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## The Pre-Raphaelite Literary-Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti

"They laid Jesse James in his grave and Dante Gabriel Rossetti died immediately." This outrageous opening sentence of Thomas Beer's fascinating *The Mauve Decade* (1926) seems on the surface one of the great non-sequiturs in the whole of literary criticism, yet the comparison, to anyone interested in Rossetti, is highly provocative. The propinquity of James's death on 3 April 1882 to Rossetti's on Easter Sunday, six days later, is sufficient to establish a superficial connection, but Beer obviously had in mind subtler analogies between these two disparate figures. He was almost certainly attracted by the mythopoeic aura that surrounded both men—in life and after death. James's exploits—first as a member of band of Confederate guerrillas, later as an outlaw, made him a popular source of fictionalized biography at the end of the last century. Equally a legend in his own lifetime, Rossetti has attracted more than a score of biographies, many of them, emulating too many of his pictures, copycat replicas. Like Jesse James in crime, Rossetti was in matters literary and artistic a law unto himself. With his "gang" of PRB's in 1848, he sought to overthrow the tyrannical hold of the Royal Academy on English art; later—first at Oxford, then at 16 Cheyne Walk—Rossetti became himself something of an academy for the coterie of artists and poets who gathered round him. Over two decades, Tudor House served as a kind of Pre-Raphaelite salon, where Rossetti fought a rear-guard action against the winds of aesthetic change, issuing imperious pronouncements on art and poetry: against the "French idiot," Manet, and the new school of Impres-

sionism; against Hopkins and the wave of modernism which that poet presaged. Scornful and fearful-of public reaction and criticism, he refused himself, and withheld permission from his patrons, to exhibit his pictures, and "worked the oracle" behind the scenes to arrange sympathetic reviews of his *Poems* in 1870; with consummate arrogance he undertook to revise Blake's poetry when he edited Gilchrist's *Life*; with characteristic hauteur, masquerading as false modesty, he rejected the approaches made to him to participate in the activities of the Grosvenor Gallery when it was launched in 1877; and, as virtually his last literary act, he imposed his will and his views on the sonnet on Hall Caine's selection of *Sonnets of Three Centuries* (1882). In every sense a one-man show, Rossetti was nonetheless mentor to several lesser and a few major talents like Burne-Jones and Morris; and, though he seldom budged from his Cheyne Walk retreat, he exerted an enormous influence on subsequent generations of poets and painters and on critics like Pater and Wilde, who quite rightly regarded him as having paved the way for Art for Art's Sake Aestheticism.

Like Jesse James, too, Rossetti was betrayed—figuratively, if not quite literally, shot in the back—by an unsuspected rival, Robert Buchanan; and, finally, like James, he had a devoted brother who long outlived him to tell his story and advance the myth of his greatness. Beer's analogy, thus, proves neither inept nor casual: it illuminates in a dramatic, if unconventional conflation, Rossetti's role in the context of Victorian literature and art; and it may even help, indirectly,