

“ALLEGORIZ[ING] ON ONE’S OWN HOOK”:
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI’S ILLUSTRATIONS
IN MOXON’S TENNYSON

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Fortunately, the prologue, epilogue, and main events of the drama surrounding the five illustrations that Dante Gabriel Rossetti produced in 1855-57 for Edward Moxon’s edition of Alfred Tennyson’s *Poems* (1857) have been repeated fully and frequently enough to require little further rehearsal.¹ No doubt partly to capitalize on the success of *In Memoriam* (1850) and Tennyson’s appointment as poet laureate in the same year, Moxon approached him in 1854 with the idea of issuing an illustrated collection of his early poems. The idea was positively received, and Moxon set about commissioning the illustrations – 54 in all – from such well known artists as Thomas Creswick, William Mulready, and Clarkson Stanfield, as well as from three of the newly famous Pre-Raphaelites: Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais. As a result of several factors, including the deleteriousness of Rossetti, which helped to rob the book of the lucrative Christmas market of 1856, *Poems* was a financial disaster for Moxon and may have helped to hasten his premature death in 1858. Major contributions to the delays caused by Rossetti were his inexperience with woodcutting and his frustration with the engravers – the Dalziel Brothers – who handled three of his five contributions, namely his designs for “The Lady of Shalott” and for two passages in “The Palace of Art,” but not his designs for “Mariana in the South” and “Sir Galahad,” which were handled by the much less vexatious W.J. Linton;² however, another major contribution to the delays was Rossetti’s meticulous attention to detail, a quality that reflects the pictorial and intellectual complexity of the designs and warrants their close examination not just individually but, as will be argued here, as an ensemble with a coherent set of themes, motifs, and concerns that are related to and yet distinct from those of the poems that they were commissioned to illustrate.

On 23 January 1855, Rossetti told William Allingham that, in selecting the poems that he wished to illustrate, he planned to choose “those” – “‘A Vision of Sin’ & ‘Palace of Art’ &c” – “where one can allegorize on one’s own hook on the subject of the poem, without killing, for oneself & everyone,