

ROSSETTI'S SONNETS AND PAINTINGS ON MARY'S GIRLHOOD:
A CASE STUDY IN RECIPROCAL ILLUSTRATION

With the notable exception of William Blake, no British man of letters ever combined such powers of poetic and artistic expression as Dante Gabriel Rossetti. While the Horatian concept of ut pictura poësis was hardly new when the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed in 1847, it took Rossetti to make the sister arts of poetry and painting equal partners in the business of illustration. Prior to Rossetti, Timothy Hilton tells us, English illustration operated

...with a bias, as is natural in a verbally sophisticated but visually undereducated nation, towards the illustration of a literary text--the painter's art thus becoming an adjunct to something which is self-explanatory in the first place.¹

Rossetti's illustrations of his own work helped to overcome this bias, making it possible for a text to illustrate a picture, as well as vice versa. The sonnet sequence called "Mary's Girlhood (For a Picture)" was written to illustrate Rossetti's already completed painting, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (London: Tate Gallery). The sonnets were printed on a slip of gilded paper and affixed to the picture's frame during the Free Exhibition of 1849.² Rossetti's easy reversal of this poem-for-picture sequence confirms the equality of the sister arts in his eyes. Between 1871 and 1879 he produced several paintings of "The Blessed Damozel" to illustrate a poem written two decades earlier.

Neither poetry nor painting ever assumed undisputed ascendancy over Rossetti's imagination. The poems and pictures he joined in the art of illustration share a "symbiotic relationship," each medium is "used to expand the reader-viewer's experience of the other."³ For example, the sonnets and paintings Rossetti combined to illustrate the girlhood of the Virgin mutually strive both to celebrate the moment of the Annunciation and to re-create its history. At the same time, poems and pictures alike subordinate religious subject matter in favor of profane beauty and the exploration of the inner consciousness. Both partake of a mild aestheticism. Our consideration of the literary and pictorial illustrations treating Mary's girlhood will therefore concentrate on the reciprocal contributions of the two media to these common ends.

The two sonnets collectively titled "Mary's Girlhood" were written to complement a painting called The Girlhood of Mary Virgin. They also anticipate a slightly later painting, Ecce Ancilla Domini (London, Tate Gallery), which cannot be excluded from this discussion. Both paintings and poems treat a religious subject -- Mary's growth towards God's will, her acquisition of the virtues which prepare her