

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "THE PRINCE'S PROGRESS" AND DANTE'S FOURFOLD SYSTEM

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In her extremely insightful interpretation of "The Prince's Progress" (1866) in *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics*, Mary Arseneau observes that from at least 1848 Rossetti was "probably familiar" with Dante's statement in a letter to Can Grande that the *Commedia* entails four levels of reading and interpretation, which he terms the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical (Arseneau 141). Arseneau returns obliquely to Dante's fourfold system towards the end of her interpretation when she asserts that the failure of the poem's dilatory Prince to complete his journey in time to claim his waiting Bride before she dies manifests itself on three levels, the "physical," the "moral," and the "spiritual" (154-55); however, it is not her aim to bring Dante's hermeneutic system to bear on "The Prince's Progress" as a whole, a task that will be attempted here with reference less to his description of the fourfold system in his letter to Can Grande than in the more accommodating rehearsal of the same ideas in the second chapter of *Il Convito* (also known as *Il Convivio*). Before embarking on that task, a brief recapitulation of the poem's compositional history, its envisioned audience, its author's Dantean background, and the fourfold system itself will provide the necessary contexts for the discussion, the aim of which is to contribute to the existing repertoire of interpretations of the Prince's character, his journey, the various events, figures, and landscapes that he encounters on his way, and the scene that confronts him on arrival at his destination.

Contexts

Thanks to Rossetti's correspondence, her editor R.W. Crump, and her biographer Jan Marsh, the compositional history of "The Prince's Progress" is well known. On 11 October 1861, perhaps in response to a theme proposed by the Portfolio Society (an informal group of female artists and writers of