

Mystery: Lo! Betwixt the sun and moon
 Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen
 Ere Aphrodite was [...]
 Torch-bearing, her sweet ministers compel
 All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea
 The witnesses of beauty's face to be¹⁹
 (*Astarte Syriaca*, lines 1-3, 9-11)

Unsurprisingly, the female entity in the visual rendition recreates Jane Morris' countenance, thus becoming a hybrid presence between the inspiring muse from above and the actual woman who posed for the artist. Rossetti even dared to uncover her shoulders and set her in a posture midway between the classic *puditia* pose of the *Medici Venus*²⁰ and the enticing attitude of his *Venus Verticordia* (1868): this left an imprint of restraint on Astarte without compromising her erotic dispo-

¹⁷ J. CHEVALIER & A. GHEERBRANT, *Diccionario de los simbolos*. Barcelona, Herder, 2003 (1st ed. 1969), pp. 484-489.

¹⁸ See R. MARTIN, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 2.

¹⁹ J. MCGANN, *op. cit.*, 2003, p. 194.

²⁰ Even though the posture is traditionally identified with this marble, Rossetti could rather have derived it from Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, especially because he adopted this same painting as a reference in *La Bella Mano* (1875-77) to justify a concept of spotless sensuality.

sition. Not just a tribute to Miss Morris' idealized beauty, the oil may also be read as a proof of Rossetti's infatuation and sexual attraction towards her. Although it was not the type of picture that would be expected to fit a respectable Victorian woman according to traditional standards —and maybe it was in these terms that Jane considered it «an abominable portrait of herself»²¹— *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) also proved that she had not lost the slightest bit of power in the Rossettian universe. Quite on the contrary, physical distance between both artist and muse had dramatically intensified her charms. Again, despite Jane's understandable moral objections, the portrait proves more positive than it seems: Rossetti's Syrian goddess functions as the high priestess of an orderly concept of sexual legitimacy bound to beauty, just like other female representations such as *Sibylla Palmifera* (1864-1870) played the same initiatic chord in respect to aesthetic inspiration and intellectual insight. The tantalizing power of the goddess is not the chaotic or murderous force described in *Lady Lilith* (1864-70), which is often read as a contrastive companion to the aforementioned sybil²², but rather a sensuous spell leading to a harmonious correlation that runs parallel to the Pythagorean music of the spheres. It is order, not chaos, which prevails in Rossetti's depiction of Astarte.

Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon
 Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune,
 And from her neck's inclining flower stem lean
 Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean
 The pulse of hearts to the sphere's dominant tune
 (*Astarte Syriaca*, lines 4-8)

2. «ON ASTARTE'S MAJESTY»: REFASHIONING THE RELIGIOUS FOR ARTISTIC PURPOSES

The canvas supports these contents in compositional terms through the goddess' statism or the posture and expression of her attendant angels who, looking upwards in wonderment, reinforce a notion of transcendence, permanence and timelessness. However, the concepts of unity and harmony poured into her profile do not intend to hide the fact that Astarte is still the depository of a primal sexual force equally imposing, appealing and disturbing. The impression derived from contemplating the picture reflects the individual's mixture of pleasure and anxiety in respect to sex, which proves the double work's efficiency. In graphical terms, the gilded girdle worn by the goddess embraces her breasts, hip and pubic area, stressing her function as a priestly referent of idolized sexuality. Meanwhile, the green

²¹ J. MARSH, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 492.

²² M.M. EMMONS, «Magdalen and Madonna: The union of physical and spiritual love in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* and *Sibylla Palmifera*». *The Review of the Pre-Raphaelite Society*, vol. 12, núm 3 (2004), pp. 17-20.

hue in her mantle and those of her attendants utters a symbolic message of amorousness. Despite the aforementioned *puditia* pose, the goddess' disposition proves somewhat enticing: her fingers, indeed close to highly erogenous areas, seem to play with the motifs in her girdle rather than just touch them. Although she lacks the nudity of the Botticellian Venus, her image proves more pronouncedly sexual; but this is not a fleshy female profile bound to the supposed opulence and depravity of the Babylonian court, since Rossetti's goddess ultimately pointed at elevation rather than corruption. We should not miss that, in the same way as he picked up an Assyrian referent to encode a set of personal and programmatic meanings, the painter-poet was quite careful about the way he used them, and it is in this sense that he even points at a certain analogy with Christian referents: Astarte's attendants, although not related to strictly ethereal matters, function as intermediaries between the sexualized deity and humanity. But maybe the most daring example of appropriation and adaptation of this material to his own discourse has to do with the use of a Messianic parallel, which he had already introduced in *Joan of Arc* (1863-1871) and would use again in (*A Vision of*) *Fiammetta* (1878): both works define the female as a projection from transcendent beauty allowing this idolized concept to manifest itself upon the sensible realm. This content, which Rossetti had initially ascribed to essentially spiritual types, had to be applied as well to icons of desire in order to assert that the ideal unity of beauty and the self rests upon a harmonious conjunction of body and spirit. The unfinished poem «Joan of Arc» (1870), which William Michael Rossetti posthumously published in 1911, codified this Messianic analogy through a «phoenix metaphor» allusive to Christ's resurrection²³. Meanwhile, (*A Vision of*) *Fiammetta* (1878) employed the rainbow motif usually seen in medieval *Pantokrator* images to encode the idea of unity between heaven and earth. *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) applied the same course of action to bodily matters through the girdle motif, for, according to Ash, the roses a pomegranates in it «are symbols respectively of the Passion and Resurrection» of Christ²⁴. This proves the fact that Rossetti's eclectic disposition was not based on essentially derivative tendencies, but rather that he re-used a set of contents to build up the apparatus which would help him to develop a discourse on the balance between body and spirit: in this sense, the individual not only gets to know about beauty,

²³ This metaphor was codified in the last three lines of the poem, which read «When Time is o'er and all hath sufficed/Shall the world's chief Christ-fire rise to Christ/from the ashes of Joan the Maid». The image, which proves derivative from the esoteric research carried out by Rossetti's father, refers to the interpretation that Rosycrucian lore makes of the «INRI» inscription on top of Christ's cross: read as *Ignis Natura Renovatur Integram* (Fire renovates nature completely), it uses the phoenix as a symbol of continuity and renewal—in line with the stages of spiritual perfection described in alchemic tradition. The ascension motif and the identification of the maiden with Christ brings about the link between heaven and earth which Rossetti also expressed in other double works. The painter-poet in fact was employing the contents in inherited religion as a supportive structure to encode his description and worship of beauty in full force.

²⁴ R. ASH, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. London, Pavillion, 1997, p. 35.

but also attempts to move towards transcendence in terms of identity, just as it happens in religious practice. The Rossettian woman is partly Messianic inasmuch as she belongs with sublime transcendence, descends upon earth and allows others to follow her on her way back to her very origin.

Although we agree with Ash's observations, we also consider that the girdle conjures a wider signification, which does not imply a cancellation of previous ones, but rather a pattern of enrichment: the pomegranate, which comes from Persia²⁵, indeed refers to Astarte's origin. However, apart from these content nuances and the programmatic implications stated above, the fruit functions as a clue allowing us to establish a link with a Biblical text withdrawn from the apocalyptic implications usually ascribed to *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77): at first, the presence of the pomegranate in *The Song of Solomon* seems merely coincidental. However, this toast to chance soon proves unfeasible under the light of further evidences: Rossetti had already dealt with this Biblical source in his oil *The Beloved* (1866), so we may assume not only that he was familiar with it, but also that he was fond of it. In this sense, the tone and visual structure of *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) proves quite close to the following lines in section (6:10) of the poem, which refer to the appearance of the beloved woman: «Who is she that looketh forth as the morning/Fair as the moon/Clear as the sun/And terrible as an army with banners?»²⁶. In our view, Rossetti partly based his representation of Astarte upon this excerpt because he intended to adopt the skilful combination of erotic love and religion seen in *The Song of Solomon* as a strong legitimizing basis which could serve, again, his own discourse: not only do the sun and the moon replicate the pattern in the double work; Astarte echoes the beloved's presence in terms of appealing attractiveness and appalling magnificence —because of the powerful feelings both women embody. We should not miss either that this reference to Solomon holds as well upon historical facts, since the monarch himself withdrew for some time from the Jewish cult in order to adore a set of pagan deities, including Astarte²⁷. It is in this sense that Biblical references prove helpful not to enlighten a religious concept but rather to serve an artistic message which deifies love and sensuality and muses upon a female portrait that can be identified as both «goddess» and «beloved». The double work, again, points at itself. We may add that, together with the aforementioned Messianic parallel, these coincidences further support our view about Rossetti's playful riddle on the word «mystery», which could be solved by means of observation and analysis²⁸. Besides, these signals highlight the use of a double articulation in Rossetti's dis-

²⁵ G. SCOBLE and A. FIELD, *The Meaning of Flowers: Myth, Language and Lore*. San Francisco, Chronicle, 1998, p. 93.

²⁶ «Quae est ista, quae progreditur quasi aurora consurgens, pulchra ut luna, electa ut sol, terribilis ut castrorum acies ordinata?» (*Canticum Cantorum*, 6:10)

²⁷ See E. BORNAY, *Las Hijas de Lilith*. Madrid, Cátedra, 1995, p. 166.

²⁸ The painter-poet intends his audience to develop their perceptive acuity and leave appearances behind, just like the sensitive and creative subject must do in order to clutch the hand of the transcending damsel leading him into the enigmatic realm of beauty.

course pointing back at the «hybrid» nature of the Rossettian damsel: the Solomonic substratum indeed allows the artist to soften Astarte's profile and also to refer to the powerful presence of Jane Morris. Both females are drawn towards a meeting point which is later on formalized and verbalized in *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77); in this way, they prove crucial for Rossetti to proceed and progress in his aesthetic discourse.

We must clarify, nonetheless, that the painter-poet turned not only to religious texts to set up this legitimizing structure: as seen before, *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) had been initially planned as a rendering of Venus, but it was through the link with the Babylonian goddess expounded by Lempriere that Rossetti managed to introduce into the double work clearly exotic overtones and a certain thematic variation —apart from a safeguarding impression of cultural distancing. However, classical references were not erased from the cluster of contents poured into *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77), maybe as a way of supporting his own message and multiperspectivist approach by showing a set of articulations with a variety of images and traditions, which reinforced his own perception of beauty as a transcending reality beyond time and space notions. The belt motif, indeed, seems derived from Lempriere who, after establishing a link between Venus and Astarte, explains the following, which somewhat blurs the line between the Roman and Greek deities of love as well:

The power of Venus over the heart was supported and assisted by a celebrated girdle, called zone by the Greeks and *cestus* by the Latins. This mysterious girdle gave beauty, grace and elegance, when worn even by the most deformed: and it excited love and rekindled extinguished flames²⁹.

The motifs adorning Astarte's belt prove useful to settle in equal terms the notions of spiritual and sensuous elevation: this is carried out through a combination of the Messianic overtones stated above and the meaning of the pomegranate and the roses³⁰ in the girdle as symbols of fecundity and love. Both discourses, stitched together, are used to draw a parallel mode of elevation and achievement for both spirit and the flesh, and it is in this way that the corresponding poem identifies the belt as a link between the two main layers of reality. The canvas replicates this pattern visually in terms more sexually explicit by using the belt to highlight Jane-Astarte's breast and pubic area:

²⁹ J. LEMPRIERE, *op. cit.*, 1900, pp. 637-638.

³⁰ Together with the heart in the lower tip of Astarte's belt, the roses refer to the sensual force of beauty and passion. These flowers also reinforces Astarte's connections with Venus/Aphrodite as an echo of the story explaining the creation of the first red rose, linked to love and passionate feelings: it was the Greek deity's blood which dyed a white rose red, possibly as a metaphoric allusion to fertility issues and to the female menstrual cycle. Rossetti had already employed the Semitic equivalent of this legend, which states that the white roses in Eden blushed at Eve's beauty, in the double work *Lady Lilith / Body's Beauty* (1864-1870).

Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon
 Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune:
 And from her neck's inclining flower-stem lean
 Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean
 The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune
 (*Astarte Syriaca*, lines 4-8)

This excerpt also codifies the enticing goddess in terms of a floral image: unlike the woman in *Bocca Baciata* (1858-59), whose robust neck is compared to a tower in the corresponding poem «The Song of the Bower» (1860), Astarte's is an «inclining flower-stem» ending in her gorgeous red lips. In addition, Jane Morris' fetishized tresses would surely make for a magnificent corolla while her green tunic would complete this vegetal image of sensuousness. Nevertheless, in spite of sexual content and the nebulous atmosphere set around her, the hybrid female in *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) is not related to the chaotic or destructive passion expressed in Lady Lilith (1864-70) and *A Sea Spell* (1870-77), since her powers are ultimately codified in terms of a positive erotic abduction towards a harmonious integrating ideal. Astarte is portrayed as a catalyst allowing the sensuous sublime to dwell within the hearts of mortals. Keeping with his playful use of the word «mystery» and practical criticism of appearances, Rossetti reflects upon this idyllic process of erotic seizure through the word «wean», in line 7. This term, which implies leaving something aside, is usually complemented by «away from» or «off». By using the sequence «wean to», Rossetti is actually introducing a pun suggesting that the goddess' influence leads lovers into a trance-like, sublime sexual encounter. The reference to universal structures and celestial spheres is instrumentalized to demonstrate the importance of the goddess' powers and attributes³¹. Furthermore, the links between lovers find a parallel in the fusion between the earthly and the heavenly, expressed through the reference to her girdle in lines 4 to 5. This entails that the ideal conjunction between man and woman would be, in a sense, comparable to the relation between the sun and the moon and the links between the different layers of reality. In all these instances, the communicative node is no other but Astarte, thus confirming the importance of the Rossettian female as *mediatrix*. We should not miss either that the sort of perfection invoked in these alignments implies that none of the conjoined elements can be fully understood without the other³², just as it hap-

³¹ Jane Morris becomes the primeval goddess of love and queen of earth and heaven. Astarte is an ancient pagan Venus and is shown in a narrow vertical format like a saint in a niche, or votive painting. The subject presents a secularization of iconic portraits whose earlier images were Christian. In *Astarte Syriaca* the mystery of love remains, but its object is carnal as well as incarnational. See A.C. FAXON, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³² This tendency towards balance and unity is not so clearly reflected in the relation between the visual and textual components in the double work, since only the second stanza of the sonnet is inscribed in the frame of the oil *Astarte Syriaca*. As a consequence, those who may not be acquainted with the remaining lines of this poetic work will surely get the impression that Rossetti is





pens with the tension of forces explaining the balance found in supreme beauty. We may add that the canvas replicated and reinforced the sense of solemnity in this «interaction and elevation routine» by means of its symmetric tendency and also through the posture of the attendant angels, who look upwards in wonderment: «Torch-bearing³³, her sweet ministers compel/All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea/The witnesses of beauty's face to be» (*Astarte Syriaca*, lines 9-11). The goddess' assistants are also expected to pervade the senses of divine and mortal beings alike so that they may leave themselves go in the safe wings of amorous thrill. The expression «all thrones of light beyond the sky and sea» (l. 10) stresses the positive meaning of the whole process and confirms Astarte's ability to transcend heaven and earth so that she may exert her influence whenever necessary. The scene may give us the impression of finding ourselves in an oniric, sensuous realm whose monumental symmetry and sense of stability is clearly permeated by powerful undulating lines filled with rhythm. As if in the midst of a smoky fumarole, *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) lacks a definite setting that might distract us from contemplating the goddess, who bears something of a «Trinitarian relation» with her subordinate attendants inasmuch as their silhouettes seem mere projections of the central figure instead of individual beings³⁴. In *Las Hijas de Lilith*, Bornay states that «the opening in the background together with the use of torchlights suggests that Astarte finds herself in the Underworld»³⁵. But, if we have a closer look to the canvas, we may perceive that it does not contain any point of reference to Hades —apart from its dark setting, which does not always point at «evilness» in an unequivocal manner. There is no gap or opening in the background, either, but just a grey cloud partly over the unusual eclipse displayed in which the sun conceals one half of the moon from our view³⁶. Rossetti's main intention is to make the audience

simply talking about the value of Astarte's ministers and the transcendent character of her powers. Besides, without the descriptive account in the first stanza, the second part of the poem grows more cryptic and generic. Readers would also miss the aforementioned references to the Pythagorean music of the spheres and the reflection of universal perfection in the sexual junction sanctified by this deity. The unity pointed out by the disposition of the word «mystery» and the sequence «betwixt the sun and the moon» in the sonnet is also lost.

³³ The winged nature of their carriers, together with the message of passion codified in the fire-lit torches, makes us aware of Astarte's far-reaching powers, too.

³⁴ The same pattern was already employed in *La Bella Mano* (1875-77). Rossetti's use of forms and lighting in *Astarte Syriaca* almost deceives our sight in the sense that these two angels seem to stem out from Astarte's back, as if they were two minor projections of her.

³⁵ E. BORNAY, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

³⁶ This fact calls into question the notion of generic equality and complementation involved in amorous exchanges. Although the traces of fecundity displayed by the eight-tip star stand before the sun, we may notice as well that the position of both universal bodies seem to point at the notions of an active masculine profile and a passive female one. Nonetheless, this does not invalidate the fact that both elements are of course indispensable in the process involved. Another reason explaining the superimposed position of the sun would be that, in case Rossetti had outlined the silhouette of both astral bodies, the resulting image would have proved quite «explicitly vaginal». We

focus on the goddess' portrait without taking into account many surrounding details that may end up distracting us. The apparent opening mentioned in the quote is in fact an optical effect created by the wings of Astarte's attendants.

Despite her statuary mien in the painting, the painter-poet managed to imprint a trace of movement in the goddess' profile by introducing a successful optical effect by means of which she seems to step towards the foreground, as if about to get out of the physical space defined by the canvas. This sensation holds upon the advanced position of her left thigh, the use of curvaceous lines and the triangle described by the apparently whimsical pleats in the garments of the subordinate angels. The latter resource also provides a certain impression of depth to the area that the deity is standing on. This set of effects partly justifies Rossetti's use of chiaroscuro and chromatic minimalism in the visual rendition. Not even the planetary conjunction in the background can match Astarte's prominence; consequently, it functions as a mystic aureole crowning her sovereign presence. This could be understood as another example of the use of artistic elements related to sacred art within a pagan context, in an attempt to elevate and dignify the notion of sexual intercourse, a taboo to mainstream Victorians. The joint influence of the bright astral bodies crowning this deity and the bewitching, gypsy-like beauty of her cinnamon-coloured skin make us catch a direct glimpse of her melancholic gaze and tantalizing lips: «That face, of Love's all-penetrative spell/Amulet, talisman and oracle/Betwixt the sun and the moon a mystery» (*Astarte Syriaca*, lines 12-14). The ending lines of the sonnet identify the concept of «mystery» also with the spell-binding powers of Astarte, which no will in heaven or upon earth may be able to resist. To illustrate this, Rossetti employs the phrase «penetrative spell», which could be read more aseptically or rather as an explicit reference to the goddess' influence upon sexual encounters, which could be analyzed in terms of an erotic rapture possessing the bodies of her devotees. We may add that the adjective «penetrative» is being used only to depict how Astarte's intercession acts, so that, in our view, it does not masculinize her profile. In other words, this would set a parallel Swinburne's androgynous femme fatale type only if we might read the adjective in the clichéd, monolithic terms of the «active»/«passive» distinction in respect to sexual behaviour. Rossetti reflects upon the powers leading to the sexual encounter rather than depict how it develops. This idea is finally supported by the sequence «amulet, talisman and oracle», which may be considered to sum up the goddess' attributions: as an oracle, she can be invoked in order to supervise sexual communication, so that it takes place in an effective manner. As an «amulet» or «talisman», she proves an icon propitiating erotic entrancement and a subsequent sexual encounter. After this totalizing reprise, the sonnet closes with the same image that it started with: a circular, unifying pattern of perfection. Thus, the double work *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-

must also call our readers' attention upon the chromatic similarity between the fires in the flanking torches of passion and the reddish star of fertility over Astarte's head.



77) confirms itself as a praising echo of the harmonic potential and legitimate nature of sexual intercourse —very much in the likes of *La Bella Mano* (1875-77). Furthermore, the double work also fronts biology (i.e. fecundity) as the element consecrating this balanced unity of two.

3. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the analysis carried out and the data unveiled in the present paper, we may assert that the description of the goddess in *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77) as an evil subject or, more precisely, as a representation of the Babylonian harlot matches neither the set of contents poured into the double work nor the aesthetic and programmatic aims that it pursues. In our view, while these evaluations filtered through negativity are sometimes due to connotative impressions, there are some other times that they mainly hold upon manipulative processes to serve external discourses which do not take into account the double work itself and its main motivations. To this we could add critical disregard of the pictorial and poetic nature of many works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which has led to partial conclusions and, most importantly, biased constructions about the female profiles in them. We hope our essay may contribute to a better understanding of Astarte's significance as an icon of deified sexual intercourse in this particular work and of the Rossettian woman in general within the artistic corpus under evaluation.

