

## THE “FIERY SERPENT”: TYPOLOGICAL TOPOGRAPHY IN DANTE ROSSETTI’S “JENNY”

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In Dante Rossetti’s dramatic monologue “Jenny,” the narrator speculates on the possible fate of the Highgate prostitute who has fallen asleep with her head upon his knee, and envisages her suffering a stereotypical fall, from the height of financial prosperity to the depths of physical isolation and suicidal despair:

When, wealth and health slipped past, you stare  
Along the streets alone, and there,  
Round the long park, across the bridge,  
The cold lamps at the pavement’s edge  
Wind on together and apart,  
A fiery serpent for your heart. (149-54)

D.M.R. Bentley, commenting on the “arrestingly visual symbol” of the “fiery serpent,” has suggested that Rossetti is “applying the vivid image of the ‘fiery serpent’ from Numbers 21:6-9 to the lamp-lit streets of London,” thereby transforming the capital into “a symbol of evil” (188). By linking the “fiery serpent” with the Old Testament book of Numbers,<sup>1</sup> Bentley essentially offers a typological reading of “Jenny,” drawing a parallel between the sinful rebelliousness of the Israelites in the desert of Canaan and Victorian England’s sinful toleration of rampant prostitution. In the same way that the Israelites, individually and collectively, can only be cured of their affliction by looking upon the brazen serpent cited in Numbers 21.8, so the narrator, and by extension readers of “Jenny,” can only be cured of their sinful sexual habits by an unflinchingly honest contemplation of prostitution as both a private and collective social evil. Thus, “in a sense the poem is itself a ‘fiery serpent’ on a pole, an attempt to give colour and form” to “an ugly reality that must be contemplated and assimilated by the speaker and the reader” before “health and