

1862, Accidental Death

Lizzie Siddal and the Poetics of the Coroner's Inquest

“Accidentally and casually and by misfortune.” Such was the verdict of an inquest on the death of “Elizabeth Eleanor Rossetti” (née Elizabeth Siddall, later Siddal) held on February 13, 1862, two days after she died having “Accidentally [taken] an overdose of Laudanum.”¹ On February 14, the *Daily News* reported the “Death of a Lady from an Overdose of Laudanum,” including most of the testimonies from the inquest and closing with a more succinct verdict: “The jury returned a verdict of Accidental Death.” A newspaper in Sheffield printed a similar notice. The coroner and the press seemed to dispose all doubts about the cause of Siddal’s death (Hunt 312). The inquest had been brief and uncomplicated; the case was closed. On February 17, Siddal was buried—along with a notebook of manuscript poems by her recent husband, a bereft Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

In 1869, her coffin was famously unclosed, exhumed to recover Rossetti’s book. So had, in the intervening years, the inquest’s verdict of “accidental death” been reopened for scrutiny. Rumors circulated about Lizzie’s death as a possible suicide, whether to end her misery after a recent stillborn daughter, to lash out at Rossetti for emotional abuse and philandering, or to make a desperate cry for help. Oscar Wilde suggested that an exasperated Rossetti had murdered Lizzie by pushing a bottle of laudanum into her hands (Hawksley 205). In her early biography *The Wife of Rossetti*, Violet Hunt includes an alleged suicide note that Lizzie had pinned to her nightgown: “My life is so miserable I wish no more of it.”² The note was supposedly destroyed, the evidence suppressed to avoid the scandal of Lizzie’s self-murder and its implications for her family.³ Jan Marsh has thoroughly discredited these rumors and instead historicized to whom they mattered and why.⁴ Nonetheless, the “legend” endures that Lizzie’s death was hardly an accident, but a tragic and exemplary Victorian suicide, a fulfillment of her role in William Holman Hunt’s iconic painting *Ophelia* (1851-52).

I do not intend to settle the case, but rather to argue that such cases were never settled to begin with. The question of Lizzie’s death—like all fatalities in which causes were either suspicious or not immediately clear—received a hearing at an inquest, during which the coroner (in this case William Payne, Coroner of the City of London) and a jury of 24 men from his district were charged with viewing the body and, at a public trial, discovering causes and motives. Their reports became public record and a source of ready-made content for newspapers, ubiquitous at the time but largely overlooked in criticism and literary history concerned with the inquest’s very contexts,

including the public sphere, the gaze and the body, crime, suicide, sensationalism, and the periodical press, to name only a few. Accidents present one such opportunity for reconsidering inquests; indeed, inquests may have been the most conspicuous public forum for adjudicating what “accident” even means. What does a verdict of “accidental death” decide?⁵ In Lizzie’s case, jurors (and newspaper readers) were reckoning with thresholds of casual tragedy and premeditation, and pinning material consequences to the verdict’s certainty. I return to Siddal’s inquest not to suggest the verdict was wrong, but instead to suggest how inquest verdicts were *always* statements of doubt, leaving open possibilities for their historical and imaginative reconsideration.

The coroner’s inquest was the site of significant debates about what professions and standards of evidence would govern the emerging biopolitics of nineteenth-century Britain (Burney). Those debates revealed dissatisfaction with, among other things, the failure of coroners’ verdicts to deliver hard facts. Legal conservatives and records keepers complained that inquest verdicts like “natural causes” or “visitation of God” or “accidentally, casually, and by misfortune” were not even causal statements, but simply phrases whose variance made them difficult to establish as precedent or to normalize as data (Burney 68). Concerning Lizzie’s case, mortality statistics for laudanum poisoning and suicide were only available after her death, with the first reports published in 1863 (Gates 18).⁶ Thus, the pronouncement of Lizzie’s “accidental death” emerged in a professional context uncertain about the evidentiary status of that verdict. Coroners’ inquests were ironically structured by doubts only resolved in narrative and social rather than factual forms.

Coroners’ inquests were part of a broader Victorian reckoning with doubt, causation, and narrative across a variety of cultural contexts and imaginative practices.⁷ I will consider a particular instance, a little-known narrative poem by William Michael Rossetti which experiments with the poetics of the inquest and documents another case of the uncanny afterlife of Lizzie Siddal. Caught up in the early ferment of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, WMR had tried his hand at a narrative poem, seeking “to apply to verse-writing the same principle of strict actuality and probability of detail which the Præraphaelites upheld in their pictures” (Rossetti, *Family Letters* 2: 63). Initially called “An Exchange of News” and then “A Plain Story of Life,” the poem was intended for—but never published in—the PRB’s short-lived flagship journal *The Germ*. After the journal folded in 1850, the poem went into dormancy, only to be revived and revised for publication in 1868 after WMR was approached by the editor and publisher Edmund Rutledge, soliciting contributions for *The Broadway Annual* (Fyfe).

This poem has an uncanny correspondence with the legend of Lizzie Siddal. I want to argue that WMR resurrected his draft poem not unlike his brother’s infamous exhumation of his manuscript notebook, and that both events eerily depended upon the “accidental death” of Lizzie Siddal and the viewing of the body required by coroners’ inquests. While Dante Gabriel’s story needs little rehearsal, it contains telling parallels to WMR’s experience. Having abandoned poetry after Lizzie died, DGR was persuaded to begin writing poems again at the urging of friends including John Morley, editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, who published DGR’s first batch in the March 1869

issue. The poems he buried had been composed during the PRB's early years, 1847-1853, and were recovered with Siddal's exhumation in October 1869. The book was apparently found where DGR had placed it: resting between Siddal's cheek and hair. It had water damage and worm holes but, according to the fabrication of someone present, Lizzie's body preserved its most remarkable feature, her "red hair retaining its bright colour, with luxuriant posthumous growth" (Marsh, "Did Rossetti Really Need to Exhume His Wife?" n.pag.).

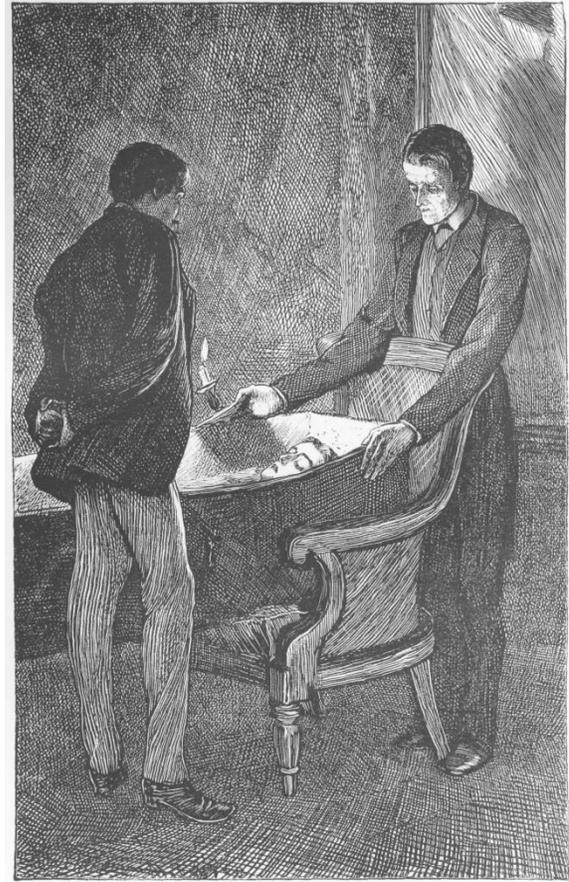
Lacking the manuscripts, we know little about WMR's extensive revisions to the poem upon returning to it in 1867-68. He did make two significant updates to the poem's title, which became "The Coroner's Inquest" and was soon after published as "Mrs. Holmes Grey," the married name of the dead woman at the poem's center. Alongside was an illustration of two men gazing at the corpse in a bedroom, drawing from the poem's own attention to luxuriant hair, a mouth which seems still to have a story to tell, and a book placed in the open coffin beneath her head.⁸

Combed and rich

The hair, which caught the light within its strings,
 Golden about the temples, and as fine
 And soft as any silk-web; and the brows
 A perfect arch, the forehead undisturbed;
 But the mouth kept its anguish, and the lips,
 Closed after death, seemed half in act to speak.
 Covered the hands and feet; the head was laid
 Upon a prayer-book, open at the rite
 Of solemnizing holy matrimony.
 Her marriage-ring was stitched into the page. (l. 233-246)

With "Mrs. Holmes Grey" in 1868, WMR is no longer telling a "plain story of life," but reimagining Lizzie's life after 1860: her belated and troubled marriage, a miscarried daughter, onset depression, uncertain death, the coroner's inquest which put her body on view, and the newspaper report which circulated the story.

The poem's narrative concerns a doctor, Mr. Holmes Grey, whose wife Mary Grey falls profoundly in love with a surgeon, Dr. Luton, whom she had met before her marriage at certain "mesmeric evenings." Upon meeting him again—now as a married woman, Mrs. Holmes Grey becomes deeply depressed and ill, explaining to her husband it was "for thinking of our girl that died / Months back" (319-320). Not long after, she flees her house and approaches Dr. Luton. Her passion mounts to hysteria; she throws herself upon him and dies of an aneurism. We learn all this through a frame tale in which Grey shows an old friend the open coffin with the body and the book he's placed therein. Too upset to explain the story himself, Grey hands over a newspaper containing an article, "Coroner's Inquest—A Distressing Case." For the next 334 lines, WMR transcribes this newspaper article as blank verse, complete with procedural details of coroner, witnesses, jury, and verdict. Again, the body is implicitly on view: "the Jury came / From viewing the corpse, in which are seen remains / Of no small beauty" (403-405). Grey awkwardly responds to questions about marital fidelity. Jurors probe the witnesses to determine the cause of Mary's malady and death: "Could your scientific skill / Assign some cause for this debility?" (422-423) The final witness, another doctor, seems to close the case: "the cause of death, / Congestion and effusion of the ventricle. / Death would be instantaneous. Any strong / Emotion might have led to that result" (713-716). While the testimony is diagnostically precise about the mechanism of death, it is entirely vague about its origins in "any emotion." Even so, the jury needs no time for its verdict, "Died by the visitation of God" (728), a standard formulation for coroners' inquests and practically devoid of causal explanation.



Woodcut by Arthur Boyd
Houghton published with WMR's
poem in *The Broadway Annual*

WMR had himself attended Lizzie's inquest but did not testify. Along with the male jurors, he saw Lizzie's laid-out corpse in her bedroom, noting in his memoir that "On the second or third day after death Lizzie looked still lovelier than before" (*Family Letters* 224). He kept the *Daily News* article reporting the inquest and later transcribed it in his memoir (Rossetti, *Family Letters* 223-224). And he displaced the entire experience into a narrative poem in which his lukewarm feelings about Elizabeth Siddal create an alternative rendering of her "accidental death" as something ordained.⁹ As an experiment in Pre-Raphaelite principles, "Mrs. Holmes Grey" is consistent with a morbid fascination with the female body, particularly Lizzie Siddal's body before and after death,

whose apotheosis appears in Hunt's *Ophelia* and in DGR's *Beata Beatrix*.¹⁰ The fascinated view of the corpse and the ambiguities of interpreting its demise are also the hallmarks of the coroner's inquest, whose explorations of mortal phenomena accidental or designed culminate in unstable verdicts that are also prompts to the Pre-Raphaelite imagination.

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¹ The text of the inquest is reprinted in Hunt 329–332.

² Elsewhere the note was described as only briefly asking that Lizzie's brother be cared for (Hawksley 194)

³ For a discussion of the social and legalistic implications of suicide in the nineteenth century, see Gates. Tellingly, Gates ends her chapter "Suicidal Women: Fact or Fiction?" with Lizzie's death, "the enduring image of Ophelia-madness after mid-century" (149).

⁴ See the *Legend of Elizabeth Siddal*. Marsh offers her own careful and subtle take on Lizzie's death in *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (216–223).

⁵ It decided almost nothing for DGR: according to Doughty, "doubt as to the unanswerable question of accident or suicide was the direct cause of Rossetti's subsequent neurosis and decline" (301).

⁶ See also Table 3 in Berridge and Edwards 275. Their book also usefully explains the inherent limitations of such numbers and further contexts for understanding opiate use and abuse in the nineteenth century.

⁷ To consider just one example, Garnica has shown how Victorian novelists adopted and lampooned inquests to privilege their own narrative inquiries into human motives and causal structures.

⁸ Is it possible that DGR's own actions were influenced by this poem? DGR read and commented extensively on WMR's early drafts. If this detail was included in the early versions of the poem, it may suggest an overlooked precedent for DGR placing his own book of poems in Lizzie's coffin.

⁹ Peattie offers a useful take on WMR's relations with the Siddalls.

¹⁰ Begun "sometime before her suicide-death," *Beata Beatrix* was resumed after Lizzie's death and only completed post-exhumation in 1870 (McGann n.pag.). In the original painting, the figure holds a poppy flower; behind her, a Dantesque figure covers his face with one hand and, in the other, holds a book. "Disquieting in its mixture of sensuous and funereal feeling," that painting depicts Lizzie in the ambiguous rapture of spiritual transcendence or opium-induced fatality (Marsh, *Legend* 14).

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