

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S DYING

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Over the past several years, as the centenary of Christina Rossetti's death in 1994 approached, substantial biographies of the poet by Kathleen Jones (1991), Frances Thomas (1992) and Jan Marsh (1994) have appeared. An earlier biography by Lona Mosk Packer (1963) was undermined by the author's attempt to designate William Bell Scott as Christina's clandestine love interest and then to read much of her love poetry from that angle, a misguided fantasy as William Fredeman's subsequent review demonstrated. The most recent of the new biographies, and generally regarded as the most valuable, is by Jan Marsh. For some readers, Marsh's book – despite its impressive scholarship, lucidity, and breadth of treatment – is similarly weakened by a rogue claim that recurs throughout the narrative but which is supported by little hard evidence. For example, Nicholas Shrimpton in the *TLS* reacted to the proposition that Christina's father sexually abused her by describing the idea as a “wild hypothesis.” He also made the following severe judgement: “Marsh's evidence for this claim is, briefly, negligible, consisting solely of a ragbag of generalized observations by twentieth-century psychotherapists and some fantastical readings of Rossetti's literary imagery” (5). Shrimpton suggests that making Rossetti into a victim of sexual abuse is akin to repackaging the poet according to trends of currently ‘fashionable’ thinking. Once again, it would appear, biographical speculation about Christina Rossetti threatens to have deleterious consequences in literary criticism.¹

A more recent review of Marsh's biography in *The London Review of Books* contains some startling remarks that help to focus attention on one aspect of Rossetti's biography seldom considered a site of controversy: her death. However, Jacqueline Rose's comments are, if anything, more questionable than Marsh's suggestion about abuse, and they indicate how the interpretation of Rossetti's dying can have effects beyond the simply biographical: “Christina the poetess lived as an ascetic, her religious devotion powerless to assuage the self-loathing which seems to have dominated so much of her adult life. (According to more than one account, she died raving at her own perdition)” (16). Notice the charged words Rose has chosen: poetess, ascetic, powerless, self-loathing, dominated, raving, perdition. What, one might wonder, but a kind of pitying contempt can stand behind such a