

## Rossetti's *La Pia de Tolommei*

M. Therese Southgate,  
MD

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, (1828-82),  
*La Pia de Tolommei*, 1868-80,  
British. Oil on canvas. 104.8 x 120.6 cm.



Victorian to the core, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) was born in London to an Italian scholar who had been forced into exile because of his political views. A poet as well as a painter, Dante was only one of three Rossetti children who adopted the artistic life. His younger sister was the poet Christina Rossetti, his brother the critic William Michael Rossetti. Not surprisingly, he was a devotee of his namesake, Dante Alighieri. In 1861, with some financial help from John Ruskin, Rossetti published a translation of Dante's *Vita Nuova*. In *La Pia de Tolommei*, his last major painting, he again pays homage to Dante. The painting refers to Canto V of the *Purgatorio*, where, with Virgil as his guide, Alighieri has emerged from hell and has ascended to the second level of Mount Purgatory. This terrace is populated by the unshriven, chiefly by those who have died suddenly, for example, in war or by murder. Either because of negligence or by indolence they had not confessed their sins in a timely fashion, and thus may not enter heaven. Since they are in purgatory, not hell, however, it is assumed that they repented privately, albeit at the proverbial "last minute"; too good for hell, not good enough for heaven, they must languish between. There Dante meets a beautiful and compassionate woman (the first woman he has met, she is also the only soul so far to have inquired about Dante's well-being, placing his needs before her own.) She begs him thus:

"...Pray,  
When thou returnest to the world," said she,  
" And art well rested from the weary way,  
Remember me, that am called Piety;  
Siena made me and Maremma undid me,  
As well he knows who plighted troth to me,  
And set his ring upon my hand towed me."

(Sayers DL, trans. New York, NY, and London, England: Penguin Books; 1955.)

Piety has been identified as Pia de Tolommei, daughter of a Sienese family and wife of one Paganello (Nello) dei Pannocchieschi, a leader of the Guelfs and lord of the Castello della Pietra in the Maremma, a swampy and malarial region along the coast of Tuscany. La Pia died in 1295 at the hands of her husband. Some say he exposed her to the malaria of the Maremma marsh, others that he had her thrown from a castle window down a precipice. Dante seems to favor the latter. Though La Pia is a woman of the 13th century, Rossetti has made her in the Victorian image: pale, slender, morose, sensuous, pious, solitary, and overdressed. Presumably languishing over an unrequited love, she sits helpless before a parapet amidst a thicket of ivy. She stares absently toward the sundial while fingering the red stone of her wedding ring. A prayerbook, a chaplet, and a letter, all abandoned, lie beside her. The sundial bears the image of an archangel with a fiery shield, Michael perhaps, guarding the entrance to heaven. In the courtyard is a silent bell, above it a flock of angry birds. In the distance lie what are perhaps the Sienese marshes, miasmal beneath a stormy sky. The story is worthy of the best Gothic novelist; the canvas is as stuffed and airless as a Victorian parlor, stifling in its detail. Its mood is ominous, sinister, even slightly erotic. Yet it is spellbinding. We care about the mysterious lady with the blue eyes, the long, graceful (though somewhat awkwardly held) neck, and the strongly chiseled jaw.

Over the course of his career Rossetti worked with three models. He often gave them similar features, as though he were searching for the template for the ideal woman. Early in his career, Rossetti's model (later, wife) was the 23-year-old Elizabeth Siddal, herself a painter and a poet. A former milliner, she had modeled for several other artists, but upon meeting Rossetti agreed to model exclusively for him. She became his Beata Beatrix, although within two years her health had begun to fail and she had become addicted to laudanum. They married in 1860 and a year later the 30-some Elizabeth delivered a stillborn child. She died in 1862 of an apparently intentional overdose of laudanum. Distraught, Rossetti impulsively placed the manuscripts of his unpublished poems in her casket and buried them with her. (In 1869, he changed his mind. Elizabeth's body was exhumed, the poems recovered; they were published a year later.) Rossetti's other models were Jane Burden, who became the wife of Rossetti's colleague William Morris, and Sarah Cox, also known as Fanny Cornwell, who was Rossetti's mistress and housekeeper.

After the death of Elizabeth, Rossetti did not fare well. By the mid-1860s his own health had begun to deteriorate. His poetry and painting continued, however. The final blow came in 1870, when, after an attack on his poetry, he attempted suicide. Thereafter, he became progressively addicted to alcohol, chloral, and laudanum. He died in Birchington-on-Sea, Kent, on April 9, 1882, a virtual recluse, though he continued working to the end. How autobiographical this painting may be one cannot know. But one may question. Is this lovely Pia, for example, Rossetti's one-time Beata Beatrix? Is the beautiful and blessed Beatrice who yearned for her lover from the parapet of heaven the unshriven Pia who awaits him on the Second Terrace, the one reserved for those who died a sudden death, as did Elizabeth? It does not matter. The Victorians thrived on stories of unrequited love, broken dreams, shattered lives. The more tragic the story, the more delicious, it seemed, the satisfaction.

**Courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence (<http://www.ku.edu/~sma/>).**