‘More Stunning Than Can Decently Be Expressed’:
Desire and Control in the Stunners of Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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**Essay Parameters:** This essay was written for a senior-level course in the theoretical framework of art historical inquiry. The assignment was to choose an art historical topic with which we already had familiarity and then to apply one or more theories of the great art historians – Winckelmann, Vasari, Hegel, Wölfflin, Schapiro, Derrida, Panofsky, Bann, Bal & Bryson, Foucault, Benjamin, Butler, Jones, etc. – to that topic in order to arrive at new perspectives and interesting insights regarding the topic.
I. Introduction

Inevitably sparking an “electric shock of beauty”\textsuperscript{1} in the eyes and body of the beholder, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s shamelessly sensual ‘stunners’ simultaneously astonished, horrified, and enchanted viewers. Rossetti’s ‘stunners’ emerged in his oeuvre in the period around the death of his wife and early muse Elizabeth Siddall in 1862, at which time the artist began to nearly exclusively paint close-up portraits of fleshly feminine beauties characterized by a “columnar neck, thick, sensuous lips, heavy mantle of hair, well-defined brow and jaw line,”\textsuperscript{2} and richly textured robes and bejeweled accessories.

This essay will examine issues of Victorian feminine typology, desire, and framing of Rossetti’s ‘stunners’ through the theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault’s “The Repressive Hypothesis” and Amelia Jones’ “‘Every Man Knows Where and How Beauty Gives Him Pleasure’: Beauty Discourse and the Logic of Aesthetics.” Specifically, it will analyze the way in which Rossetti’s ‘stunners’ discursively produce or engage in the dichotomous Victorian conception of female sexuality that worked to regulate sexuality through a juxtaposition of the ideal, embodied in the normative, chaste, etherealized Christian woman, versus the deviant, characterized as sexually assertive, extra-marital, and even dangerous to society. This essay will then address the ambiguous moral meaning Rossetti attached to the various types of ‘stunners’ through their operation through desire, precluding the traditional Kantian approach to aesthetic theory. Finally, taking cue from Amelia Jones, this essay will examine how Rossetti simultaneously

granted Victorian viewers access to forbidden fantasy in the paintings of ‘stunners’ while at the same time retaining the status of high art for the paintings by tempering their depictions of powerful, non-normative female sexuality through the devices of framing and objectification.

II. Historiography and Theoretical Intervention

The complex nature of female sexuality within Rossetti’s oeuvre has inspired a rich historiographic tradition on the topic at hand. In general, there are two major conceptual focuses on which scholars have heretofore concentrated: Rossetti’s engagement with discursive regulation of female sexuality in *Found*, and the typology and striking sensuality of Rossetti’s ‘stunners.’ The former historiographic category has received particular attention from Linda Nochlin in her 1978 essay called “Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman.” Nochlin’s essay examines Rossetti’s painting *Found* from three major angles: through Victorian discursive regulation of sexuality, in comparison with William Holman Hunt’s painting *The Awakening Conscience*, and through the lens of Rossetti’s personal biography. Nochlin proposes that *Found* prescribes to the contemporary artistic conventions of representation of the fallen woman and that the painting reveals the ‘ideological assumptions’ Rossetti held regarding female sexuality. She also suggests that the despair of the prostitute in *Found* might represent Rossetti’s own sense of disillusionment and despair at the end of his career, himself having once made an analogy of the artist and the whore in a letter to the poet Algernon Charles
Swinburne.³

Similar to Nochlin, Lynn Nead also explores the Foucauldian discursive definition of Victorian female sexuality in her 1984 essay entitled “The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting.” Nead explains that Victorian females were ideally urged to be sexually passive through moralizing paintings emphasizing the cult of domesticity, including George Elgar Hick’s *Woman’s Mission* series and *The Sinews of Old England*.⁴ Nead also addresses the way in which the threat that assertive female sexuality and prostitution posed to the regulated social order was discursively disarmed through a mythology in which prostitutes were pitied because of the desperation, feelings of regret, alcoholism, and ultimate tragedy of suicide they experienced. Nead suggests that Rossetti’s *Found* was an attempt on the part of the artist to discursively engage with this mythology of the fallen woman, ultimately aiming to encourage viewers to sympathize with and seek to save the Magdalen.

The other historiographic trend, being the examination of typology and sensuality of Rossetti’s ‘stunners,’ usually takes place within books of more general content. Jan Marsh’s 1987 *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, for example, labels and briefly describes the common types of women featured in Pre-Raphaelite paintings at large. Specifically, Marsh cites “bohemians, stunners, holy virgins, nubile maidens, doves, mothers, fallen Magdalens, medieval damozels, sorceresses, allegories, icons, and pale

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ladies of death.”\(^5\) Crucially, Marsh identifies three types within the array of Rossettian ‘stunners’ that will be examined in this essay through discursive theory: “first is the fair, demure, modest maiden with her innocent attractions; the second is the proud golden beauty who might borrow a term from later ‘sex goddesses’; and the third is the dark, enigmatic siren or \textit{femme fatale}.\(^6\)

Susan Casteras’ 1987 \textit{Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art} is helpful in its analysis of the sensual appeal of Rossetti’s ‘stunners.’ Casteras offers insight into the new standards of womanly beauty put forth by Rossetti’s ‘stunners,’ as well as the Pre-Raphaelites’ general interest in the concept of the \textit{femme fatale}.\(^7\)

Also enlightening is Elizabeth Prettejohn’s essay “Women with floral adjuncts: Rossetti’s New Style,” published in an exhibition catalogue for the “Dante Gabriel Rossetti” exhibit at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, and the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, in 2003. Prettejohn traces the influence of sensual Venetian paintings, such as those by Titian, on Rossetti’s ‘stunners’ in the 1860s and discusses the diversification of his style in the 1870s.\(^8\)

Finally, Griselda Pollock’s essays “Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elizabeth Siddall” and “Woman as Sign: Psychoanalytic Readings” were published in her 1988 book \textit{Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art}. In the first essay, Pollock highlights male hegemony in Rossetti’s art through an exploration of “woman’s function as sign securing

\(^{6}\) Marsh 27-28.
\(^{7}\) Casteras 166-171.
\(^{8}\) Prettejohn 57-58.
the privileged status for Rossetti in and through such polarizing formulations as male/female, artist/model, tutor/pupil, age/youth, and so forth.”

9 Her second essay, “Woman as Sign: Psychoanalytic Readings,” applies Freudian theory to Rossetti’s ‘stunners.’ Specifically, Pollock claims that Rossetti’s femmes fatales incite fear of castration in the male viewer, producing an anxiety about loss of the pre-Oedipal mother. Pollock also suggests that the viewer attains pleasure in beholding Rossetti’s femme fatale paintings through the constant oscillation between a sense of threat and a sense of desire.”

The following essay is greatly indebted to the aforementioned historiography associated with discursive regulation of female sexuality in Found and contemporary moral paintings, Pre-Raphaelite typologies of women, and the implications of the sensuality of Rossetti’s ‘stunners.’ This essay seeks to understand how Rossetti’s broader oeuvre prescribed to and participated in the Victorian discursive regulation of sex; how desire operated within the paintings of his ‘stunners;’ and how paintings of the ‘stunners’ work to frame and control female sexuality. Specifically, these objectives will be approached through an application of Foucauldian and Jonesian theory to several paintings of ‘stunners’ by Rossetti: the “fair, demure, modest maiden” in The Damsel of the Sanct Grael, the “femme fatale” in A Sea-Spell, the “golden… sex goddesses” in Fair Rosamund and Monna Pomona, and the “nubile maiden” in Girl at a Lattice.


10 Barzman 37.

III. Michel Foucault’s Discursive Theory

In “The Repressive Hypothesis,” Michel Foucault claims that members of the European and American (upper) middle class experienced multiple discursive forms, including literature, art, institutional structure, religion, medical jargon, and everyday language use, that worked to control societal norms of sexuality in the Victorian era. Specifically, Victorian discourse inherently structured sexuality into a norm, characterized as heterosexual, married, adult, pro-creative sex, versus a transgression of that norm, characterized by sexual acts or proclivities that stray outside the norm in any way.

Within the ‘good’ or culturally sanctioned standards of sexuality, women had further regulations imposed on them; medical jargon, conduct books, and religious practices, amongst other things, discursively created expectations of female chastity, sexual passivity, submission, and disinterest in corporal pleasure.¹²

The manifold ways in which sexuality was talked about, conceptualized, and categorized in the Victorian era worked as a means of sexual regulation for social control and stability. Not by force but by subconscious, discursively-imposed binary oppositions between the licit/illicit, chaste/impure, Madonna/Magdalen, and domestic angel/fallen woman, which subsumed all non-normative sexual heterogeneities into the latter negative categories, women were urged toward the former components of these binary pairs. Any deviancy was viewed as flawed and in need of serious reform, both for the wellbeing of the deviant individual and to divest the deviant individual of his or her threat against stable moral society.¹³

¹² Nead 26.
¹³ Michel Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” ed. Paul Rabinow, The
Rossetti’s only paintings to explicitly regulate female sexuality are the already much-analyzed oil painting *Found* (Figure 1), begun in 1854 but never finished, and the 1864 watercolor *The Gate of Memory* (Figure 2). *Found* depicts a moment of reunion between a male countryside peasant and the lover from his youth, who has since turned to prostitution out of desperation to make a living in the city. Drawing upon the popular Victorian mythology of the prostitute, Rossetti includes symbols of the dangerous position of the prostitute: a bridge in the background hints at her likely fate of suicide, while the ensnared white calf represents the helplessness and endangered purity of the woman in the flesh market of the city. The *Gates of Memory* depicts a prostitute peering down an alley towards a group of children and a flower-crowned girl, which make her regretful because they remind her of the youthful purity and innocence she has lost forever.

Outside of these two isolated examples, however, Rossetti did not often paint morality scenes that specifically addressed issues of prostitution, chastity, and sexual ethics. It is reasonable to say that *Found* and *The Gates of Memory* are anomalous in the scope of Rossetti’s oeuvre, and many scholars have convincingly argued that these were his only isolated attempts at painting conventional scenes of the mythology of the prostitute. The limited instances in which Rossetti painted in this manner, however, imply that it may be helpful to instead turn our attention to the artist’s more subtle engagement with the Victorian dichotomous model of female sexuality that is manifest in his far more common painting subjects of the 1860s-1870s: the ‘stunners.’

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14 Nochlin 150.
15 Nochlin 148.
16 Nochlin 139-153; Nead 27-36.
Foucauldian discursive regulation will now be explored through an analysis of the ideal woman in *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* and the deviant, depicted in various incarnations in *A Sea-Spell*, *Fair Rosamund*, and *Monna Pomona*.

**IV. The Angel: Discursive Formulation of Ideal Female Sexuality**

Rossetti’s painting *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* (Figure 3) discursively imposes an ideal vision of woman toward which it was implied Victorian Christian women ought to have aspired. In this painting, there is a central female figure who has a sensual and deeply soulful beauty: her body is robed, but her thick, white neck protrudes out to support a head of loose red hair and full red lips. While the damsel in Rossetti’s painting does not necessarily have the physical traits we would expect to find in a traditional Christian painting of a pure, good woman, she seems innocently unconscious of her own beauty and despite her sensuality she retains a certain chasteness. The damsel’s qualities of purity and sexual disinterest are suggested through her white, almost etherealized skin; her modest cloak that heavily drapes her body to hide its curves and de-emphasize its shape by merging it with the space behind and around her; the soft, non-challenging, quietly self-contained nature of her side-focused gaze; and the cool light and muted color scheme that bathe the composition. The primarily non-sexual emphasis of this damsel, then, seems to be very much in alignment with the contemporary Victorian medical jargon, conduct books, and moralizing paintings that created expectations of passive, chaste, disinterested female sexuality safely contained within the procreative duties of the
Further emphasizing the connection between ideal female purity and Christian duty, *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* has religious signification. The damsel assumes the traditional Christian gesture of the two raised fingers indicating a blessing. The woman’s head and gaze are turned slightly away from the viewer; because we cannot see her surroundings or the object of her mystic gaze, we can determine only that she is entranced in some spiritual experience. A white dove hovers just behind the woman with wings outstretched in such a way that viewers at first have difficulty determining whether these are in fact the wings of the bird or if they might belong to angelic woman instead. The dove clasps what is perhaps an incense vessel in its beak; as a well-known Christian symbol of innocence and peace, the bird affirms the damsel’s association with benevolent cosmic power. The damsel also holds in her hands the chalice of the Holy Grail, a symbol of the mysterious Christian power of salvation. In sum, the Christian symbols in *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* unite natural beauty, bodily purity, and sexual passivity with spiritual salvation and fulfillment. Rossetti’s damsel discursively reinforces the highest ideal of the female; she is the perfect angel who, when placed in the comfortable middle class home, stands as an exemplar to be admired and mimicked by Victorian women.

V. The Enchantress and the Mistress: Formulating Deviant Female Sexuality

Although Rossetti was admired for his paintings of holy women, far more common in his array of ‘stunners’ are female characters who discursively produce Victorian female

17 Nead 26.
sexual norms throughout their representation of deviancy. Rossetti’s sexual deviants, amongst his most dazzling painted women, are portrayed as *femmes fatales* or as mistresses and harlots. Both of these types of deviants will be examined, as will the possibility of a hierarchy of deviancy associated with these two types.

The spiritualized *Damsel of the Sanct Grael* and the oppositional alluring, flower-crowned siren in *A Sea-Spell* (Figure 4) were both painted after the model, Alexa Wilding, and so share many of the same qualities of beauty: swollen lips, loose and silky hair, thick exposed neck, and bright eyes turned away from the viewer. Despite these shared qualities, however, Jennifer Lee has noted Wilding’s versatility: “the group of works in which she figures prominently includes all types of his fantastic visions of femininity – both the idealistic and the nightmare, the positive and the negative.”

Rossetti’s deeply contrasting conceptualizations of Wilding in *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* and *A Sea-Spell*, then, will help to determine how he may have been influenced by and participated in the spreading of Victorian sexual norms.

As the siren of *A Sea-Spell*, for example, much more of Wilding’s body is exposed than it was in her depiction as the damsel. Rather than the heavy, amorphous cloak worn by the damsel, a sheer, shimmering garment is all that covers the siren’s radiant, voluptuous figure, failing to conceal her décolletage, shoulders, and arms.

Despite the inviting sensuality of the siren in *A Sea-Spell*, however, certain aspects of this painting connote dark undertones and even a threat of peril associated with the obviously sensual female character. As Susan Casteras has noted, Rossetti painted a

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number of *femmes fatales*, like this siren, who seem to “communicate, with their mystical silence, half-closed eyes, sensuous mouths, and mesmerized stares, a sense of magnetism, expectancy, and even potential danger.”\(^{19}\) For example, in the Greek mythological tradition, the siren’s song ensnares the hearts of passing sailors so that the sailors stray from their course and meet their deaths on rocky reefs. The title *A Sea-Spell* immediately connects this painting with the pagan mythical sea tradition of the siren, so this siren’s gentle plucking of the strings of the lute, rather like a spider’s web, must possess the power to bewitch and lead astray male passersby. The “dazed… longing”\(^{20}\) white seabird above the siren, a perfect foil to the dove about the woman in *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael*, might represent the distraction and insatiable yearning that men will suffer should they come too close. David Sonstroem notes that “in an especially sinister touch Rossetti chose for some of the foliage that of the Venus Fly Trap,“\(^{21}\) a plant infamous for the way it lures and captures insects passing idly by. Another symbol in this painting is that of the apple tree behind the siren. This is likely a reference to the tempting of ‘innocent’ Adam by Eve in the Garden of Eden, the original seducer of man who would bring about the suffering of mankind. These symbolic dimensions of *A Sea-Spell* combine to convey a perilous power located in the frank sensual and corporal appeal of the siren; this is articulated particularly well by art critic Théodore Duret:

> This creature, a kind of sibyl, siren, or melusine, has none of the delicate graces of woman; she is nonetheless very living and, when one has gazed at her for some time, she becomes unforgettable; she exercises a kind of fascination, but mixed with inquietude; one is afraid to come too close to

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\(^{19}\) Casteras 167.


\(^{21}\) Sonstroem 158.
her, one fears that if she took you by the arms, she would make your bones crack.  

Ultimately, Rossetti’s *femmes fatales*, as illustrated by the siren in *A Sea-Spell*, discursively label overt and powerful female sensuality as inappropriate, non-Christian, and bearing deleterious implications for men. Even if the *femme fatale* has not yet crossed the threshold of immoral sexual action, Rossetti gives viewers fair warning of the dangerous threat she poses to the upstanding moral character and even life of the man who transgresses female sexual propriety.

Rossetti’s paintings of mistress or harlot-type ‘stunners’ also discursively arranged the paradigm of Victorian female sexuality into a binary opposition between the chaste ideal and the immoral deviant. The mistress-stunner, or “proud golden… ‘sex [goddess],’” as Jan Marsh has called her, was the most sensually indulgent and morally provoking type of ‘stunner’ painted by Rossetti.  

In formal terms, the mistress-stunner is often brought up close to the foreground of the canvas and painted on a larger scale than were the other ‘stunners.’ The bare neck, chest, and arms of the mistress figure standardly play prominently into her depiction, and she is often very richly adorned with flowers, jewelry, combs, feathers, and sumptuous fabrics. In iconographic terms, the mistress-stunner often contains direct allusions to adultery, promiscuity, and sexual ripeness in the painting’s title and symbolism, serving thus as a flagrant transgression of the Victorian female sexual ideal.

Rossetti’s painting of *Fair Rosamund* (Figure 5) of 1861, for example, depicts the radiant Rosamund Clifford, mistress to King Henry II in the twelfth century.  

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22 Théodore Duret, qtd. in Pretttejohn 106.
Henry II famously “had a house constructed for her in a maze at Woodstock near Oxford… [and] no one might visit her there except the king.” The red string tied to a golden rose on the wall in front of Rosamund represents the device used by the king to find the right path into the maze to find his lover, intentionally retractable to protect Rosamund from the wrath of his jealous wife, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. Rosamund is pictured here waiting for the king’s visit, anxious, flushed, and feverish. The crowned heart, indicative of the love King Henry II has for Rosamund and his infidelity to Eleanor, and the rose motif, stemming from both Rosamund’s name and its sexual implications, appear throughout the painting.

Another example of the mistress-stunner, to be but briefly mentioned, is Rossetti’s 1864 painting *Monna Pomona* (Figure 6). This painting is unabashedly spilling over with sexual symbolism: the woman’s green dress falls away to show lacy undergarments beneath; golden necklaces emphasize the swollenness and, some would say, phallic nature of her neck; brown-edged white roses in the upper right corner signify the decay of purity, while fresh scarlet roses are scattered suggestively over the mistress-stunner’s lap; and an apple in her hand possibly alludes to the temptation of man in the Garden of Eden. Furthermore, the face of this mistress-stunner is marked with a languid, distracted expression, as if she is dreaming of some recent or soon to come pleasure.

Ultimately, the opposition of female figures in *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* and *A Sea-Spell, Fair Rosamund*, and *Monna Pomona* worked discursively to organize and regulate Victorian female sexuality of the middle class. As Nancy Armstrong has

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25 Prettejohn 185.
[The nineteenth century] concentrated on conflicts within the female character, between her innate desires and the role she was destined to occupy… The domestic woman and her demonic ‘other’ posed a psychological opposition. In political terms, however, monster and angel worked discursively as a team to suppress other notions of sexuality… that did not adhere to the ideal of legitimate monogamy.26

The opposition between Rossetti’s deviant *femmes fatales* and mistress-stunners and the ideal *Damsel of the Sanct Grael* represent quite literally this opposition between the “monster and an angel” and leave no categorical identity outside these entities for women to take on. The angel in *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* is the ideal fusion of natural beauty, chastity, passivity, and Christian duty; as such she is presented as the highest ideal and she is associated with the power of salvation. The siren monster and mistress-stunners in *A Sea-Spell, Fair Rosamund,* and *Monna Pomona,* too, are naturally beautiful women, but their exposed, sexualized bodies and associations with infidelity pose serious problems for Victorian sexual ethics.

In some sense, it might be possible to identify a hierarchy of deviancy within the paintings thus far examined. Whereas *A Sea-Spell* provides explicit warning signs about the inherent peril in the tempting sensuality of a woman, the radiant mistresses of *Fair Rosamund* and *Monna Pomona* indulge more explicitly the exploration of deviant female sexuality. The startling boldness of their sexual content, even to modern viewers who think of themselves as living far outside the moral strictures imposed in the Victorian era, is made even bolder through the lack of symbolic danger embedded within them, as was the case in the *femme fatale* picture. As such the mistress-stunner paintings seem to be

the ‘most’ deviant on the spectrum of Victorian female sexual norms, meaning they seem to wantonly transgress rules of propriety even more so than the *femmes fatales* because they are not warnings about the danger of temptation so much as examples of glowing, confident women who have already fallen to temptation and flouted societal norms.

VI. Ambiguity and Desire in Rossetti’s ‘Stunners’

Despite the recognizable division between licit and illicit sexuality in Rossetti’s ‘stunner’ paintings, the nature of the division is not necessarily moralizing in its message. Whereas Rossetti’s unusual paintings *Found* and *The Gates of Memory* explicitly condemn deviant sexuality in the sympathetic way that was conventional amongst contemporary artists, his ‘stunners’ contain far more ambiguous dimensions of meaning. In contrast to his peers, Rossetti seems to have generally made fewer judgments about female sexual propriety because even where he depicted the dangerous consequences of deviancy, such as *A Sea-Spell*, he still presented the experience of deviancy as seriously desirable. As Jan Marsh has remarked, “womanhood is almost never shown as contemptible or base, and the images of the ensnaring sorceress are as idealized and beautiful as those of the courtly lady.”

So in spite of the fact that Rossetti’s *femmes fatales* and mistress-stunners are meant to define and regulate Victorian female sexual norms through their depiction of the negativity of transgression of norms, they still elicit erotic response on behalf of the viewers of the paintings. Paradoxically, the very act of regulating and prohibiting aspects

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27 Marsh 109.
of sexuality in these paintings actually creates points of pleasure. This concept is best expressed in Foucauldian terms:

The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace. There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled; but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure... Power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch. Pleasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered.28

The consequence of the illicit erotic bent of Rossetti’s ‘stunner’ paintings, emerging at points of forbidden, deviant sexuality, seems to have been the debate about whether they could rightfully retain the status of high art with regard to aesthetic theory and contemporary reception. Amelia Jones explains that traditional Kantian aesthetics, originally recorded in his Critique of Judgment, and the likely Victorian consensus maintained that the art critic must suppress and transcend his personal tastes and desires in order to see purely and objectively the work of art and to experience the true beauty emanating freely forth from the artwork.29 It is easy to imagine the Kantian art critic gazing upon The Damsel of the Sanct Grael with approval; it seems possible to recognize her ethereal beauty in a non-sexual way, and as such this painting could have been considered tolerable and even ideal from the Kantian perspective. But to gaze upon one of Rossetti’s mistress-stunners and remain totally divorced from her erotic implications seems difficult, perhaps even impossible.

Such may have indeed been the case, for contemporary reactions to Rossetti’s

28 Foucault 323-324.
mistress-stunner paintings seem to have been divided along Kantian lines. Some viewers disapproved of the blatant sexuality and sought to resist its temptation in the name of high art. When William Holman Hunt saw Rossetti’s *Venus Verticordia*, for example, he remarked:

I will not scruple to say that it impresses me as very remarkable in power of execution – but still more remarkable for gross sensuality of a revolting kind peculiar to foreign prints… I would not speak so unreservedly of it were it not that I see Rossetti is advocating as a principle the mere gratification of the eye and if any passion at all – the animal passion to be the aim of art…  

Here, Hunt criticizes the slippage between “picture and viewer [designed] to elicit a response more intense than that normally considered appropriate to high art,” even going so far as to compare *Venus Verticordia* to foreign pornographic prints. And yet others, such as Rossetti’s friend Algernon Charles Swinburne, reacted positively to Rossetti’s ‘stunners,’ feeling them to be “more stunning than can decently be expressed” and freely allowing their desire to exercise itself as part of the full experience of the paintings.

**VII. Framing to Control Female Sexuality**

We have now examined the notion that Rossetti discursively operates in and on the Victorian binary conceptualization of female sexuality by depicting either ideal chaste maidens or confident, sensual *femmes fatales* and mistress-stunners. A great deal of controversy initially surrounded Rossetti’s paintings of women who fell into the latter category, but as drastically deviant the sexually-charged and desirable mistress-stunners

30 William Holman Hunt, qtd. in Prettejohn 77-78.
31 Prettejohn 77-78.
32 Algernon Charles Swinburne, qtd. in Spencer-Longhurst 36.
were, the paintings of them ultimately won out as great examples of high art and feminine beauty rather than as pornography. It seems that an application of Amelia Jones’ theory of framing might help to explain how it is that the Victorians were ultimately able to tolerate the very female figures they believed were threatening to destroy their society.

In “‘Every Man Knows Where and How Beauty Gives Him Pleasure’: Beauty Discourse and the Logic of Aesthetics,” Jones examines François Boucher’s 1751 painting called the Toilet of Venus. The Toilet of Venus is a sensual, highly-ornate painting of the nude Madame de Pompadour. Jones notes that Boucher’s depiction of the woman – “as paradigm of the female nude – works to contain just the uncontrollable erotic frisson that she invokes.”33 Like Boucher’s Toilet of Venus, although Rossetti’s ‘stunners’ may be “deified and given devastating potency through the very sexual power that Kant’s aesthetics labors to contain” they are also “disempowered as… beautiful object[s].”34 The powerful, confident, sexually-deviant ‘stunners’ on Rossetti’s canvases who threaten to upturn male discursive control are objectified, reduced to mere commodities to be consumed by the male gaze and traded by males in the public art market. Furthermore, the ‘stunners’ are generally framed in the foreground, literally held back from full view, agency, and freedom by the male painter and the male viewer. Not only does framing prevent actual access to this illicit focus of our desire, but it also precludes the societal upheaval that would come from it:

This alluring woman [stunner] is ultimately unattainable, for the wall, bower, or toilette table that often literally holds her back reinforces the strange paradox of her being both sexy and yet soulful, desirable, and inaccessible. These women are being held back from perhaps

33 Jones 382.
34 Jones 383.
unleashing a fearful sexuality.\textsuperscript{35}

It is interesting to note that Rossetti’s placement and extent of framing corresponds with the degree to which the given painting represents Victorian sexual deviancy. Depictions of ideal women and even enchantresses warning against temptation, for instance, are not resolutely encased in their compositions because they are not so much of a threat. In \textit{The Damsel of the Sanct Grael}, the ideal woman is only loosely framed by unfixed, ephemeral leafy vines positioned very low down in the foreground. The close-up depictions of mistress-stunners such as \textit{Fair Rosamund} and \textit{Bocca Baciata} (Figure 7), contrastingly, are solidly architecturally enframed by walls of some sort that span across the foreground in front of the women, thereby granting only very limited access to these women who seriously transgress Victorian sexual norm of marital, procreative sexuality.

Even more solidly framed than the mistress-stunners is \textit{Girl at a Lattice} (Figure 8), painted by Rossetti in 1862. In this painting, an adolescent girl struggles to catch a downward glance out of a window. The girl may very well represent what Marsh has named the “nubile maiden;” perhaps she is even a prefiguration of the archetypal mistress-stunner, having in common loose hair, flowers, and a red coral necklace.\textsuperscript{36} Perhaps this girl is particularly heavily framed, bound on all four sides by unyielding architecture, because of her youth and the artist’s perceived need to reign in the girl’s budding sexuality until such a time that it is appropriate to reveal it. Although the mistress-stunner and the sexualized child are both transgressions of Victorian sexual

\textsuperscript{35} Casteras 167.  
\textsuperscript{36} Marsh 5.
standards and homogenized into the term ‘deviant,’ the latter is the more extreme form of deviancy and thus in need of greater control.

In general this pattern of correspondence between sexual deviancy and framing seems to hold true, although there are exceptions to the rule. *Monna Pomona,* for example, is one of the more sexually forward mistress-stunners of Rossetti’s oeuvre, yet she lacks an articulated frame of architecture or natural foliage. Fascinatingly, even for some ‘modern’ viewers of the relatively sexually-liberated age of today feel uncomfortable when looking at *Monna Pomona;* she is almost too confident, too ‘easy,’ and too uncontrolled for us to safely enjoy. On the other hand, the painting of this mistress-stunner is cropped in such a way that only her most sexualized body features are included: face, neck, chest, fingers, torso, and lap. Perhaps *Monna Pomona* works less through framing than it does through objectification; the mistress-stunner’s sexual body is offered to the penetrating male gaze for his pleasure and then freely bought and sold on the market, paradoxically not unlike the plight of the female subject in *Found* that Rossetti sought to remedy.

**VIII. Conclusion**

This study has endeavored to evaluate the discursive regulation, operation of desire, and use of framing in Rossetti’s ‘stunners.’ While many scholars had already identified a general typology into which Pre-Raphaelite artists at large and Rossetti in particular have tended to cast their painted female figures, this essay sought to understand how Rossettiian ‘stunner’ typology regulated female sexual discourse. It seems that Rossetti set up a clear binary model in which the ideal, sexually passive angel opposes the
indulgently sensual, sexually assertive, and either tempting or adulterous woman.

Although Rossetti operated within and on Victorian sexual norms through this binary model, this does not mean that he blindly conformed to ‘appropriate’ attitudes about female sexuality. In fact, Rossetti attaches ambiguous meaning and blatant desirability even to the sexually deviant female, which can perhaps be interpreted through the Foucauldian notion of the attachment of pleasure to the deviant through the very process of defining and condemning transgression.

The powerful operation of desire in the experience of Rossetti’s ‘stunner’ paintings, both ideal and deviant ‘stunners’ alike, leaves little room for the Kantian aesthetic approach and instead requires Victorian audiences and viewers of today to indulge their fantasies in this arena. What ultimately makes this indulgence of pleasure acceptable, even in the stricter sexual regulatory framework of the Victorian era, is the disempowerment of the sensual female ‘stunners’ through objectification into art-objects to be consumed and traded amongst men and through the framing of ‘stunners’ to provide appropriate levels of restraint and symbolic control of the women who threaten to upturn Victorian patriarchal regulation.

In the end, it seems that Rossetti stands out as master largely because of his ability to allow viewers to indulge in their fantasies of temptation and the love affair while simultaneously providing cues in the form of the binary female sexual paradigm, symbolism of danger, disempowerment through commodification, and varied levels of framing to moderate these fantasies and keep them in the realm of the blissful imaginary. Whereas Rossetti’s women are for the poet Swinburne more sensually pleasing “than can decently be expressed” in his artistic medium of words, it was Rossetti’s mastery of the
techniques and devices of visual art that allowed him to transcend indecency to create a space in which Victorians could safely indulge in their desires without threat of the catastrophic social upheaval that they believed would result were viewers to actually physically act on these desires.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{37} Algernon Charles Swinburne, qtd. in Spencer-Longhurst 36.
IX. Images

Figure 1: Found

Figure 2: The Gates of Memory

Figure 3: *Damsel of the Sanct Grael*

Figure 5: *Fair Rosamund*  

Figure 7: *Bocca Baciata*

Bibliography


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