

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S *LADY LILITH*,
SIBYLLA PALMIFERA,
"BODY'S BEAUTY," AND "SOUL'S BEAUTY"

D.M.R. Bentley

Unlike the ballads of "Life" and "Death" with which A.C. Swinburne opened the first series of *Poems and Ballads* (1866), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's most famous pair of paintings, *Lady Lilith* and *Sibylla Palmifera*, were not originally conceived as companion pieces but became so over a period of years. Whereas Swinburne's two ballads were written in the same year (1862) and carry epigraphs that link them to and through Lucrezia Borgia, Rossetti's paintings were begun over a year apart – *Lady Lilith* in 1864 and *Sibylla Palmifera* near the end of 1865¹ – and remained unconnected textually until 1868, when they were drawn into conjunction by the sonnets entitled "Lilith" and "Sibylla Palmifera" that appeared together among the "Sonnets for Pictures" in *Poems* (1870) and as "Body's Beauty" and "Soul's Beauty" in the 1881 version of *The House of Life*. The two paintings are approximately but not exactly the same size (95.3 × 81.3 cm. versus 94 × 82.6 cm.), and Rossetti's letters of 1866-67 to George Rae, the exceedingly patient purchaser of *Palmifera* (as Rossetti initially called it [*Correspondence* 3: 376-77 and 3:505]), indicate that he considered the painting, at least for the purposes of securing its sale, a companion piece for *The Beloved* (which Rae already owned) rather than *Lady Lilith* (which Rossetti subsequently sold to F.R. Leyland).² Cohere they certainly did, however, and not merely into a pair but into a constellation consisting of two companion paintings and two companion poems that are unique in Rossetti's *oeuvre* for the mutually illuminating light that they each sheds on the others. An examination of *Lady Lilith* and "Body's Beauty" will establish the ground against which Rossetti set *Sibylla Palmifera* and "Soul's Beauty" for comparison and contrast.