

THE “OLD ITALIAN BOOK”  
THAT MADE DANTE ROSSETTI “THE PARTICULAR KIND  
OF MAN AND ARTIST” THAT HE WAS

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In a letter of 28 May 1865 to Alice Boyd, William Bell Scott reports that on the previous evening he “had a very pleasant chat” with Dante Gabriel Rossetti that included an exchange that has gone all but unnoticed and unexamined:

He showed me an old Italian book illustrated by Mantegna, the book that had the most important part in making him the particular kind of man and artist he is. It is full of the style, sentiment, and invention proper for mediaeval poetic painting. He would not lend it (he had given away his father’s copy ten years ago, and has been looking for one ever since and just got it), but I think I must get the book myself tho’ it costs about £10. (qtd in Fredeman, “Letters” 91)

In the edition of Scott’s letters to Boyd in which this passage is quoted, William E. Fredeman suggests that the “old Italian book” may have been *Tabulae Triumphi Caesaris*, a “made-up volume of 9 plates ... dated in the dedication, Mantua 1599,” adding by way of corroborative evidence that the sale of the contents of Rossetti’s house in 1882 included “9 photographs from Mantegna’s *Triumph of Caesar*” (91). On the basis of the evidence available to Fredeman when he edited Scott’s correspondence with Boyd in 1975, his suggestion that the book Scott saw was *Tabulae Triumphi Caesaris* is not entirely implausible, but it may unintentionally have helped to direct attention away from a far more likely candidate – one that warrants firm identification and close consideration if it was indeed “the book that had the most important part in making ... [Rossetti] the particular kind of man and artist” he was in 1865.

On both external and internal evidence *Tabulae Triumphi Caesaris* seems extremely unlikely to have been the apparently formative “old Italian book”