ABSTRACT

CHANGING THE VICTORIAN HABIT LOOP: THE BODY IN THE POETRY AND PAINTING OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND WILLIAM MORRIS

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Founded in England in 1848, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood rebelled against Victorian artistic convention and sought to recapture a medieval style of painting believed by its members to have existed before Raphael. That style was a significant departure from the prevailing Royal Academy style, however, and—as many critics note—ahead of its time. Among the Pre-Raphaelites, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris were unique for their creative output as both poets and painters. This dissertation examines the representation of the body in some poems and paintings by Rossetti and Morris and analyzes the impact of the Pre-Raphaelites on habits of thinking about the body.

The mainstream Victorian habit of thinking about the (especially female) body was generally to respond negatively: the body was dirty, shameful, sinful, and not a topic for polite society. Victorian responses to the body—in the flesh or represented—tend to be restrictive, moralistic, and didactic. Using recent discoveries in the study of habit formation and habit change, this dissertation analyzes how the poems and paintings of Rossetti and Morris keep what one researcher calls the same cues and rewards but substitute a different routine in the habit loop. That different routine enables thinking about the body in more positive ways: the Pre-Raphaelite body can be seen as natural, active, dynamic, and worth seeing as it is.

Tracing how the body is represented in the poems and paintings of Rossetti and Morris as well as in their creative context, this dissertation establishes seven categories for describing the representation of the body: narrative gaze, privileged body parts, clothing and drapery, color, gesture, posture, and facial expression. Rossetti and Morris typically use the last six corporeal categories to defamiliarize the body and surprise the audience, bringing readers and viewers to the “inner standing point.” When that surprise wears off, readers and viewers are led to re-evaluate their view of the body from a more distanced, critical perspective. The process traced in this dissertation often results in acceptance of the new Pre-Raphaelite idea of the body by readers and viewers, at least on the individual level.