

“A VERY CLEVER AND FINISHED PIECE OF WRITING”:
WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI’S “MRS. HOLMES GREY”

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Be not keen to cry – “So this is All!” – ... Ask: “Is this truth?”
– W.M. Rossetti, “When whoso merely hath a little thought”

William Michael Rossetti’s “Mrs. Holmes Grey” was largely written in the late summer and early fall of 1849 and then revised in the ensuing five months with a view to publication in the fourth number of *The Germ* (May 1850).¹ When that did not transpire, the poem was set aside for almost two decades until, after some further revision that, according to Rossetti, did not “alter ... its general character and point of view,”² it was published in the February 1868 number of *The Broadway*, a monthly magazine devoted to the arts. Written with the “idea ... [of] apply[ing] to verse writing the same principle of strict actuality and probability of detail which the Praeraphaelites upheld in their pictures” (Rossetti, *Family Letters* 2:63),³ “Mrs. Holmes Grey” also reflects the growing commitment of the group and its associates to focussing on modern subjects such as the fallen women of William Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1853-54) and Dante Rossetti’s never-to-be completed *Found* (1854-). To the extent that its subject is a Coroner’s Inquest into the death of a woman, Mary Grey, who had left her husband for another man, “Mrs. Holmes Grey” is a literary ancestor of the paintings of Hunt and Dante Rossetti as much in its contemporary focus as in its attention to “strict actuality and probability of detail.” It thus holds interest and significance both aesthetically and thematically as a reflection of Pre-Raphaelite ideals and concerns, and, moreover, as its author’s major and, at 810 lines, most substantial excursion into verse prior to *Democratic Sonnets* (1907).

Yet, despite its manifest scholarly appeal, “Mrs. Holmes Grey” has received little attention, the reason being twofold: its relative inaccessibility and its perceived weakness as poetry. After its appearance in *The Broadway*