

*Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* by Jan Marsh. London: Jonathan Cape, 1994. 634 pp. ISBN 0-224-03585-1, \$29.95.

Jan Marsh has devoted much of her career to making visible the neglected lives of the talented women of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. By illuminating the central significance to Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite studies alike of perhaps the best known of those women, Marsh's biography surely marks a milestone in this important project. Through careful research and close critical reading, Marsh redefines the contours of the life and enlarges her subject so as to expand our knowledge of the diverse body of Rossetti's work. In so doing, she produces nothing less than an affirmation, indeed a celebration, of the enduring achievement of Christina Rossetti while simultaneously demonstrating the continuing relevance of a genre which cultivated and mapped the Victorian writerly landscape, literary biography.

In rendering the early years Marsh not only draws upon Rossetti's retrospective diary, *Time Flies* (1885), as other biographers have done, but more importantly she also harmonizes her narrative with an extended reading of the poet's own volume of nursery rhymes for children, *Sing-Song* (1872). This makes for a very different picture of the conflict in Rossetti's childhood between her own disposition toward energetic willfulness and the counselling by family members of prudence, obedience, and self-restraint.

The fleshing out of family relationships is another strength of this biography. Marsh is the first to emphasize, for example, the importance of Frances Rossetti's tendency to transfer her own thwarted ambitions onto an admiration of the intellect and talents of others, especially those of her children. This inclination to live through her children became a powerful catalyst in the potency of their desire for achievement as well as in the success they finally attained. In addition, while Marsh once again rectifies the record of women's history in paying tribute to Maria, the eldest and least known of the Rossettis, she has a further purpose in mind. Skilfully tracing the "religious atmosphere fermented" by Pusey, Dodsworth, and others of the Oxford Movement, and "particularly targeted at young women" (55), she amplifies the differences in Maria and Christina's responses, one successfully conforming and the other breaking down. Marsh thereby invites us to search for the solution to the problem that has perplexed biographers since William Michael Rossetti's 1904 "Memoir" of his sister's life: Rossetti's mysterious adolescent illness.

Much of the first half of the biography is thus devoted to sifting through and eliminating social and cultural causes of the all-pervasive melancholy of Rossetti's early poetry, a melancholy that appears to exceed the effects of illness, the constraints of Victorian femininity, and the "religious mania" of the 1840s. This leads Marsh to raise the most controversial question of the book: "Was Christina unwillingly implicated in some sexual activity at the age of twelve or thirteen that left a permanent sense of guilt?" (260). The question comes as no surprise as Marsh