

*Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Late Victorian Sonnet Sequence: Sexuality, Belief and the Self* by John Holmes. Aldershot, Hants, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005. ix, 189 pp. ISBN 0-7546-5108-8. \$89.95; £45.00.

Since the Victorian period itself, critics have agreed that the two great Victorian poets are Tennyson and Robert Browning, but have debated the third. John Holmes notes that conspicuous nominees for the bronze medal have included "Arnold, Swinburne, Gerard Manley Hopkins (with the rise of Modernism), and Christina Rossetti (with the rise of feminism)," but speaking both as a "literary agent" or advocate and a critic, Holmes forcefully argues that if "breadth and depth of influence are the criteria, [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti undoubtedly stands third after Tennyson and Browning in the hierarchy of Victorian poets." Much depends upon that "if," of course, but Holmes is surely right about Rossetti's importance and influence as the acknowledged "king," according to James McNeill Whistler, and "master," according to George Meredith, of both Victorian poets and painters. Holmes is on safe ground emphasizing the importance of the poet whom Yeats recognized as perhaps the greatest of all influences on the artists of the "tragic generation," and it would hardly be going too far to think of the "genius" celebrated by Pater and Ruskin as the very genius, or presiding spirit of the arts, over the half century from his *Poems* of 1870 to the outbreak of the Great War.

As Holmes narrows his focus, however, he also destabilizes his argument. Arguing not as an advocate for Rossetti's charismatic genius but more exclusively for the incomplete 1870 version of *The House of Life: A Sonnet Sequence*, he narrows Rossetti's sphere of influence to the diverse sonnet sequences produced between 1870 and 1917 and asserts that those works "form the most productive and innovative poetic movement of the late Victorian period." If so, one must conclude that the late Victorian period was sadly impoverished, despite Holmes's spirited advocacy of such works as George Barlow's *To Gertrude in the Spirit World* (1878), Theophilus Marzials's *Love's Masquerades* (1873), Wilfrid Scawen Blunt's *Sonnets and Songs by Proteus* (1875), and Rosa Newmarch's *Horae Amoris* (1903). Even Holmes is inclined to admit that with the exception of these and a few others, "most of the sonnet sequences of the sons of Gabriel are of slight literary value."

Wanting to date this "most productive and innovative poetic movement" from 1870, Holmes needs, of course, to establish the fundamental importance of the version of *The House of Life* published in the 1870 *Poems*. Consequently he challenges William Fredeman's judgement "that the 1881 version represents Rossetti's final evolution of the poem, and it is this version to which critical attention must be directed" by pointing out that "historically" the 1870 version is the most important text because it "inaugurated the most intense spate of sonneteering of the Victorian period." Despite the rather circular reasoning,