

REVIEWS

The Portrait of Beatrice: Dante, D.G. Rossetti, and the Imaginary Lady by Fabio A. Camilletti. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 2019. xv, 258 pp. + 6 b/w illus. ISBN 9780268103972. \$50.00.

Fabio A. Camilletti's *The Portrait of Beatrice* begins by addressing a simple problem: there are no reliable physical descriptions of Beatrice Portinari in the writings of Dante Alighieri. This may be surprising, given how central Beatrice is to the Florentine poet's works, particularly the autobiographical *La Vita Nuova* (1294). Even when she materializes to Dante in heaven at the end of the *Divine Comedy*, the poet confesses himself "defeated" in trying to describe the "beauty that [he] saw." Furthermore, there are no extant painted portraits of the famed Beatrice from the period when she was alive. As Camilletti points out in his introduction, this absence of any textual or visual portraits of Beatrice creates challenges for any subsequent artists who seek to depict her, in that it is not known what she actually looked like. Instead, as Camilletti observes, "the absence of any given portrait – or of any physical description of Beatrice in Dante's works – [is] an incentive toward the visionary re-creation of the beloved's ideal beauty." Artists must use their imaginations when deciding how to depict Beatrice, instead of relying on historical sources.

As is well known, Dante was an important source of inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelite circle, especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti's affinity with the Florentine poet has been the subject of an extensive body of scholarly literature and has also become something of the stuff of legend. Rossetti is central to Camilletti's *The Portrait of Beatrice*, as it was he, in Camilletti's view, "whose activity – from the late 1840s onwards – can be taken as a turning point in the reappraisal of the *Vita Nova* in the Victorian age, in England and beyond." (Rossetti first translated Dante's *Vita Nuova* in 1848, and the translation was eventually published in his 1861 collection *The Early Italian Poets*.) Rossetti's Italian heritage also plays a key role in Camilletti's book, especially chapter 2, "Early Italian Poets, Early Italian Painters."

Central to *The Portrait of Beatrice* is the complex relationship between past and present: Renaissance Italy and Victorian England; the living and the dead; the influence of historical artists and writers over their modern equivalents. Where Pre-Raphaelitism is concerned, Camilletti's book deals exclusively with Rossetti and his family. It contains an extended analysis of Rossetti's "Hand and Soul," the short story published in *The Germ* (1850), which takes up two of the book's three chapters. Camilletti considers some of