

D. G. ROSSETTI'S "THE CHOICE" SONNETS IN
THE HOUSE OF LIFE: A READING

Early in Part II of The House of Life, Rossetti includes three fascinating sonnets that are grouped together under the single title "The Choice" (LXXI-LXXIII). These sonnets are a fine masterpiece of irony, and they serve at this point to underscore once again the main theme of this epic. In them, he offers the reader three modes of life -- the sensual, the religious, and the contemplative.¹ But two modes are very unattractive and the third enticing.

The first sonnet argues for the sensual life:

Eat thou and drink; to-morrow thou shalt die.
Surely the earth, that's wise being very old,
Needs not our help. Then loose me, love, and hold
Thy sultry hair up from my face; that I
May pour for thee this golden wine, brim-high,
Till round the glass thy fingers glow like gold.²

The sensual life is presented in a very inviting manner. The sonnet ends with the speaker marveling at those who pursue "Vain gold, vain lore,"³ instead of choosing the path of sexual love:

Through many years they toil; then on a day
They die not, -- for their life was death, -- but cease;
And round their narrow lips the mould falls close.

The second of the "Choice" sonnets looks with apparent contempt at human beings who go through life fearing death and damnation. These people lose their lives by spending them in a state of constant terror. The sonnet is overtly a criticism of the orthodox religious mentality, which awaits the end of the world and the Judgment Day. Nor does it offer such people any hope of salvation:

Will his strength slay thy worm in Hell? Go to:
Cover thy countenance, and watch, and fear.

The third of the "Choice" sonnets examines the lives of people dedicated to the pursuit of truth. Such lives, we are told, must of necessity end in failure, for truth is not attainable. The sonnet compares human thought to a brilliant swimmer and truth to the measureless sea. Even the best swimmers must drown if they