

DISPLACED AND ABSENT TEXTS
AS CONTEXTS FOR
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *MONNA INNOMINATA*

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Christina Rossetti rarely tells us how to read her poetry, but with her "Sonnet of Sonnets," *Monna Innominata*, she is openly directive. Her preface invites us to see the sequence against the background of the amatory poetry of Dante, Petrarch, and the troubadours, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetic response to the medieval tradition, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Epigraphs from Dante's *Commedia* and Petrarch's *Rime* head each sonnet of *Monna Innominata* as if to explain the text below, and scriptural echoes and references in individual sonnets resonate with the epigraphs and their specific theological contexts to further suggest how to approach the poem.

William Whitla's and Antony Harrison's studies of the poem's intertextuality demonstrate how Rossetti's interpretation of the love-sonnet tradition reveals her own poetic enterprise. Whitla concludes that she establishes the literary conventions only to challenge or subvert them (82-131), and Harrison contends that her transvaluation of the tradition looks to "recover and espouse" a Dantean ideology that is incompatible with Victorian values (185). These evaluations of Rossetti's contextualization of *Monna Innominata* reveal the many ways in which the poet has shaped a unique persona, one who is linked to but distinct from the voices created by past and contemporary sonneteers, and who ponders in a different key questions similar to those of her antecedents about human mortality, the mutability of earthly love, its expression through poetry in life, and its possible redemption in heaven. Yet clues to a reading of *Monna Innominata*, and to the perspective of its female speaker, can be found not just in the poem's relation to its broad literary context but also to its local context: the volume *A Pageant and Other Poems*, in which it was published, and a quartet of love sonnets, entitled "By Way of Remembrance." Though Rossetti never published "By Way of Remembrance" in its entirety during her lifetime, she reworked its four sonnets for both *Monna Innominata* and another sequence published in *A Pageant and Other Poems*, "'Behold a Shaking,'" a double sonnet depicting the resurrection of the dead and the salvation of the blessed.¹ As an absent text, one that does not appear in the