

# D.G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*: Allegory, Symbolism and Courtly Love

To his contemporaries, Dante Rossetti was the leader of the "fleshly" school of poetry, but more recent critics have found even in his most frankly sexual poems a straining away from the tangible world toward a transcendent state or "infinite moment."<sup>1</sup> In the sonnet-sequence, *The House of Life*, the apparent discord between worldliness and otherworldliness is troubling to readers who would like to understand this work as an artistic unity. Here, Rossetti's treatment of love is an uneasy marriage of sexuality and spirituality, and the poet seems to conceal his ambivalence or indecision behind a screen of poetic diction. The problem is nowhere more evident than in his personification of Love. A few years ago a critic wrote of "the strange mediating figure of 'Love,' which often confuses and obstructs relationships in 'The House of Life.'"<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it is clear that Rossetti drew his personification of Love largely from models in the courtly love poetry of the Middle Ages. Thus we are not without clues to the mystery of this figure. In the years when Rossetti was composing his sonnets, the woman-worship of the Victorian age was flourishing, and Rossetti's susceptibility to it was intensified by his mystical disposition. For this reason, the courtly lover's conceit of a Religion of Love, which mimicked or parodied the Church, was especially congenial to him. Because Rossetti adopted this and other medieval poetic modes, his personified Love can often be understood as a direct descendant of the god Amor of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, the *Roman de la Rose*, and the *Vita Nuova*. At the same time, as we shall see, the allegorical mode of representation which characterizes the courtly love poetry is at odds with the restless transcendence-seeking part of Rossetti's imagination. This difficulty repeatedly leads Rossetti into a treatment of personified Love which is not medieval, and which is, when mingled with the Dantesque treatment, somewhat bewildering. We can escape much of the confusion

by investigating the ambivalence of Rossetti's medievalism, an ambivalence which places this poet in a wider Victorian context. The same ambivalence will oblige us to view with some reservations the various current hypotheses about the "artistic unity" of *The House of Life*.

Being a reader and translator of medieval poetry, especially that of Italy, the personification of Love was of course a natural gesture to Rossetti. One cannot easily overestimate Rossetti's debt to the poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*:

*She led me then into a fresh green bower  
And there I saw flowers of every hue  
And I was filled so full of sweetened joy  
Love's godlike boy  
There too I seemed to see.*<sup>3</sup>

Rossetti's language comes directly from such sources as these lines of Cavalcanti, but it undergoes a change in meaning. Cavalcanti's bower, one of the many guises of the medieval Garden of Love, is identical with any number of Rossetti's landscapes:

*Sweet twining hedgeflowers wind-stirred in  
no wise  
On this June day; and hand that clings  
in hand:—  
Still glades . . .*

"The Lovers' Walk" (XII)

Rossetti's bower, however, is a place of refuge, not only from whatever distracts one from the pursuit of love, but also from the decay which lies in wait for mere worldly lovers. This becomes apparent in the conclusion of the same sonnet, where we find the garden inhabited by lovers

*Whose passionate hearts lean by Love's  
high decree  
Together on his heart for ever true,  
As the cloud-foaming firmamental blue  
Rests on the blue line of a foamless sea.*