

“LOVE THAT RELEASES NO BELOVED FROM LOVING”:
CHRISTINA AND DANTE ROSSETTI’S REACTION TO THE
COURTLY LOVE CONVENTION OF DANTE ALIGHIERI
AND THE IDEALIZATION OF THE FEMALE MUSE

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Critics have identified an ideological opposition between Christina Rossetti’s and Dante Rossetti’s interpretations of Dantean courtly love. Mary Arseneau summarizes this opposition when she claims that Dante Rossetti’s central interest in “the idealized and eternal union of ... human lovers” contrasts strikingly with “Christina’s focus on the union of both lover and beloved with God” (27). Such a reading has its foundation in the wider theological oppositions of both artists. Christina Rossetti, as a Tractarian poet, is understood as unable to “embrace the Pre-Raphaelite revolt against dualism: ... a vision of the immanence of the supernatural *in* the natural” (Bump 328), while Dante Rossetti, as a Pre-Raphaelite, is often seen as “deliberately exclude[ing] transcendental ‘meaning’ from his symbols, elevating in their place exact perception and sensation” (Holmes 13). The Rossettis’ ideological differences thus stem from the fundamental opposition between Christian and Romantic definitions of the divine, defined here by Catherine Musello Cantalupo: “divinity *exists* in Romantic nature, whereas divinity is merely *shadowed* in Christian nature” (283).

These oppositions are often understood as the motivation for the Rossettis’ decisions to focus on contrasting works by Dante and, by implication, on different aspects of his philosophy of courtly love in its diverging aspirations towards either sacred or erotic unions. Arseneau has argued that Dante Rossetti’s focus on Dante’s love for Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* is refuted by Christina’s emphasis on the *Divine Comedy* and her preoccupation with the “redirection of the pilgrim Dante’s love from Beatrice towards God” (27). In particular, Christina’s “Monna Innominata” sonnets are often read as a direct rebuke of her brother’s reading of Dantean courtly love (Holmes 9). Holmes has argued that the sonnets promote an “alternative ... Christian moral and theological agenda” to Dante Rossetti’s “frank celebration of sexual love.” He contends that Christina viewed her brother’s preoccupation with the physical aspects of courtly love as “dangerously irreligious” because it was