

ROSSETTI'S ASTARTE SYRIACA:  
A NEGLECTED SONNET

During the final decade or so of his life, the figure of the siren began to haunt Rossetti's poetry and painting. Oswald Doughty has written of this period: "Over the last years of Rossetti's life we need not linger. The 'chloralized years' his brother called them. Increasing insomnia and physical decline, increasing recourse to the fatal remedy, such is the main stream of Rossetti's life henceforth until the end. Nor was this all. Increasing solitude, increasing debts, despite the large sums his works now realized, and consequent slavery at his easel in sickness and in health to meet them, were additional burdens. Although he still chiefly painted 'women', the 'flowers' gradually disappeared, and in harmony with his existence these feminine subjects became in time symbols of melancholy, of mystery, as in the brooding Pandora and Proserpine, the cruel and sinister Astarte Syriaca, painted amidst much physical and mental anguish."<sup>1</sup>

"Astarte Syriaca (For a Picture)" is a fascinating but much neglected sonnet written in conjunction with the above-mentioned picture of Rossetti.<sup>2</sup> It resorts to pre-Greek mythology to demonstrate the tremendous powers of illusion of the siren, but the sonnet itself also succeeds in plunging the careless reader into a state of illusion about Astarte:

MYSTERY: lo! betwixt the sun and moon  
Astarte of the Syrians: Venus queen  
Ere Aphrodite was. In silver sheen  
Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon  
Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune:  
And from her neck's inclining flower-stem lean  
Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean  
The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune.

Torch-bearing, her sweet ministers compel  
All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea  
The witnesses of Beauty's face to be:  
That face, of Love's all-penetrative spell  
Amulet, talisman, and oracle, --  
Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery.<sup>3</sup>

"Astarte Syriaca" is an excellent sonnet. The mystery of love is like the riddles of the Delphic oracle, and the sonnet itself is therefore a riddle.<sup>4</sup> To unlock the meaning of "Astarte Syriaca" is