

“SOMETHING I DO NOT KNOW AGAIN”:
UNEARTHING ABJECTION IN DANTE ROSSETTI’S
“JENNY”

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Dante Rossetti was neither lazy nor laughing nor languid in the aftermath of “The Fleshly School of Poetry” attack of October 1871. Following weeks of uncertainty, the *nom de plume* “Thomas Maitland” was traced back to the writer Robert Buchanan, and in December that year *The Athenaeum* carried Rossetti’s methodological and measured reply: “The Stealthy School of Criticism.” Defending “Jenny” – one of the most significant works in *Poems* – Rossetti notes the “forsee[ability]” of Buchanan’s criticism, which “hold[s] that the thought in it had better have dispensed with the situation which serves it for framework” (“Stealthy School” 337). That “framework” is prostitution; the “thought” is Rossetti’s notion that art requires an “inner standing-point” (see Bentley 691) because “the beauty and pity, the self-questionings and all-questionings which it brings with it, can come with full force only from the mouth of one alive to its whole appeal, such as the speaker put forward in the poem – that is, of a young and thoughtful man of the world” (“Stealthy School” 337-38).¹ Confronted with Buchanan’s attack, Rossetti’s sensitive defence of “Jenny” displays the same “thoughtful[ness]” he ascribes to the poem’s speaker, mingling concepts of “beauty” and “pity” with an interrogative outlook which is – most compellingly – capable of turning in on itself.

“Jenny” is a complex, structurally disjointed, and often uncertain dramatic monologue; written in a cryptic manner, even the connections between each section of the poem seem self-concealing. Yet, when studied attentively, “Jenny” can be read as a text that draws on these problematic aspects to confront the reader with a detailed presentation of abjection that anticipates Julia Kristeva’s popular interpretation of the concept. Challenging the long-standing notion that the speaker’s inconsistency, ambivalence, and anxiety are foundational problems that the reader and critic alike must overcome to “read” “Jenny,” I shall show how the opening of the dramatic monologue establishes a concern with a distinction between the subject, the object, and