

## THE CHARACTER OF PRE-RAPHAELITE POETRY AND FICTIONAL PROSE

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*He belongs, or is said to belong, to the ... Pre-Raphaelite school of painting.... [I]f there is any good quality by which his poems are specially marked, it is a great sensitiveness to hues and tints as conveyed by poetic epithets.*

– Robert Buchanan, “The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D.G. Rossetti” 336

### I

On the eve of the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in September 1848, Dante Gabriel Rossetti sent some of his poems to William Holman Hunt for comment. With one exception, “The Card-Dealer” (or “Vingt-et-un” as it then was), the poems cannot be identified with certainty, but there is a strong likelihood that they included one or more of “The Blessed Damozel,” “Retro me, Sathana,” “For an Annunciation, Early German,” “The Portrait,” and “Mater Pulchrae Delectionis” (later “Ave”), all of which were wholly or largely written by then and some of which he had sent to Leigh Hunt for comment late in 1847 or early in 1848 under the title “Songs of the Art Catholic.” Unfortunately, the letter containing Hunt’s response to the poems does not appear to have survived; however, two of his comments are registered by Rossetti in a letter written on or about 23 July 1848. One of these, an explanation of the title of “Vingt-et-un” and a stanza of the poem that Hunt had found “obscure,” is of restricted interest, but the other is more general and of very considerable interest as a reflection of Pre-Raphaelite poetics in the months when the PRB was coming together and Rossetti, Hunt, and other members of their circle were turning their attention not only to such things as the name of the group and a manifesto to establish its principles (their “List of Immortals”), but also to poetry per se through the formation of a Literary Society that met for the first time in mid August (*Correspondence* 1:64-67).

In his letter Rossetti prefaces his response to Hunt’s comments by addressing his fear that they are “Burchettical” (1:66) – that is, harsh and even caustic in the manner of Richard Burchett, an assistant master at the Central