

*The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts* edited by Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1999. 351 pp. + 25 illus. ISBN 0-8214-1243-4. \$39.95.

Over the past twenty years the caricatured image of Christina Rossetti as the sentimental lyricist and unintellectual spinster has been systematically eroded by a steadily accumulating body of sympathetic criticism. In her concise and helpful introduction to *The Culture of Christina Rossetti*, Mary Arseneau situates a new collection of essays within this recent history of scholarship on the poet. Readers are promised “a new appraisal of an unfamiliar Christina Rossetti, one more radical (even in her conservatism), more ironic, more critical of literary traditions within which she positions herself, more diverse, and more engaged with political, economic, scientific, and social issues than once she was thought to be.” The two elements in the subtitle--female poetics and Victorian contexts--identify the general foci of the twelve essays (three of which have been published elsewhere, two of them slightly altered and one revised). In fact, though, the collection is divided into three sections: Intertexts and Influences, Contexts and Critique, and Female Poetics. Included with these essays (many of which are outstanding) are a substantial bibliography and a usefully detailed index.

Two excellent essays that alert us to the importance of reading Rossetti’s poetry with a greater attentiveness to unexpected ironies, notes of anger, and postures of rebellion are Margaret Reynolds’s “Speaking Unlikenesses: The Double Text in Christina Rossetti’s ‘After Death’ and ‘Remember’” and Susan Conley’s “Rossetti’s Cold Women: Irony and Liminal Fantasy in the Death Lyrics.” Reynolds argues that beneath the “nice version” of lyrics such as “After Death” and “Remember me when I am gone away” there lurks “an alternative aesthetics of secrecy, self-containment, and caprice,” a “subversive text ... inscribed within a complaisant poem.” Her essay is delightfully bold and witty in its assertions and is a pleasure to read. The presence of an “ironic poetic voice” in Rossetti’s most anthologized lyrics is also the subject of Conley’s analysis. Both authors demonstrate that Rossetti’s poetry is far more subtle in its effects and intentions than has been understood or appreciated. But in disclosing the “skeptical, ironic female voice,” Conley needs to avoid the suggestions that certain sentiments apply directly to Rossetti. If, for Rossetti’s dead or dying speakers, “death is to be preferred over life,” the poems need to be identified as dramatic monologues and not lyric confessions of repressed feelings. If “an exchange” between the lovers in “An Echo” can be described as “vampiric,” we perhaps need to remember that Rossetti was the niece of John Polidori. After absorbing the remarkable insights of Reynolds and Conley,