

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S
THE BLUE CLOSET AND THE TUNE OF SEVEN TOWERS:
RECEPTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

D.M.R. Bentley

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blue Closet* (1856-57) and *The Tune of Seven Towers* (1857) are the two most mysterious pictures that he painted during the Oxford phase of Pre-Raphaelitism. In the blue-tiled closet (private chamber) of its title, *The Blue Closet* depicts two aristocratic women playing a double and highly decorated clavichord. Gazing pensively downwards, one of them rings a string of bells with her free hand while the other, with eyes closed in rapture, uses her free hand to pluck a stringed instrument that surmounts the clavichord. Behind them two other women are singing from sheet music. Above the clavichord is a branch of holly and in front of it a reddish lily grows in an untiled area in the floor. In *The Tune of Seven Towers*, the title of which refers to the fortress outside Constantinople (Istanbul) that is schematically represented on the banner in the painting,¹ an aristocratic woman plays a psalter attached to her chair. Beside her a man seated in a chair leans forward to listen intently and behind her a woman is wringing her hands and also listens intently, with her head resting against the back of the lady's chair, which is surmounted by a bell. To the left, behind the group, a woman leans in at an aperture to place an orange branch on a bed and to the right another aperture reveals a bird flying up or trapped in a stairwell. Rossetti himself offered no elucidation of *The Blue Closet* or *The Tune of Seven Towers*, saying only that the former depicts "some people playing music" and that, like contemporaneous pictures such as *The Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra* (1857), they were painted when he was "full of" Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (*Correspondence* 3:317 and 131). So what has been made of them and in what ways are they significant?

Since the title of *The Blue Closet* refers merely to the room in which the scene is set, it provides no clue to the picture's broader historical or geographical context. Three of its elements are potentially more helpful, however: the is set, it provides no clue to the picture's broader historical or geographical con-