

**REWRITING CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: CROSS-GENDERED SIBLING  
RIVALRY, FRATERNAL INTERVENTION AND THE  
COUNTER-POETICS OF DISSIDENCE.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**This thesis attempts to rewrite Christina Rossetti's relations with her brothers Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Michael Rossetti, paying especial attention to unravelling the received tradition that as an artist, Rossetti was indebted to Dante Gabriel's patronage. Instead, I argue that she negotiated her career as a poet against a covertly competitive backdrop of sibling rivalry, in which Dante Gabriel made strenuous efforts to direct and control her creative work. This thesis also examines and challenges the myths that William Michael set in motion as his sister's initial editor and biographer, and which still inform our perception of her as a poet and as a sister. I also investigate her standing regarding the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a relation which is more problematic than is generally believed, maintaining that she was excluded from equal membership within this glamorous circle while simultaneously strategically important to them, both as a poet and a model.**

**Clearly, the various misrepresentations of Rossetti's life and works are gendered. I employ the tools of feminist literary practice and new historicism in order to reveal the extent to which the treatment of Rossetti both by her brothers and various critics, has reflected patriarchal pressures and strictures. Primary manuscripts, some unpublished, or published in censored versions, are scrutinised and pieced together in an attempt to present a more accurate view of both**

**Rossetti's relationships with the men in her life, and her own sense of herself as a poet. Close attention is also paid to the singularity of her personal history, which was underscored by her strong sense of poetic vocation.**

**This attempt to rework the traditional picture of Christina Rossetti provides significant new perspectives on and readings of her canon, and her brother's. I trace patterns in her poetry which are related to her struggle for creative agency in the face of fraternal intervention, and propose a model of dialogic interrogation for re-reading significant texts. I conclude that a comparative study of intertextuality between the Rossettis contributes vitally to the further understanding of both poets.**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**The writing of most theses resembles a perilous quest narrative, complete with disasters, digressions, seemingly insurmountable obstacles and various sloughs of despond. Mine was no exception. It first took shape in extreme isolation, then under what felt like, at times, a state of siege; at the same time it acted as a springboard that took me to three continents and gave me access to rare manuscript libraries and some of the most stimulating and dynamic academic communities worldwide. The networks of support which enabled me to write this dissertation have a cast of, if not thousands, literally hundreds. I was peculiarly dependent on the good will, help and hospitality of others due to the fact that this thesis was largely researched and written outside of South Africa, at a time when the spectacular decline of our economy and our shrinking currency made this an extremely difficult undertaking.**

**Thus, for financial assistance, thanks are due to the following institutions and individuals: the Human Sciences Research Council, now the Centre for Scientific Development, which obliges me to both acknowledge its support and announce that it cannot be held responsible for the opinions expressed in my work; the Postgraduate Bursary Office of the University of Cape Town; the English Department of the University of Cape Town; Volkskas Bank, which granted me a student loan after four other major banking establishments had turned me down**

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## **PREFACE**

**In writing this thesis, I have pieced together both published material and archival manuscripts, which did not necessarily make use of consistent stylistic configurations. This is especially true in the case of manuscripts which were later published, but minutely altered in presentation; for example, in preparing his siblings' letters for printing, William Michael Rossetti invariably italicised words that were underlined in the originals. Other editors of letters and journals applied their own typographical standardisation. Wherever possible, I have used the form as it appears in the source I cite first, although this leads to overall inconsistency. I also reproduce the originals exactly, including deletions, errors, and any discrepancies or idiosyncrasies of style, spelling and format. It will be noted that in the case of manuscripts, I sometimes cite two sources: both the original archive and any subsequent publication; where possible, I provide the date of the original manuscript for identification purposes. This is especially useful in cases where the original has been altered or censored in the process of subsequent publication. Dates followed by a question-mark are those which have been tentatively attributed to undated or partially dated material by previous editors.**

**I use Rebecca Crump's variorum edition of Christina Rossetti's poems as a standard source when discussing the texts, and here too, I sometimes cite two**

page references; this is when the index materials for the poem, separately listed in Crump, contain pertinent information. I follow the rules of standard British spelling throughout, but when citing material published in the USA, I replicate the spelling used in the original.

**Library Collections consulted:**

**Additional MSS and Ashley Collection, British Museum, London.**

**Bodleian Library, Oxford.**

**Rare Manuscripts and Troxell Collection, Princeton University Library,  
Princeton.**

**Angeli-Dennis Collection, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver.**

**Columbia University Library, New York City.**

**Huntingdon Library, San Marino.**

**Abbreviations Used:**

**Collected Works of DGR: The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti with a  
Preface and a Memoir by William Michael Rossetti.**

**CP: The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti, 3 vols, ed. Rebecca Crump.**

**DGR: His Family Letters: Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters with a  
Memoir by William Michael Rossetti.**

**FL: The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti, ed. William Michael Rossetti.**

**Letters of DGR: Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 4 vols, ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl.**

**Memoir: William Michael Rossetti's Memoir in The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti.**

**Poetical Works of DGR: The Poetical Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ed. William Michael Rossetti.**

**PW: The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti, with a Memoir & Notes by William Michael Rossetti.**

**RML: The Rossetti-Macmillan Letters, ed. Lona Mosk Packer.**

**RP: Rossetti Papers 1862-70: A Compilation, ed. William Michael Rossetti.**

**TR: Three Rossettis: Unpublished Letters to and from Dante Gabriel, Christina, William, ed. Janet Camp Troxell.**

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis began when, reading Lona Mosk Packer's biography of Christina Rossetti,<sup>1</sup> I came across a photograph of the original manuscript of one of Rossetti's poems -- which had apparently been mutilated by her brother and posthumous editor, William Michael Rossetti. Clearly a long poem, its central pages had been torn out, leaving behind only the first and last stanzas in the little notebook in which it was written. The first line of the poem (entitled *A Nightmare*) read "I have a love in ghostland", and the physical relation of this "love" towards the first-person narrator was described four lines later: "If I wake, he rides me like a nightmare." The words "love" and "rides" had been deleted and replaced (in what seemed to be William Michael's handwriting) by "friend" and "hunts" respectively -- an alteration he neglected to mention in his notes to the poem in his edition of his sister's *Poetical Works*, until a decade ago, the only available comprehensive collection of Rossetti's poems.<sup>2</sup>

I was transfixed by an intense excitement which contained too much indignation to qualify as *jouissance* -- was this perhaps William Michael's standard practice? Had Rossetti's poems, like Emily Dickinson's, been doctored and sanitised before

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<sup>1</sup>Christina Rossetti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963.)

<sup>2</sup>The *Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti with a Memoir & Notes* by William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906.)

publication? Turning to the text, however, I found that the photograph of the notebook manuscript had been included only in support of the author's own (subsequently discredited) thesis; that Rossetti had nursed a guilty and secret passion for a married man. Nowhere was there any discussion of the literary, social or political implications of tampering with original manuscripts, or even of censorship. As a scholar who had come to feminist literary practice via an activist history, I felt that my "discovery" raised compelling questions: had William Michael, who survived his siblings by a quarter of a decade, tinkered with the original poems after his sister's death, and if so, to what extent? Did he cast himself in the role of the protector, even producer, of his sister's image as a pious spinster, and did this necessitate suppressing of any hint of overt sexuality in her work? Whether or not these queries could be answered, the implications remained: it seemed completely possible that for Rossetti, fraternal control and censorship extended beyond the ambit of her life.

These were the initial broad and somewhat rhetorical questions which got me to the Western Manuscript Reading Room of the British Museum several months later. I was hoping to be able to establish to what degree Rossetti's texts had been rewritten or censored, and to begin an investigation of the extent to which Victorian gender stereotypes had played a influential role. Although the first two volumes of Rebecca Crump's variorum edition of Rossetti's complete poems<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti, 3 vols (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980-1990.)

were by then available, making it possible to check original holograph works against their appearance in print, there was still a mass of manuscript material, some of it never previously published, or printed only in part, that required scrutiny.

However, as I shuttled between the British Museum in London and the Bodleian Library in Oxford, my research seemed to be leading to a dead end: there was no large-scale evidence of rewriting (other than by Rossetti herself); neither had Crump identified this as a serious problem. Certainly, some of Rossetti's juvenile poems had been abbreviated; and one poem entitled *Portraits*, evidently meant as thumb-nail sketches of her two brothers, had been literally cut. Instead of the neatly ruled line Rossetti herself would draw through verses or lines she discarded, part of the page itself had been cut away, leaving only a rather satiric opening stanza (clearly referring to William Michael) and a more sentimental final stanza affectionately praising both brothers, as "Beloved of many a loving heart/ And cherished both in mine ...." The missing lines presumably comprised a not entirely flattering description of Dante Gabriel, who is described in the two lines just before the gap as "... a semi-dozing man/ Who wakes to go to bed by light."<sup>4</sup> William Michael later acknowledged rather ruefully that Dante Gabriel himself had destroyed the offending stanza.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Bodleian Library, 9 May 1853; Crump, CP III 213-4, 442.

<sup>5</sup>PW 491.

Moreover, as I uncovered more about Rossetti's methods of composition and transcription, I could not rule out the possibility that although William Michael had defused the vocabulary of *A Nightmare*,<sup>6</sup> there was no guarantee that Rossetti herself had not destroyed the intervening pages, even though this was unlikely. Other contenders were her older sister, Maria, and her mother, both of whom acted as proofreaders, scribes and copyists for her. A number of the poems in the neat fair-copy notebooks into which her poems were transcribed were in Maria's handwriting, even more copper-plate than Rossetti's own.

This was not enough to build a thesis on, although I was at this stage more interested in questioning the relation between Rossetti and her brothers than in duplicating Crump's retrieval of the original poems. As I sifted through the manuscripts, not quite certain what I was looking for, but afraid to omit anything in case it turned out to be of significance, I came across the Rossetti-Macmillan correspondence in the British Museum, and began recording it, unaware that Packer had already edited and published these letters in a little-known volume

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<sup>6</sup>Both Crump and Frances Thompson (*Christina Rossetti* [Hanley Swan and London: The Self Publishing Association, 1992]) believe that the changes are made in Rossetti's own handwriting; I hesitate to contradict their expert scrutiny, but feel, with Packer (112-3) and Kathleen Jones (*Learning not to be First: the Life of Christina Rossetti* [Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire: Windrush, 1991] 147), that the writing is almost certainly William Michael's. However, the broader mystery of *A Nightmare* was at last partially solved with the publication of Crump's third volume, in which a longer (and previously unavailable) version of the poem, entitled *A Coast-Nightmare*, saw the light. Here Rossetti herself had used the words the words "friend" and "hunts" in place of "love" and "rides." This would have provided William Michael with some rationale for altering the initial poem. (Crump, CP III 268-9, 465-6.)

largely bypassed by scholars.<sup>7</sup> Here I came across a series of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's increasingly peremptory letters to the publisher Macmillan; given their testy and proprietary tone, I at first assumed that he was writing to his own publisher about hitches in the publication of his own works. However, on realising that he was actually hectoring his sister's publisher about the proof-copies of his sister's volume of verse (which he refused to return for printing until she had made the changes he considered necessary), I experienced my second moment of epiphany. Up till now, while I had felt that Rossetti's relation to her male siblings, their circle (in particular the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) and their creative projects required rethinking, I had never considered that she might have experienced actual resistance or sabotage within her family -- let alone on the part of Dante Gabriel -- whom, I assumed, was surely established in his own right as an artist.<sup>8</sup> However, this in itself could be significant: perhaps he unable to countenance any challenge to his creative superiority from within the family. An even more striking possibility posed itself; perhaps this "creative superiority," an pronouncement made by later critics, had never been established once and for all during the lifetime of the Rossetti family; perhaps brother and sister had battled as equal rivals in art. *Perhaps she was even the better artist.*

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<sup>7</sup>**The Rossetti-Macmillan Letters** (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963.)

<sup>8</sup>I had never thought to question the tradition that he was the more famous in their lifetime; I was to discover that she was the first to achieve public reknown as a poet, nearly a decade before he did so.

As I read on, concentrating now on the letters rather than the poems, I discovered more and more evidence which suggested that both brothers were uncomfortable in different ways, not only with their sister's recognised identity as a poet, but with some, even many, of the actual texts she produced. Dante Gabriel, especially, extremely sensitive to both competition and criticism, struggled to come to terms with Christina's success and status as a poet (rather than a sentimental poetess) and was clearly discomforted by the singular, even unsettling qualities of some of her poems. Both brothers put a great deal of energy into *explaining* (and explaining away) the poems; William Michael in the form of plodding commentaries written after her death, Dante Gabriel by means of more aggressive strategies of trying to tame them during her life. This dissertation will include discussion and description of how he developed strategies of controlling his sister's texts (by means of editing, censoring, renaming, rewriting, selecting, organising, criticising and illustrating them) as well as her counter-strategies of evading and resisting his supervision.

However, a project of this nature is bound to be polemical, and in the present case, this is made even more necessary by the unshaken and barely questioned status of the received opinion that Rossetti benefitted by her association with Dante Gabriel, William Michael, the rest of the Pre-Raphaelites and their creative community. Clearly, it would be both foolish and inaccurate to suggest that she did not profit from access to a circle which included not only Pre-Raphaelite

luminaries such as Ford Madox Brown, John Millais, William Holman Hunt, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris and Arthur Hughes, but also Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), Robert Browning, John Ruskin, Coventry Patmore, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Edmund Gosse, the popular contemporary poetesses Dora Greenwell and Jean Ingelow, the feminist activists and writers Barbara Leigh Smith (later Mme Bodichon), Bessie Parkes, Anna Maria Howitt and Augusta Webster. A particularly beloved friend was Swinburne, whom Rossetti adored; the feeling was mutual, and theirs must make for one of the most incongruous friendships in Victorian literary circles.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it must also be pointed out that with the exception of the initial members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti cultivated most of these acquaintances on her own account; in fact, many of them sought her out as the foremost female poet of her day, and the one considered Barrett Browning's most obvious successor.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, I wish to propose that fresh, even startling insights reveal themselves when the traditional perspective of fraternal influence is reversed: instead of

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<sup>9</sup>It was certainly responsible for some amusing and endearing poetic exchanges of courtesy. Rossetti sent Swinburne a present of one of her religious works, delicately "merely drawing his attention to the verses"; he in turn dedicated one of his collections of poetry to her. Each initially put out delicate feelers as to whether or not the other would be offended, but then responded with delight to the intended compliment. (Thompson 321-24.)

<sup>10</sup>Rossetti's *Goblin Market and Other Poems* came out shortly after Barrett Browning's death, and was widely taken as evidence that its author was suitably qualified to "replace" Barrett Browning as Britain's "foremost woman poet," an argument that clearly demonstrates the gendered reasoning of the day which could only conceive of one great women poet at a time.

congratulating Rossetti on her good fortune in having male siblings who brought this world to her door, and in particular a brother whose career as an artist provided a role model and a source of useful contacts and guidance, what requires investigation is the extent to which she was excluded from this wider world, or permitted to participate only tentatively or marginally, while largely confined to secondary roles and the domestic hearth. The degree to which she was not only obliged to stand in her brother's shadow, but both overtly and covertly prohibited from rivalling his claim as the predominant artist in the family must be scrutinised: the process, in other words, of Rossetti's painful education in learning "not to be first."<sup>11</sup>

However, it would be fallacious to suggest her brothers invariably or deliberately excluded her from opportunities they enjoyed (although this was sometimes the case); or even that they discouraged her attempts to practice what the family referred to as "the Art." Indeed, both were rather touchingly proud of her initial attempts; and William Michael, never really a contender for the laurel wreath of the family, and who therefore did not seem to suffer from the fear that his own writings (such as they were) might be unfavourably compared with his sister's, basked modestly in her achievements and continuing prestige after her death.

Even a desultory reading of the archival materials (letters, diaries and notebooks)

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<sup>11</sup>This phrase comes from the poem *The Lowest Room*, in which the protagonist struggles to come to terms with the limitations of her life: "Not to be first: how hard to learn/ That lifelong lesson of the past;/ Line graven on line and stroke on stroke;/ But, thank God learned at last." (Crump, CP I 207.)

clearly points to the genuine affection and family loyalty shared by all three; it is only on closer examination that the tensions, anxieties, and hidden agendas begin to emerge.

The varieties of contextual patriarchal discourse cannot be discounted from this scrutiny, either. Women were not meant to write about sex, politics, bloody death, heroes or warfare, and in spite of Barrett Browning's monumental example, social criticisms mounted in the poems of a woman writer were also frowned upon; fraternal objections to such poems are hardly surprising. What also becomes clear is that the Victorians had rather less scruples about the supposedly inviolable rights of manuscripts than the indignant twentieth century reader or historian might assume; biographers had no qualms about omitting or even altering material that might be considered sensitive, and the histories they wrote were often carefully constructed around a variety of omissions. The attempts to control Rossetti's texts have to be seen in a context where censorship was considered to be polite, even necessary according to social or gender conventions; Dante Gabriel himself removed the most graphic of his **House of Life** sonnets describing what was euphemistically called *Nuptial Sleep* from his volume before allowing Christina to read it.<sup>12</sup> She in turn, with an ingenuity which characterised her combination of literary curiosity with her moral

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<sup>12</sup>After the Buchanan *contretemps*, he removed it altogether from successive editions of the **House of Life** volume. (Preface, **The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti with a Preface and Memoir by William Michael Rossetti** [London: Ellis & Scrutton, 1886] xxxiii.)

convolutions, pasted paper over parts of the chorus in Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon* in order to be able to read her friend's work;<sup>13</sup> a gesture usually assumed to stem from extreme sexual prudery, but which was no doubt religiously motivated; it was the drama's pagan and blasphemous elements, not the sensuous ones, that she could not countenance.

William Michael meanwhile kept an iron hand on the posthumous editions of both Dante Gabriel and Christina's works, and omitted a political sonnet (*On the French Liberation of Italy*) of his brother's from one volume, explaining frankly to the reader that he did so because of the "vigorous and perhaps repulsive metaphor" employed (one of post-coital lassitude shared by a prostitute and her client).<sup>14</sup> There was also the finagling William Michael insisted on when Dante Gabriel's *House of Life* sonnets were first published; the dates were deliberately blurred to suggest that the poems were the inspired by the tender memories of a devoted widower, rather than the current reflections of a man obsessed with the wife of his friend and business partner, William Morris.<sup>15</sup> And when it came to the respective biographies of his siblings, William Michael's control was initially absolute, later anxious. Almost as much was omitted from his memoirs of his brother as was left in; although considering Dante Gabriel's personal history --

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<sup>13</sup>Jones 120.

<sup>14</sup>Preface, *Collected Works of DGR* xxxiv.

<sup>15</sup>Stanley Weintraub, *Four Rossettis: A Victorian Biography* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1977) 247.

which has been popularised in the public imagination as a rather lurid lantern-show of mistresses, infidelity, grave-robbery and drug addiction -- the censorship is hardly surprising, and was defended with honest, if slightly pompous dignity: "Some readers of the Memoir may be inclined to ask me -- 'Have you told everything, of a substantial kind, that you know about your brother?' -- My answer shall be given beforehand, and without disguise: 'No; I have told what I choose to tell, and have left untold what I do not choose to tell; if you want more, be pleased to consult some other informant.'"<sup>16</sup> In Christina's case, however, William Michael did not have much to censor, although he was initially squeamish about mentioning either the breast cancer for which she underwent a radical mastectomy, or her "disappointments" in love -- the broken engagement to James Collinson, and her rejection of Charles Cayley's proposal.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the presentation of Rossetti's life and works operated on gendered principles; although both brothers invariably assumed that her poems refer to personally experienced emotions and events (which explains the level of their anxiety about her performances -- who knew what she might reveal next?), there was no similar attempt to *consistently* establish or explain what personal circumstances, if any, could possibly have prompted each and every poem by Dante Gabriel. This was just as well, considering that one of his

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<sup>16</sup>Preface, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters with a Memoir by William Michael Rossetti* (London: Ellis & Elvey, 1895) xii.

earliest poetic projects as an adult was a meditation on a visit to a prostitute.<sup>17</sup> Christina's attempt, however, to treat the situation of an illegitimate girl as a topic for poetry, was met with opposition and disapproval.<sup>18</sup> And there is a marked distinction between not only the biographical treatments themselves, but the rationales behind them: in case of Dante Gabriel, a fairly radical cover-up was necessary; in Christina's case, a ideal myth of sweet and lovely womanhood had to be constructed.

Where did this leave my research on Rossetti? It seemed that past attempts, both feminist and traditional, to read her life through her texts were extremely problematic: however, reversing the process seemed to promise much. Indeed, Dolores Rosenblum had already formulated several extremely useful and suggestive tropes that translated from the writer's life to her texts without the naivety or blurring that such cross-referencing can be subject to.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile,

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<sup>17</sup>This was *Jenny* (*Poetical Works of DGR*, 83-94.) According to Oswald Doughty, he began work on this piece at the age of twenty. (*A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti* [Oxford University Press, 1960] 54.)

<sup>18</sup>See 188 below.

<sup>19</sup>"Christina Rossetti: The Inward Pose," *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1979) 82-98; "Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry: Watching, Looking, Keeping Vigil," *Victorian Poetry* 20.1 (Spring 1982): 33-49; "Christina Rossetti and Poetic Sequence," *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* ed. David Kent (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1987) 132-156; *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986.) Her analysis of key patterns in Rossetti's poetry, in particular the "inward pose" of the "stone woman" who is both watched and a watcher, and who constructs a variety of masks both as protection and critique, are sensitively drawn from a reading of Rossetti's life which is analysed in terms of its exemplary qualities. Rosenblum notes, but does not go on to develop, the implications of the

both Anthony Harrison<sup>20</sup> and Katherine Mayberry<sup>21</sup> had argued that an understanding of the broader context of Rossetti's life was necessary in order to undertake informed new critical readings; it seemed equally imperative to closely scrutinise the immediate context of her life, and the varieties of gendering to which this was subject.

There were other motivations for retrieving aspects of Rossetti's life in order to re-read her texts, including the one so appealing to the feminist activist: some kind of intellectual redress was necessary. It was in fact Joanna Russ's **How to Suppress Women's Writing** which first introduced me to the possibility that grave critical injustice had been done to Christina Rossetti, a poet whose works I had always greatly enjoyed without ever questioning the establishment view that she was a minor if charming poet, deserving of epithets such as "modest", "wistful", "melancholy" and "artlessly simple", seemingly applied indiscriminately to both the poet and her poetry, a conflation often observed in the discussion of women writers. Russ claimed that "[The] chilling, trance-like, almost schizophrenic lines

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fraternal dualism (and duelling) between Rossetti and Dante Gabriel; although **The Poetry of Endurance** includes two brief sections, entitled "Rivalry and Language" and "Rivalry, Usurpation and Language," these explore textual development of these themes, only briefly linking them to the contextual and familial pressures.

<sup>20</sup>**Christina Rossetti in Context** (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.)

<sup>21</sup>**Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.)

[that open *A Royal Princess*] with their technical brilliancy ... could not possibly have been written by the docile spinster whose heart was like a singing bird and who spent her life writing ... love poems or simple-minded nursery fairytales. Of course they were not: that persona (another re-categorising) has nothing to do with the real author of the poems, who is the *poet* Christina Rossetti."<sup>22</sup>

In the few years since Russ wrote these words, there has been a near-renaissance in Rossetti scholarship, much of it generated by feminist critics, and much of this in turn addressing the issues of context. The last decade in particular, has given rise to a proliferation of feminist literary studies on Victorian women writers, the Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti herself and her contemporaries. Primary material relating to Victorian women has been taken down, dusted off and re-read; Showalter's 1979 complaint that "Historical and literary studies ... based on English women [writers] are badly needed; and the manuscript and archival sources for them are both abundant and untouched"<sup>23</sup> happily no longer applies. Although I do not intend to provide a comprehensive overview of all Rossetti scholarship<sup>24</sup> or even a thorough resumé of feminist scholarship, certain trends

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<sup>22</sup>**How to Suppress Women's Writing** (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983) 64-5.

<sup>23</sup>"Towards a Feminist Poetics", **Women Writing and Writing About Women**, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm in association with Oxford University Women's Studies Committee; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979) 29.

<sup>24</sup>For fuller details, see Rebecca Crump's **Christina Rossetti: A Reference Guide** (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1976) which includes material up to 1973; Edna Kotin Charles provides a detailed and competent review of material written between 1862 and 1982 in **Christina Rossetti: Critical Perspectives, 1862-1982** (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press;

in the near-renaissance of Christina Rossetti criticism are worth noting; it is also necessary to establish what gaps remain to be explored, and to test the validity of currently prevailing critical arguments.

*Goblin Market*,<sup>25</sup> arguably Rossetti's most famous poem, was the first to attract the attention of feminist critics,<sup>26</sup> and it has been largely feminist scholarship which has retrieved this poem from the limbo to which it had been consigned after decades of criticism which had treated it initially as pretty fairy-tale and then as either a Freudian revelation of sexual neurosis<sup>27</sup> or religious and sacramental allegory.<sup>28</sup> Whereas the latter readings stood in uncompromising opposition, the fairy-tale and Freudian elements were sometimes combined, as in Maureen Duffy's *The Erotic World of Faery*, which argues that the poem is an

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London: Associated University Presses, 1985); and Rosenblum's bibliography in *Poetry of Endurance* (237-238) lists specifically feminist Rossetti scholarship up till 1986.

<sup>25</sup>Crump, CP I 11-26.

<sup>26</sup>Miriam Sagan noted this trend in 1980, and summarised current feminist commentaries in "Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' and Feminist Literary Criticism," *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* III.2 (May 1980): 66-76.

<sup>27</sup>Ellen Golub's "Untying Goblin Apron Strings: A Psychoanalytical Reading of 'Goblin Market,'" *Literature and Psychology* 23.4 (1975): 158-65, is a typical example of this kind of critique; she reads the poem as a witness to the child's struggle in "passing from oral passivity to oral sadism" and dealing with "the next developmental stage: the anal." (161-4.)

<sup>28</sup>Marian Shalkhauser's "The Feminine Christ," *Victorian Newsletter* 10 (Autumn 1956): 19-20, which suggests that *Goblin Market* is an allegory of specifically feminine salvation, is a standard example of this kind of reading. Jerome McGann notes that "Everybody agrees that the poem contains the story of temptation, fall and redemption, and some go so far as to say that the work is fundamentally a Christian allegory." ("Christina Rossetti's Poems: A New Edition and a Revaluation," *Victorian Studies* 23 [Winter 1980]: 247.)

elaborate fantasy of female masturbation.<sup>29</sup> The results were occasionally lurid; **Playboy** magazine called the poem "the all-time hard-core pornographic classic for tiny tots" and provided an illustration (in a style that suggests a pastiche of Arthur Rackham and Walt Disney) showing two nymphets in a sylvan scene languorously enjoying oral sex.<sup>30</sup> Although Cora Kaplan<sup>31</sup> and Germaine Greer<sup>32</sup> reread the poem with feminist agendas during the mid-seventies, both fell into the trap of assuming that any woman without sexual experience was necessarily repressed to an abnormal degree (or in a state of near-demented frustration), and looked to *Goblin Market* to prove this -- albeit more sympathetically than in previous similar attempts. However, others were seeking ways out of the cul-de-sac of reading the poem as a testimonial to extreme erotic repression and female sexual frustration, as this tendency to place both poem and author "on the couch" was beginning to "push the analysis to absurd limits."<sup>33</sup> A refreshing change in direction was taken by Ellen Moers, who in a tone close to exasperation briefly pointed out that Laura's treatment at the hands of the goblins is far less likely to be the product of repressed sexual sado-masochism

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<sup>29</sup>London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972, 315-320.

<sup>30</sup>"'Goblin Market' by Christina Rossetti", September 1973: 115.

<sup>31</sup>"The Indefinite Disclosed: Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson," in *Jacobus* 61-79. Kaplan argued that "[w]hile *Goblin Market* cannot be decoded as an elaborate adult sexual scenarion, it undoubtedly remains an exploration of women's sexual fantasy which includes suggestions of masochism, homoeroticism, rape or incest." (69.)

<sup>32</sup>Introduction, *Goblin Market* (New York: Stonehill Publishing, 1975) vii-xxxvi.

<sup>33</sup>Charles 159, commenting on Golub's "Untying Goblin Apron Strings."

than the poet's memories of her only period of physical intimacy, as the youngest child in the "rough-and-tumble" of a nursery with two brothers -- "the *only* heterosexual world that Victorian literary spinsters were ever freely and physically to explore."<sup>34</sup> This shift away from the more prescriptive post-Freudian readings was followed by Sandra Gilbert's ground-breaking discussion of the poem,<sup>35</sup> in which she argued that the central image of "forbidden fruit" illustrated not so much illicit sexual experience as the thirst for knowledge and desire for art, and the dangers (for women) inherent in achieving these goals. (The poignant conclusion seems to be that women can only risk contact with the fruit of knowledge for the sake of others; once again in the interests of self-sacrifice.) In characteristic late-seventies style, Gilbert concluded that the message of *Goblin Market* was that "while men hurt, women heal,"<sup>36</sup> and certainly feminist scholars began to look at the final six lines of the poem with new interest -- perhaps after all, they did not preach a sentimental moral, or present an evasive closure uneasily tacked on to a disturbing text, but instead an ethic of sisterhood in order to survive the treacherous wiles of men:

'For there is no friend like a sister  
In calm or stormy weather;

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<sup>34</sup>*Literary Women* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976) 104-6.

<sup>35</sup>*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 565-575.

<sup>36</sup>*Madwoman in the Attic* 567.

To cheer one on the tedious way,  
To fetch if one goes astray,  
To lift one if one totters down,  
To strengthen if one stands.<sup>37</sup>

This theme of feminine solidarity, which overcomes male interference and triumphs over adversity, was developed by Dorothy Mermin in her article "Heroic Sisterhood in *Goblin Market*," which concludes that the poem creates a fantasy of a feminist Utopia, from which men are banished, after their "juices" have been taken from them and put to use by women, claiming, "This is a world in which men serve only the purpose of impregnation."<sup>38</sup> Janet Galligani Casey disagreed, arguing for an even more far-reaching radical reading of the sister trope as Utopian: "At the end of *Goblin Market* Rossetti posits not a world without men, but a world in which all people are allowed to play all parts, to embrace a wholeness that is only possible with the dissolution of the traditional male/female dichotomy. This poem ... defines "sisterhood" as the interdependence, rather than isolation of antinomies .... [it] celebrates a dynamism -- a sisterhood -- between polarities."<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, others had used this new focus on sisterhood as a means of approaching and questioning a wider range of Rossetti's poems. Critics such as Helena Michie and Jeanie Watson questioned

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<sup>37</sup>Crump, CP I 26.

<sup>38</sup>*Victorian Poetry* 21.2 (Summer 1983): 114.

<sup>39</sup>"The Potential of Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*." *Victorian Poetry* 29.1 (1991): 65, 66.

whether the solidarity of sisterhood could survive the transition from the fantasy world of *Goblin Market* to the arena of courtship (and female competition) described in poems such as *Noble Sisters*, *Sister Maude*, and *Cousin Kate*, with Michie concluding that Rossetti uses female communities as a safe and secure rehearsal area in which to practice conflict and rebellion.<sup>40</sup> Watson, meanwhile addressed the problematic aspect of feminine self-sacrifice raised by the model of sisterhood posed in these texts.<sup>41</sup> Michie's most recent piece goes on to explore Rossetti's construction of sisterhood as difference, and interestingly enough, suggests a paradigm of sibling rivalry between sisters as a means of reading the "sisterhood as conflict" poems.<sup>42</sup> Others in turn have begun connecting feminist readings of the poem with wider current debates of class, empire, race and the marketplace; Mary Wilson Carpenter suggests that Rossetti's construction of sisterhood "represses hierarchical differences and permits the female gaze to feast on the female form," and goes on to demonstrate that *Goblin Market* "articulates women's common vulnerability to sexual and economic exploitation while affirming the bodies and appetites that are implicated in that exploitation."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>"The Battle for Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's Strategies for Control in Her Sister Poems," *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* III.2 (May 1983): 38-55.

<sup>41</sup>"'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me': The Dilemma of Sisterly Self-Sacrifice." *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies* 7.1 (1986): 50-62.

<sup>42</sup>"'There is no friend like a sister': Sisterhood as Sexual Difference," *ELH* 56.2 (Summer 1989): 401-421.

<sup>43</sup>"'Eat me, drink me, love me': The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*." *Victorian Poetry* 29.4 (Winter 1991): 425, 430.

Developing a similar theme, Elizabeth Helsinger analyses the Utopian discourses of the poem in terms of their "gendering of market relations."<sup>44</sup>

This widening range of discussion with its emphasis on both the texts and the political issues surrounding them, facilitated the process whereby various groups of Christina Rossetti's poems (some little known or fallen out of "fashion"), and motifs in her poems and those of other nineteenth century women poets began to be examined with growing interest by feminist academics as diverse in both theoretical and textual approaches as Betty Flowers, Diane D'Amico, Andrea Abbot, Sharon Leder, Kathleen Hickok, Angela Leighton and Isobel Armstrong.<sup>45</sup> The sophisticated scholarship done by Dolores Rosenblum resulted

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<sup>44</sup>"Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*." *ELH* 54.4 (Winter 1991): 908.

<sup>45</sup>Flowers ("The Kingly Self: Rossetti as Woman Artist," *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David Kent [Ithica and London: Cornell University Press] 159-174) and D'Amico ("Eve, Mary and Mary Magdalene: Christina Rossetti's Feminine Triptych," Kent 175-191) both draw attention to the radical qualities of Rossetti's religious prose and poetry. D'Amico in particular has written a number of useful pieces on the subtle inversions in a wide range of poems which have otherwise been critically neglected. (See for example, "Christina Rossetti's 'From Sunset to Star Rise': A New Reading," *Victorian Poetry* 27.1 [Spring 1989]: 95-100, or "'To Another Land': An analysis of Christina Rossetti's 'Moonshine,'" *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* III.1 [1979]: 54-62.) Leder and Abbott (*The Language of Exclusion: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti* [New York: Greenwood Press, 1987]) scrutinise Rossetti's history and works for traces of political dissent and social involvement, as does Kathleen Hickok. (*Representations of Women: Nineteenth-Century British Women's Poetry* [Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1984].) Angela Leighton homes in on aspects of Rossetti's context to uncover the grittier aspects of her commitment (textual and otherwise) to the plight of "fallen women" ("'Because Men Made the Laws': The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet," *Victorian Poetry* 27.1 [Summer 1989]: 109-127); and Isobel Armstrong demonstrates how Rossetti's texts both lend themselves to and invite complex and eclectic theoretical approaches. ("A Diary of a Feminist Reading of Christina Rossetti's *Winter Rain*," *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. Sue Roe [Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986] 117-137.)

in the only full-length work by a feminist academic which provides an overview of Rossetti's canon. This, as we have already noted, provided invaluable insights into her poetry, making use of fresh and unusual models, and linked these to important new perspectives on Rossetti's well-documented life and family relationships, but its author is the first to claim that her treatment is neither comprehensive nor authoritative, but rather serves to open up new debates about Rossetti's work by providing alternative keys to reading it. In general, the focus of interest in recent years on Rossetti's work, and *Goblin Market* in particular, raises two issues that are illuminated by closer scrutiny of Rossetti's fraternal relations; firstly, the fierce concentration on the significance and various readings of "sisters" and "sisterhood" conjures up corresponding questions concerning brothers and the Brotherhood. Secondly, the variety of readings points to the complexity and multivalences of Rossetti's texts, which, I shall argue, were at least partly developed in response to critical sibling scrutiny.

Meanwhile, the various historical and social circumstances surrounding Rossetti's life and writing have come under feminist scrutiny in recent years, and this has impacted on the biographical treatment of the poet. Katherine Mayberry notes with asperity that of the fourteen full-length works on Rossetti produced in the last century, twelve are biographies, and points to the imbalance that has resulted;<sup>46</sup> however, it is precisely because of the prurient and sentimental

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<sup>46</sup>Mayberry 1-3.

nature of traditional treatments of Rossetti's life (which was often shamelessly fictionalised in the first half of this century),<sup>47</sup> that so much feminist retrieval of biography has been necessary before re-reading the poetry has been able to commence. The need for continuing feminist re-visions of biography and historical context is demonstrated all too clearly when one reads the opening words of David Kent's recent anthology of essays<sup>48</sup> (so far the only collection of writings on Rossetti's work), itself divided into sections headed "Rossetti: Poet" and "Rossetti: Woman Artist and Prose Writer": "'Of all the decades in our history, a wise man would choose the eighteen-fifties to be young in' .... 'few people growing up to manhood in 1870 could feel altogether in despair of their country.' This was the same period in which Christina Rossetti established her

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<sup>47</sup>To pick just one example, there is Frances Winwar's biography of the Rossetti, **Poor Splendid Wings: The Rossettis and their Circle** (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1933), first published under the pseudonym Grebanier; the author's protestations notwithstanding (she wrote "This is not a fictionalized history or biography, though it read [sic] like a novel"), it is probably the most exuberantly inventive; quite unwittingly, it gives the impression that Dante Gabriel was actually the primary romantic focus of Rossetti's life: "Instead the world claimed Gabriel, who from then on came home, in the young girl's eyes, as a voyager bearing strange and wonderful tales of places that were not hers to behold. She lived vicariously through his adventures, and if at times her cheeks flushed before her mother's gently lifted brows, her lips were quickly humbled to silent apology." (28.) It must also be pointed out that Rossetti was not the only member of this circle to have their life fictionalised; the glamour, mystique and nostalgia attaching to the Pre-Raphaelites has meant that Dante Gabriel's life has been a veritable battleground of biography, with rivals and relatives furiously writing conflicting versions of his life. Helen Angeli Rossetti's partisan defense of her uncle in **Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Friends and Enemies** (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949) was, for example, written largely in response to the most overtly fictional book of all, Violet Hunt's **The Wife of Rossetti** (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1932) -- a melodramatic rendition of Elizabeth Siddal's life. Marsh, in **The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal** (London and New York: Quartet Books, 1989), has investigated how Siddal's life has been rewritten with a variety of scripts according to different vested interests and cultural pressures, and points out the difficulties of retrieving biography in such circumstances.

<sup>48</sup>**The Achievement of Christina Rossetti.**

poetic vision and reputation. Of course she was not a young man, but then we have to imagine -- do we not? -- that social circumstances in an enlightened country operate uniformly on the just and the unjust alike...."<sup>49</sup>

Thus, in spite of the plethora of new material, the Rossetti scholar today finds that much excavation is still required; certain disquieting gaps continue to open up in feminist "coverage" of Rossetti's life and works. This is not to suggest critical neglect; both in quality and quantity, feminist treatments of Rossetti's life and works are beyond reproach. The difficulties lie in the persistence of certain myths, which have yet to be rigorously interrogated and deconstructed. These are partly responsible for the frustration experienced by critics for whom some of Rossetti's poems remain inaccessible, and also for the tendency of various projects, in particular the biographical undertakings, to fall back on questionable received opinion.

Whereas the various experiences and pitfalls of being a nineteenth-century woman writer or artist have and are being innovatively examined, comparatively little work of this nature has focused on Rossetti herself. The lives and works of the women in the wings of the Pre-Raphaelite circle (not for nothing was it named a Brotherhood) have come in for detailed examination largely by feminist

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<sup>49</sup>Jerome J. McGann, Introduction 1.

scholars,<sup>50</sup> as part of the movement to restore women artists, often relegated to the fringes of the male-dominated artistic movements they were associated with, to a less marginal position, and to re-assess their work more judiciously and reliably. However, no-one has yet made any definitive attempt to accurately locate probably the most significant woman associated with the Pre-Raphaelites within the history of that movement.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Some offerings are **Pre-Raphaelites in Love** (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989) by Gay Daly (the rather misleading title does not suggest her main project, which is to foreground the histories of the women involved); **Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement** (London: Virago Press; 1989) by Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn; **The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood** (New York: Quartet Books, 1986) and **Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art** (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1987) by Marsh, who has also written biographies of Elizabeth Siddal (**The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal** [New York and London: Quartet Books, 1989]) and Jane and May Morris (**Jane and May Morris: A Biography** [London: Pandora, 1986].) Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock provide a useful theoretical paradigm in "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: A Study of the Representation of Elizabeth Siddal" (**Art History** 7.2 [June 1984]: 206-27); J. Anne George and Susie Campbell also re-evaluate the vital contribution to the Pre-Raphaelite arts-and-crafts movement made by Jane, May and Jenny Morris and Bessie Burden in their article "The Role of Embroidery in Victorian Culture and the Pre-Raphaelite Circle" (**The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies** 7.2 [May 1987]: 55-67.)

<sup>51</sup>This omission by feminist historians is strange; Catherine and Andrew Belsey's article "Christina Rossetti: Sister to the Brotherhood," **Textual Practice** 2.1 (Spring 1988): 30-50, investigates the marginal position of women within the Pre-Raphaelite circle, and comments on the ways this affected Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal in their chosen roles of poet and artist respectively; however, it does not attempt to situate or relocate Rossetti within a current account of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. In the preface to **Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood**, Marsh acknowledges that she has failed to include Rossetti among the "sisters" and that a separate study is required (2); nevertheless, the few remarks she makes about Christina tend to draw on the received tradition of the "pious spinster." Likewise, Rossetti is largely absent from Gay Daly's **Pre-Raphaelites in Love**; nevertheless, Daly is one of the first recent critics to pick up and comment on Rossetti's penetrating sensitivity to Siddal's suffering at the hands of Dante Gabriel; traditionally, most biographers have accused Christina of coldness and hostility towards Elizabeth, a supposition for which there is no documented basis.

Until eighteen months ago, no biography of Rossetti using specifically feminist tools was available, although the lives of the Rossettis have been exhaustively studied from traditional perspectives. More will be said later about Lona Mosk Packer's debacle (one she could perhaps have avoided had it not been for the then current and patronising tradition that all Great Art by a woman *had* to spring from a broken heart), and Georgina Battiscombe's slick and efficient contribution<sup>52</sup> is regrettably bland. Phyllis Rose remarks "...it will take a writer less brisk and sensible than [Battiscombe], more sensitive to imagined experience and how it gets expressed, to satisfy us fully about ... Christina Rossetti."<sup>53</sup> One of the more jarring features of both the Packer and Battiscombe biographies, is that their authors repeat without questioning the received wisdom that Dante Gabriel "helped" his sister in her poetic career -- in spite of all hard evidence to the contrary. Battiscombe's work contains phrases such as "Once again, with the best possible motives, Dante Gabriel gave his sister the worst possible advice .... Seldom has a brother been more devoted to his sister's interests or more appreciative of her genius; and seldom has a brother given his sister worse advice." She even includes an entry entitled "well-meant, but bad advice" under the index section for Dante Gabriel.<sup>54</sup> Packer too writes revealingly, if inaccurately, of the **Prince's Progress** volume: "without [Dante Gabriel's]

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<sup>52</sup>Christina Rossetti: *A Divided Life* (London: Constable, 1981.)

<sup>53</sup>*Writing of Women: Essays in a Renaissance* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985) 49.

<sup>54</sup>Battiscombe 136, 114, 230.

obsessive but selfless devotion to [Rossetti's] cause she would not have been able to accomplish what she did in such a short time."<sup>55</sup> (Dante Gabriel's interference in fact dramatically slowed down the production of this collection.)<sup>56</sup> The so far uncontested assumption that Dante Gabriel's contributions to his sister's poetic efforts were not only benign, but greatly added to the value of Rossetti's work, is a particularly disturbing and misleading one. That this misrepresentation is flourishing, is demonstrated for example, by Gail Goldberg's panegyric on how Dante Gabriel's illustrations and editing improved both *Goblin Market* and *The Prince's Progress*,<sup>57</sup> as well as Maryan Wynn Ainsworth's approving remarks on his attempted takeover of the *Prince's Progress* project -- which she reads as collaborative contribution.<sup>58</sup>

The persistence of this myth, and the attempts to maintain it in spite of the tangible evidence that contradicts it, in particular points to one of the more serious omissions by feminist and new historical critics in this field. Summing up over a century's worth of Rossetti criticism, Charles testifies to the uncontested status of this supposition: "Dante Gabriel served as his sister's tutor ...,

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<sup>55</sup>Christina Rossetti 193.

<sup>56</sup>See 196-200 below.

<sup>57</sup>"Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Revising Hand,'" *Victorian Poetry* 20.3-4 (Winter 1982): 144-159.

<sup>58</sup>"'The Prince's Progress': Works from 1863 to 1871," *D.G. Rossetti and the Double Work of Art*, ed. Ainsworth, 73-79 (exhibition catalogue, Yale University Art Gallery, 1976.)

encouraging her to write, offering criticism and counsel, and providing the opportunities for association with leading figures of the Pre-Raphaelite movement."<sup>59</sup> Here we see the persistence of not one but two myths: that Dante Gabriel not only stimulated and nurtured Rossetti's poetic gifts, but also provided access to the exciting and innovative circle of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. As will be seen, his attempts to control and mediate her writing were prompted by far more complex factors than a simple impulse to encourage; and he acted as much to exclude his sister from equal membership within the Brotherhood as to include her in its projects and goals.

One of the most recent biographies, and so far the only explicitly feminist one, Kathleen Jones' *Learning not to be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti*, makes a lively and refreshing, if not wholly successful, attempt at reclamation, portraying Rossetti as an angry woman, stifled by what Florence Nightingale described as the "petty grinding tyranny of a good English family."<sup>60</sup> It makes use of Rosenblum's lateral framework of locating Rossetti as a contemporary of other nineteenth-century women poets, and provides in some respects a novel reading of Rossetti's family life, concentrating more, however, on the adverse effects on Rossetti's writing of her sister and her mother's "policing" of her poetry, than on Dante Gabriel's policy of undermining it. While this constitutes a fresh approach

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<sup>59</sup>Charles 14-15.

<sup>60</sup>Quoted by Angela Leighton in "Because men made the laws" 115.

(if lamentable to those idealistic about sisterhood and feminine communities), Jones nevertheless seems to accept that Dante Gabriel's intentions, if not his actions, were to help rather than to hinder his sister's writing.

This assumption, although somewhat eroded by scepticism, still operates in feminist treatments of Pre-Raphaelite history; Jan Marsh also seems to take for granted that Dante Gabriel's attempts to aid both his sister and Elizabeth Siddal as artists, were genuine, even if erratic and misguided. Angela Leighton too assumes that Dante Gabriel's attitude towards his sister's writing was one of "moral protectiveness" even while she objects to his double standards of judgement.<sup>61</sup> Even Catherine and Andrew Belsey's innovative delineation of Rossetti's tenacious efforts to carve out her poetic identity within the interstices of patriarchal relations, concludes that she would not have succeeded without the support of her male relatives. They remark approvingly:

Her first venture into print was in 1847, when her grandfather printed her verses on his private press. When she entered the world of commercial publication it was her brothers who took charge, protected her, organised her, changed her words. It was Dante Gabriel who arranged for *Goblin Market* to be published ..., who conducted the correspondence with the publisher, and who altered the poems when he thought necessary. And, when after her death William Michael edited her collected poetical works ... he was more than a compiler: what is called her work is the result of *his* omissions, deletions and alterations....

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<sup>61</sup>"Because men made the laws" 115.

The Rossetti males may have taken charge of their sister's poetical career, but there were clear advantages for her in being a Rossetti. Her brothers were proud of her, convinced of her talent. And they got her into print.... She could not fully escape from patriarchal relations (what woman can?), but paradoxically it was those very relations which helped to propel her into poetry, into subjectivity.<sup>62</sup>

While much of this is undoubtedly true, this overlooks Rossetti's own struggle for agency: her attempts to publish on her own, her steady submission of material to journals, her insistence on her own poetic vocation. It also oversimplifies the complexity of her relations with her brothers, Dante Gabriel especially, who hindered as much as they helped "propel" her into poetry. I will argue that whether or not he was himself aware of what he was doing, Dante Gabriel's interference with Rossetti's art amounted at times to subconsciously deliberate sabotage.

The most recent biography of Rossetti, by Frances Thompson, is probably the best of the recent offerings, especially in terms of exploring the religious communities and discourses Rossetti participated in: the priests whose sermons she listened to, and who gave her private counselling, as well as the female religious communities alongside which she worked on social projects such as rehabilitating prostitutes, come in for detailed investigation. Thompson is clearly aware of the ambivalence of the relationship between brother and sister, and in a

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<sup>62</sup>"Christina Rossetti: sister to the Brotherhood" 46-47.

few throwaway lines, likens Dante Gabriel to Branwell Brontë, an analogy that lends itself to more sustained pursuit. However, although she clearly has reservations about the standard assumptions that Rossetti greatly benefitted from her relation with both brothers, Dante Gabriel especially, she does not attempt any consistent re-reading of these relations, going along with the prevailing trend which identifies Dante Gabriel as a positive and active influence on Rossetti's writing; for example, in describing the brilliant literary gatherings at the Brownings, which both Rossetti brothers attended, she writes: "It seems strange that Christina did not accompany her brothers to the Brownings.... Still, Gabriel was always generous and enthusiastic about his sister's work; it seems inconceivable that he did not bring some of her poems with him." She goes on to note that William was equally puzzled: "'My sister did not publish any volume until 1862, the year following [Barrett] Browning's death; but she had printed some few compositions to which my brother was more than likely to call the attention of Robert Browning.'" Yet this did not happen; and Thompson concludes rather lamely, "As ever, what were openings for Gabriel remained closed to Christina."<sup>63</sup>

Isobel Armstrong's suggestions for further reading of Rossetti's works put forward the claim for further contextual and intertextual rereading: at the end of a "diary" of a study of Rossetti's *Winter Rain*, in which she draws on her

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<sup>63</sup>Thompson 119, 71.

knowledge of Lacan, Freud, Kristeva, Derrida, Bachelard, Juliet Mitchell, and Voloshinov to provide a wonderfully iconoclastic and organic essay, she writes the following:

The politics of Christina Rossetti's language would become far clearer if we read her against the work of other women poets -- Landon, Hemans, Greenwell, Ingelow. The discourses of male-produced theology, the languages of the social theories which clustered round Christina Rossetti's work with fallen women, the evolutionary discourse of Darwin, and above all, the men she must have been perpetually in dialogue with, her brother and the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, all these would enable us to read her relation to Victorian ideology and culture. And this is also a way of rereading the relations of biography and culture.

Does this intertextual project look too much like 'ordinary' criticism? In that case, feminist criticism subsumes ordinary criticism, not the other way round, because ordinary criticism is too often blind to questions of gender.<sup>64</sup>

So it can be concluded that although feminist scholarship has made significant inroads and provided some useful leads to follow in the field of Rossetti scholarship, certain areas concerning both biography and texts remain unmapped, as Armstrong makes clear; and various questionable conclusions and judgements remain unchallenged.

However, before even part of this suggested agenda can be tackled, mention must be made of certain other practical and historical problems which hamper the

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<sup>64</sup>"Diary of a Feminist Reading" 136.

proper evaluation of Christina Rossetti's work, and which fall outside of the ambit of this thesis. To begin with, there is not inconsiderable difficulty with access to primary material. In one sense, the Rossetti scholar is faced with an overwhelming mass of original material, thanks to the Victorian passion for chronicling data, and their tendency to keep the huge amounts of correspondence they generated. Much of this, however, is scattered among archives on at least two continents, and remains either unpublished, or published in piecemeal form. There exists (for example) no complete, unexpurgated collection of Christina Rossetti's existing letters at present, which places the Rossetti scholar without the resources to visit half-a-dozen manuscript libraries at a distinct disadvantage.<sup>65</sup>

This problem is related to the difficulties concerning biographical data -- which has sometimes been tampered with, or which has simply been adjusted to fit the received opinion generated by a century of largely white male middle-class scholarship. As this has tended to judge Rossetti as a frustrated spinster and minor poet, writing mostly sentimental, pious and occasionally melodramatic poetry, with some moments of lyric beauty, biographical data that supports this view has received preferential treatment: the extracts from her original letters used in the first biographies, which suggested the piety, modesty and orthodoxy of their writer, have been recycled *ad nauseam*. Yet, for example, the letter she wrote the editor of Blackwoods Magazine, in which she announced her

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<sup>65</sup>Anthony Harrison is at present preparing an edition of Rossetti's collected letters, a welcome development. The resulting collection will greatly facilitate further scholarship.

determination to be a poet, although freely available, and made public in an early biography, did not until recently receive serious consideration in treatments of Rossetti's life or works.<sup>66</sup>

Original material has not only been evaded, suppressed, or explained away: far more drastic, if perhaps inevitable, is the destruction of primary resources.

Rossetti herself destroyed certain personal writings of her own, as did some of those close to her, according to Jones and others. This was done "not to hide a family skeleton, but to protect the saintly image that had been constructed in the public mind."<sup>67</sup> In all fairness, it must be said that normal impulses of privacy are justifiable: for example, Rossetti's decision to burn her letters to Cayley, which were returned to her after his death, does not suggest anything less than honourable, and can by no means be read as furtive. The destruction of material, however it might be regretted by the modern critic, is less problematic than material which has been altered or tampered with.

Fortunately, Rebecca Crump has recently completed the final volume of Rossetti's **Complete Poems**; a variorum edition that will be invaluable to all scholars, who

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<sup>66</sup>See 100 below. This letter, which first appeared in Mary Sandars' biography **The Life of Christina Rossetti** (London: Hutchinson Co., 1930), attracted the attention of modern Rossetti scholars only after Anthony Harrison used it in support of his thesis in "Christina Rossetti: The Poetic Vocation," **Texas Studies in Literature and Language** 27.3 (1985): 225.

<sup>67</sup>Jones xiv.

up till now have had to make do with various anthologies, including the original **Poetical Works** (once again complete with the censor's touch) edited by William Michael. We also have now, thanks to Crump, access to all Rossetti's previously unpublished poems (a significant number) including her juvenilia, as well as extremely valuable data on the provenance and revision of her entire canon. This edition is particularly valuable in terms of the evidence it provides of Rossetti's patterns of thorough, at times even drastic, textual revision. This reveals at least two previously unacknowledged aspects of her creative rationale; firstly, her degree of self-censorship, which is significant in deconstructing the myth of the spontaneous poetess blithely unaware of the implications, particularly sexual or political, of what she wrote.<sup>68</sup> This particular aspect of her revision also underlines the extent to which she was conscious of that fact that her poems would be scrutinised, especially by members of her family. Secondly, in the words of Anthony Harrison, the extent to which Rossetti revised her work demonstrates "her ability to compose with artistic detachment that belies assumptions of her poetry's sincerity, as well as critical propensities to interpret its contents biographically."<sup>69</sup> Crump's demonstration of these aspects of

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<sup>68</sup>Thompson provides a fascinating study of how Rossetti's revisions sometimes operated as deliberate self-censorship; using Crump's text, she is able to trace the process whereby the blatantly sexual charge in *To-day and To-morrow* (as well as other poems) is toned down or entirely eliminated. (157-162.)

<sup>69</sup>Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* 8. Here Harrison enlarges on his earlier demonstration (in "Christina Rossetti and the Poetic Vocation" 227-231) of how Rossetti entirely altered the narrative of *Maude Clare* in the process of revising it. (4-8.) Another poem which Rossetti was to rework and substantially alter was *Echo*; the three-stanza poem which finally resulted is very different in tone to the earlier drafts.

Rossetti's writing lends considerable support to the argument that Rossetti was propelled by a sense of artistic vocation, and that she was a conscious and deliberate poet; an issue explored in fuller detail in the second chapter of this thesis.

Among other resources is Packer's edition of the Rossettis' correspondence with Christina's publishers, Macmillan, a useful "smoking gun" for the scholar who requires evidence of Dante Gabriel's active interference with his sister's writing. The unfortunate Packer apparently missed the significance of the material she was dealing with, and it is hard to resist demonstrating how she clings bravely to traditional assumptions in the face of contradictory primary material:

"Christina's letters ... reveal an unfamiliar aspect of her enigmatic personality. She appears in them as the working poet with a business-like interest in preparing her books for publication. Her lively concern with revising her poems and with retaining copyright -- her "hobby" she called it -- discloses [a] strain of practicality.... At the same time her letters possess ... a combination of courteous deference, playfulness, subtle insight, and feminine wit.... Christina's attitude of grateful respect contrasts amusingly with Dante Gabriel's assured condescension, slightly tinged with hauteur...."<sup>70</sup> What the letters actually reveal is Christina's relentless tenacity in politely insisting on controlling her poems, and Dante Gabriel's boorishness when dealing with "trade," even a respectable publisher.

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<sup>70</sup>RML vi.

Packer's insistence on the fraternal myth becomes blatantly apparent when, writing of the letters that accompanied the bitter battle over the **Prince's Progress** volume, she states: "Finished by May, ... and scheduled for 1865 publication, the book did not appear until a year later, owing to Dante Gabriel's delay in supplying the illustrations. Except for his dilatoriness in this respect, he devoted himself ... to furthering with single-minded enthusiasm his sister's career. He even attempted to regulate her business relations with Macmillan, but in so doing he muddled her affairs to such an extent that she finally had to tell him politely but firmly to keep hands off."<sup>71</sup> The edition itself went largely unremarked, but like Janet Camp Troxell's edition of miscellaneous Rossetti letters,<sup>72</sup> it has the advantage that the originals have at least been faithfully transmitted, with none of the editing that the Victorians who had known Christina found necessary.<sup>73</sup> Troxell's collection has the disadvantage of being piecemeal, and therefore not always coherent to a reader unfamiliar with the affairs of the Rossettis; however, it includes significant letters either omitted from, or not available for William Michael's editions of family correspondence, **The Family Letters of Christina**

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<sup>71</sup>RML 36.

<sup>72</sup>**Three Rossettis: Unpublished Letters to and from Dante Gabriel, Christina, William.** (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1937.)

<sup>73</sup>A comparison of the letters printed in **Family Letters** and **Rossetti Papers** with the originals reveals a consistent pattern of omissions and occasional alterations. In Mackenzie Bell's popular biography **Christina Rossetti** (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1898) which was the first to appear after Rossetti's death, letters were also presented as edited excerpts, of which most of the originals are now lost.

**Georgina Rossetti<sup>74</sup> and Rossetti Papers 1862-70: A Compilation.<sup>75</sup> Those which deal with Rossetti's sense of poetic identity are particularly valuable.**

**Much of the published primary biographical material by Rossetti's contemporaries deals with her life at one remove, and sometimes a dubious one at that; we catch a glimpse of her in the pages of William Michael's diaries and memoirs, in Dante Gabriel's letters and those of other family members, and in various letters and articles written by other Pre-Raphaelites and Victorians, but it is hard to establish how reliable these images are, considering the investment her contemporaries had in picturing her a certain way. Re-evaluation continues to be necessary; as Anthony Harrison pointed out in 1988, "We need a full-scale, dependable biography [the efforts of Jones and Thompson in this respect have gone a long way to filling this gap], an edition of her complete letters, an annotated bibliography of her reading, and clear-minded critical treatment of her previously unstudied poems (that is, the bulk of them.)"<sup>76</sup>**

**Moving into different territory, I would like to suggest that one of the barriers that has hampered proper appreciation of not just Rossetti's work, but many other minority and female writers who have been assigned only minor nichés in**

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<sup>74</sup>London: Brown, Langham & Co, 1908.

<sup>75</sup>London: Sands & Co, 1903.

<sup>76</sup>Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* 202.

the canon, if not completely excluded from it, has been the problem of patriarchal publishing and anthologising. This phenomenon is convincingly exposed as part of a larger strategy of rendering women writers invisible or ineffective, in Joanna Russ's **How to Suppress Women's Writing**.<sup>77</sup> Dale Spender also draws attention to it in her works on how women writers and thinkers are silenced, and their ideas devalued, displaced or stolen, both in the publishing world, and the academic and pedagogical arenas.<sup>78</sup> The process of canonical exclusion is a simple one: women poets are rendered (literally) invisible by failure to include their poems at all in anthologies claiming to provide comprehensive overviews of a period, or by including proportionally few (for example, ten poems by Tennyson, but only one by Barrett Browning, creating the impression that the former was the more significant and prolific poet), or (most devious of all) by anthologising the "weaker" poems by women poets -- perhaps the most stereotypically "feminine" or sentimental. A suspicious proportion of the poems by women included in anthologies are their shorter love poems, rather than those of social dissent; one thinks, for example, of Barrett Browning's repeatedly anthologised sonnet, "How do I love thee? let me count the ways," recently used in South Africa to advertise cheap perfume. Meanwhile, her **Poems Before Congress** on the social evils of nineteenth-century capitalism, industrialism and

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<sup>77</sup>Russ 49-96.

<sup>78</sup>See **The Language or the Sex? Or why you don't have to read women's writing to know it's no good** (New York and Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989) and Introduction, **Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them** (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) 3-31.

slavery have remained out of print for the best part of this century; and poems such as *The Cry of the Children* (which deals with the misery of child labour in the mines and factories), *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point* (describing the flogging of a female slave who has borne an illegitimate child after being raped) and *Curse for a Nation* (which directly challenges the rulers of England on political and social injustices) have until very recently been absent from anthologies.

Likewise, I traced the responses of my students to Rossetti (if they had heard of her, and weren't under the impression that the only Rossetti who wrote poetry was Dante Gabriel) in part to the anthologies they used both at school and college. They generally felt that her work was sentimental, childlike and morbid; judgements based on poems such as *Song* ("When I am dead, my dearest/ Sing no sad songs for me;") and *Remember* ("Remember me when I am gone away/ Gone far away into the silent land"); short poems taken out of the context of her larger body of work, written in deceptively simple and repetitive language, and dealing on the surface with unfashionable, but suitably feminine and melancholy topics. The 1980 edition of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*<sup>79</sup> (the standard poetry textbook for South African undergraduates) did not contain either *In an Artist's Studio* or *A Birthday*, equally short poems that present Rossetti as an artist in a very different light to the "death and parting" works. *Goblin Market* has scarcely

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<sup>79</sup>Ed. Arthur M. Eastman (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, Inc, 1st ed. 1970.)

been included in collections of poetry in recent decades, although student anthologies regularly contain much longer works by Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot, Alan Ginsberg, and so forth. *The Lowest Room* and *The Iniquities of the Fathers Upon the Children*, two of Rossetti's more lively, rebellious and contemporarily accessible longer poems, are practically unobtainable outside of Crump or out-of-print copies of **Poetical Works**.

There is no doubt that this difficulty with access to the better works written by women has a ripple effect on teaching, appreciation and scholarship concerning women writers, and that proper appreciation of Rossetti's merits has been particularly affected by this bias. Her work has been not so much affected by canonical exclusion, but (more insidiously) by canonical misrepresentation. What is more, in her case, inclusion in anthologies often becomes an unflattering comparative showcasing with Dante Gabriel; editors often place their work side by side, but explicitly rank hers as secondary to his (whereas no such ordering is considered necessary for other poets featured.) For example, one of the more respectable anthologies of Victorian poetry and prose,<sup>80</sup> in widespread use in the USA, places a selection of Christina's poems immediately after Dante Gabriel's,

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<sup>80</sup>Houghton, Walter E. and G. Robert Stange, eds. **Victorian Poetry and Poetics** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1st ed. 1959, 2nd ed. 1968.) Christina did not feature in the first edition of this anthology; a selection of her poems were added in the second edition, where she is the only woman represented. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is excluded from a volume which includes poems by Arthur Clough, Francis Thompson, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, George Meredith, and 172 pages of material by Robert Browning.

and opens the brief overview of her works with the comment, "Christina Rossetti was the younger sister of Dante Gabriel, but she was neither so original a poet as her brother, nor so much of a Pre-Raphaelite."<sup>81</sup> The introduction to Dante Gabriel's poems, however, begins, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti presents the interesting case of a man torn between two vocations, for each of which he was splendidly endowed, and in each of which he achieved fame and influence."<sup>82</sup>

Finally, not only is Rossetti still often defined (detractingly) in terms of her relation with her brother; she still seems doomed to be confused with Dante Gabriel, simply by virtue of their common name. It is an unfortunate but still largely undisputed social convention that when a man and a woman who by blood or marriage share the same surname both achieve fame, it will be assumed by the general public that that name will always refer to the male, while the female will be qualified by her first name. Hence we find Curie and Marie Curie, Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth, Shelley and Mary Shelley, Schumann and Clara Schumann, and so forth. Thus most scholars assume that Rossetti scholarship refers to the study of Dante Gabriel's work; certainly he seems to have attracted the bulk of study. The MLA bibliographic list for the past decade reveals that 84 articles or works have been

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<sup>81</sup>Victorian Poetry and Poetics 599. Of course, both these claims have been contested ever since brother and sister first began publishing their works.

<sup>82</sup>Victorian Poetry and Poetics 569.

written on Christina as a poet, while 147 -- nearly double the amount -- have been written on Dante Gabriel's poetry.<sup>83</sup> The inference is that he was a more significant writer than she was, whereas the reverse is more likely true; Dante Gabriel's especial claim to fame lies less in his poetry than in his paintings. The tendency to conflate Christina's work with that of her brother's began in her own lifetime; the popular lyric "When I am dead, my dearest" was first published under the name "Christina Gabriela Rossetti".<sup>84</sup> William Michael himself noted the inequity of public opinion; writing in 1907 of the birthplace of the Rossettis, he notes that "A memorial disc for Dante Gabriel Rossetti has recently been set up on this house: it ought to include, but does not, Christina Georgina Rossetti."<sup>85</sup> He also testifies to the intertwining of their poetic identities in the public realm; shortly after Rossetti's funeral, he wrote, "Recently I have had a very painful reason for realising to myself a very pleasurable fact -- that of the high estimation in which my brother, himself no less than his work, is now publicly held, some thirteen years after he passed away. The death of my beloved sister Christina ... called forth a flood of not undeserved but assuredly very fervent praise; and in the eulogies of her were intermixed many warm tributes to

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<sup>83</sup>Spread over the last ten years, these figures camouflage the fact that the disproportion was much greater in the first half of the last decade; the publication of a book of critical articles on Christina in 1987 (Kent's *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*) and the proliferation of journal articles on Christina within the last three years give the overall picture more parity. For details of year-by-year disparity up till 1989, see Mayberry 15.

<sup>84</sup>Mayberry 14.

<sup>85</sup>Preface to FL x.

my brother...."<sup>86</sup> Certainly the situation of the Rossetti siblings conjures up a wry variation of the classic epitaph, "in death, they were not divided."

The general tendency to class Rossetti first as an adjunct to her brother and then as a minor figure associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, rather than as a poet in her own right, has until recently been a feature not only of much of the biographical and critical material treating her life and works, but also informal and popular opinion. The intricacy of the rivalry between brother and sister, and Dante Gabriel's impact on Christina's life and work will be discussed at length later; all that needs to be established at this stage, is that the general *pre-critical* assumption that Dante Gabriel is the major Rossetti, with Christina assigned second place in the family pantheon, has also affected our ability to assess the merits of her poems judiciously. In a small attempt to reverse an unjust trend, all references to Rossetti in my thesis will be to Christina; Dante Gabriel will be identified by his first names,<sup>87</sup> as will William Michael.

I now turn to the examination of features of Rossetti's life that have perhaps been misrepresented or omitted from past studies. Firstly, a framework of gendered sibling rivalry must needs be established, and questions which proceed from this formulated. Then follows a biographical revision which focuses on Rossetti's

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<sup>86</sup>Preface, DGR: His Family Letters xii.

<sup>87</sup>His baptismal names were Gabriel Charles Dante; Christina called him Gabriel, but he himself adopted the re-arrangement of Dante Gabriel.

singularity rather than on her supposed conformity to gender prescriptions, and provides an investigation of the sense of poetic vocation she experienced and developed as an artistic and aesthetic *modus operandi* in her attempts to survive as a female artist in within the particular constrictions of the patriarchal discourses of her society, family and religion.

In my third chapter, I attempt to establish the contradictions and tensions of her location vis-à-vis the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, from which she was excluded, and to which she was also essential, and to suggest that the experience of being both crucial and marginalised, particularly in the role of the artist's model, contributed to the shape of her own creative agendas. From the Brotherhood to the brothers: I pay close attention to her relationship and negotiations with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a biographical sphere which has been consistently misread or glossed over. A detailed reading of the primary material suggests that a complex combination of competition, even aggression, qualified support and attempts at management characterised Dante Gabriel's attitude to his sister's writing. Finally, I turn to William Michael (who efforts to edit his sister's work initially set this project in motion) in order to establish to what extent he rewrote Christina's life and works.

In the fourth chapter, I suggest that Rossetti's experience of herself as an object of art, as well as her experience of constantly retrieving her writing from the

attempts of her brother to rewrite it, suggests several useful strategies for re-reading texts that are continually noted for their "elusive" and "evasive" qualities. I also outline a variety of patterns established by Rossetti as a form of interrogation of her brother's art, both paintings and poems, and argue for an intertextual approach to both writers that takes into account the dialogic function of their texts.

In a brief epilogue, I close by returning, via the chorus of female voices in the texts, to the nexus of biography: here I suggest that not only is her relation to the men in her family and life, and their gender discourses significant, but that her location within feminine communities also requires further scrutiny.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Rewriting Christina Rossetti: A Model of Sibling Rivalry

A growing body of literature suggests that sibling relationships and rivalries are as crucial in influencing and shaping the psyches of human beings as are the dynamics of parent-child relations manifested in narratives such as the Oedipal myth.<sup>1</sup> Freud himself stated in his "Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis" that siblings initially regard one another as "competitors," and that the primary instinct evoked is hostility, even if this is subsequently "overlaid" by an "affectionate attitude."<sup>2</sup> While the unquestioning advocacy of Freudian psychoanalytic theories is not my purpose, feminist, Marxist and poststructuralist revisions, applications, and new combinations of his theories of the unconscious and personality development have sufficiently demonstrated their usefulness in analysing both familial and linguistic relations, and in charting the development

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<sup>1</sup>See S. Bank and M. D. Kahn, **The Sibling Bond** (New York: Basic Books, 1982); George H. Pollock's "On Siblings, Childhood Sibling Loss, and Creativity," **Psychoanalytic Studies of Biography**, ed. Moraitis and Pollock (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1987) 113-167. See also Norman Kiell, Introduction, **Blood Brothers: Siblings as Writers** (New York: International Universities Press, 1983) 45-48 for bibliographic details of research on sibling relations up till 1982.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Pollock, "On Siblings," Moraitis and Pollock 116-7.

not only of the psyche, but symbolic evolution.<sup>3</sup> George Pollock remarks that "sibling relations, sibling functions, and the meaning of siblings for each other ... are among the least studied aspects of nuclear family life, particularly in terms of intrapsychic development and functioning throughout the life-cycle. The impact on personality development of sibling interactions in childhood has been greatly underemphasized."<sup>4</sup> Kiell also points out that studies of sibling bonding and rivalry have been also almost exclusively confined to childhood histories, whereas the crucial significance of these patterns in the behaviour and emotional life of adults -- for whom sibling bonds endure longer than any other relationships -- has been under-investigated and under-represented.<sup>5</sup> It is only recently that studies of adult siblings relations have been undertaken, and these have tended to concentrate on factors such as birth order (rather than gender typings) in analysing competitive patterns, responses to one other's achievements and failures, and so forth.

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<sup>3</sup>Certain schools of feminist theory have made constructive use of Lacan's application of the principles of Saussurean linguistics to Freud's theories of the unconscious in order to further develop a model for understanding the psychological function of language in the development of human beings. For a concise overview of Lacan's argument and its relation to feminist treatments of language, see Deborah Cameron's **Feminism and Linguistic Theory** (London: Macmillan, 1985). For a differently situated account of the relation between Freud and feminism, see Juliet Mitchell's **Psychoanalysis and Feminism** (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1975), Part One in particular.

<sup>4</sup>"On Siblings," Moraitis and Pollock 116.

<sup>5</sup>Introduction 7-10.

It is between siblings that the dynamics of power shifts and struggles resolve into complex scripts of competition, collaboration and co-operation. The first site of political conflict is the family; and although social codes often posit, or subscribe to an ideal in which siblings are co-equal peers, the usual scenario is a battle for hierarchical ranking with especial status and advantage attaching to random factors of age and gender.<sup>6</sup> Thus an investigation of sibling rivalry between Christina, Dante Gabriel, and (to a lesser extent) William Michael Rossetti could lead not only to new discoveries about their respective creative ventures in the light of competition and approval-seeking tactics: it could also reveal what impact cross-gendered strategies of rivalry and survival had both on their lives, and also their texts.

Valuable research and work has been done on other women artists and writers, closely associated by blood or marriage with "recognised" male geniuses, that establishes patterns of antagonism in the conditions of their lives and writing, if not in the actual relationships. The majority of such studies have concentrated on analysing marital or quasi-marital relations. In *Parallel Lives*, Phyllis Rose examines the "scripts" of four Victorian marriages, and one committed partnership (that of Mary Ann Evans [George Eliot] and Henry Lewes), and charts the extremely high cost, in terms of creativity, that most of the women in

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<sup>6</sup>The Lacanian account of the entry into the symbolic order might well lend itself to the incorporation of a more complex hierarchical construct than that of desire and lack resolving into a bifurcated world of polarised oppositions.

these relationships paid (no matter how willingly) in order to facilitate the intellectual career of their husbands.<sup>7</sup> Even wives to whom neither the desire or the capacity for a literary career of their own has been attributed, often made significant, if usually unacknowledged contributions to the achievements of their spouses: Dale Spender paints a particularly black picture of Tolstoy's literary and literal abuse of his wife, who painstakingly and thanklessly polished, edited, and transcribed his rough drafts into proof copies, and on occasion, interceded with the political rulers to get him permission to publish.<sup>8</sup>

Women writers in particular have had the domestic and emotional arrangements of their families and marriages increasingly closely scrutinised in recent studies. For example, the tangled web of parental, marital and sibling pressures that has inflected Mary Shelley's creative *oeuvre* has come under investigation; Ellen Moers is the first of several critics who re-read her writings, *Frankenstein* in particular, as a textual response to and subconscious critique of her complex relationships with her father, lover/husband and her step-sister's lover -- all of them literary men. Although Moers concentrates on the successive traumas of illegitimate teenage pregnancies, birth, breast-feeding, the death of Shelley's infant daughter, and post-partum depression in her reading of *Frankenstein*, the context of her relationships with her father, William Godwin, and the poets

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<sup>7</sup>*Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1984.)

<sup>8</sup>*The Writing or the Sex?* 163-175.

Shelley and Byron is also foregrounded.<sup>9</sup> Anne Mellor's biography provides an incisive study of Mary Shelley's emotional and literary entanglement with her husband; her scrutiny of Percy Shelley's "rewriting" of *Frankenstein*, and his close editing of the text in order to impose his own style on his wife's work, serves as a compelling parallel with the history of Dante Gabriel's attempts to rewrite Christina's works, described in my third chapter.<sup>10</sup> Other critics have judiciously differentiated between the quality of the personal relationship between male and female writers, and the potential for conflict between their creative projects. For example, Nina Auerbach investigates how Robert Browning's dramatic monologues debate Barrett Browning's epics, undermining and eventually even silencing her claim to an authoritative female voice by literally writing the "last word" after her death; in effect, "killing" her all over again.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, this emphasis on the domestic scripts and narratives available within and generated by romantic and marital relationships, and the ways in which they became interlaced with the imaginative and creative work done by women writers, forms an intriguing overlap with the study of sibling dynamics between writers and artists within the same family network, especially where these

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<sup>9</sup>Moers 93-99.

<sup>10</sup>*Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York and London: Methuen, 1988). See especially 57-69 and the Appendix: "Percy Shelley's Revisions of the Manuscript of *Frankenstein*" 219-224.

<sup>11</sup>"Robert Browning's 'Last Word,'" *Victorian Poetry*, 22.2 (1984): 161-173.

interactions were complicated by gender. Margaret Homans, for example, uses a model of gendered sibling roles as a starting point for her re-reading of the work of Dorothy Wordsworth, who offered up her prose journals as source material for her brother's use, thus enabling him to inscribe his first-person "I" onto her observations -- in the delightful phrase of James Holf McGavran, Jr., to transform her "eyes" into his "I's."<sup>12</sup> Homans notes that "[t]he circumstance of Dorothy's close relation to her brother provides the best possible locus for beginning a fair examination of sexual difference in poetry, .... William's primary concentration on the self and subjectivity in poetry make Dorothy's contrasting evasions of poetic identity especially salient, and especially available to an interpretation based on sexual difference."<sup>13</sup> It is also significant that all three of the female poets Homans investigates -- Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson -- had a brother who used them as either domestic, emotional and creative resources, and exacted considerable sacrifices in time and energy from them. Susan Wolfson also tackles the interweaving of the sibling and creative relation, in a piece which focuses on the problems of articulation

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<sup>12</sup>"Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals: Putting herself Down." **The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings** (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 230.

<sup>13</sup>**Woman Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 42.

faced by Dorothy Wordsworth.<sup>14</sup> However, in spite of the wealth of relatively unexplored terrain suggested by the family scenarios of Alice, Henry and William James, the Brontë quartet, the Coleridges and Emily Dickinson, the study of gendered sibling rivalry has tended to concentrate on the visual arts. Karen Peterson and J.J. Wilson's overview of women artists (which strangely enough, omits the Pre-Raphaelites) has a chapter on "mysterious sisters" of male artists, and the toll of loneliness or ostracism exacted on their lives by their insistence on artistic careers equal in opportunity to those of their brothers. Among others, they discuss the work of the overshadowed Gwen John, Romaine Brooks and Florine Stettheimer, noting "[m]any were the eccentric sisters more or less self-exiled by what we would now call dryly, differing lifestyles."<sup>15</sup>

It must also be acknowledged that rivalry is not the only factor at issue: as Pollock notes, "sibling rivalry is an important but only one aspect of sibling relations....Instinctual expression that would be too threatening if acted upon with parents can be "tried out" with siblings. Socialization, companionship, play, symbioses, support, mutual aid and education, idealization, affection, communication, empathetic contact, enjoyable interactions, obligations, aggressive

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<sup>14</sup>"Individual in Community: Dorothy Wordsworth in Conversation with William." In **Romanticism and Feminism** ed. Anne Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988) 139-166.

<sup>15</sup>**Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal From the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century** (New York and London: Harper Colophon Books, 1976) 98-99.

outbursts, interests, and many other aspects of living get tested, expressed, and suppressed with siblings...."<sup>16</sup> This translates well to the Rossetti family, as to simply present the Rossetti brothers' relation to Christina as oppositional is to crudely oversimplify the intricate and delicate dynamics that operated between them.

For example, there was never any attempt at plagiarism on the part of the male Rossettis, whether deliberate or not (as one sees with the poems William Wordsworth lifted from the prose journals Dorothy wrote and read aloud to him, or the purloining of Zelda Fitzgerald's writing by her husband Scott Fitzgerald.)<sup>17</sup> Neither was there any attempt to draw Christina in as a contributor whose creative attempts were merged and blurred with Dante Gabriel's. There was never any pressure on her to act as a "scribe" version of Treffey Dunn, the assistant who did most of the copying and background work for Dante Gabriel's later paintings. (The experience of having one's work incorporated into the portfolio of a husband or male relative was by no means an uncommon one for Rossetti's female contemporaries: Jane Morris worked extremely hard and painstakingly on many of the sewing and tapestry projects attributed to William Morris; and her embroidery and fabric designs are still considered part of his creative output.) Dante Gabriel and William Michael did

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<sup>16</sup>Pollock, "On Siblings" 117-8.

<sup>17</sup>Spender, *The Writing or the Sex?* 175-192.

not ever try to pass off a work of Rossetti's as their own, the way some nineteenth-century painters and writers flagrantly assumed into their corpus works by female relatives, pupils, or spouses.<sup>18</sup> Although as children the Rossettis worked collaboratively up to a point, there were no communal writing exercises such as the Gondal and Angria legends conjured up by the Brontë children. Individual projects were in fact rather jealously protected. The young Rossettis did produce a joint magazine, but they worked separately on assigned tasks. The one group writing activity -- the composition of *bout-rimé* sonnets -- was deliberately staged as a competitive, rather than cooperative, exercise.

Pollock's broader contextualisation of sibling rivalry certainly sheds light on the complexity of Rossetti's responses to her brother, and the degree to which she exposed herself and her work to his interference. It is hard to otherwise understand, for example, the blithe sang-froid with which she would occasionally assign her business interests to a notoriously haphazard and unreliable Dante Gabriel, regardless of the inevitable tangles that were bound to ensue. This too perhaps goes some way towards explaining why she kept offering her work for his scrutiny, and asking for advice she had no intention of taking, and enables

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<sup>18</sup>Russ points out that Van Gogh's first paintings were copies of works by his mother, Anna Cornelia Carbentus (50); and Spender demonstrates how D.H. Lawrence manipulated his female friends and lovers into writing large chunks of "raw material" which he would work into his novels. **The Writing or the Sex?** 150-160.

some comprehension of her participation in the myth of his critical helpfulness.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of Christina and Dante Gabriel, however, we have an unusual example of two gifted artists from the same family, raised together by the same parents, given apparently the same education in childhood, instilled with the same moral values and bourgeois aspirations, close together in age, almost identical in native temperament<sup>20</sup> and creative genius, and differentiated only by gender. Nevertheless as adults, they split into diametrically opposed and inverted images of the other, opposite poles of a binary dualism, living symbols of an either/or dialectic. Given the combination of synchronous closeness and alienation that characterised their relationship, the image of a photograph and its negative can be used to suggest both their inverse mirroring and acute disconnection: he was flamboyant, she was drab and reclusive; he was bohemian, she was austere; he was a renegade, she was excessively religious; he was the artist, she was the muse. This repeating pattern has been held as a model not only for their lives, but has also affected critical responses to their creative works, which have often been compared in oppositional terms; Betty Flowers extrapolates from their relationship of artist and model polarised readings of their art, suggesting that Rossetti's poetry grew "toward more control and conciseness even as [Dante

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<sup>19</sup>See 230, 233 below.

<sup>20</sup>This similarity in disposition has been remarked on by numerous commentators; within the family itself, Gabriele Rossetti divided his children into two categories; Christina and Dante Gabriel were the "two storms" in contrast to William Michael and Maria -- the "two calms." (Thompson 22.)

Gabriel's] painting moved toward more elaboration and lushness."<sup>21</sup> (A parallel situation arises in comparative studies of Dante Gabriel and Siddal's works; one scholar announces that "[Siddal] seems to have had no original creative power: she was as the moon to his sun, merely reflecting his light.")<sup>22</sup> Rossetti herself never fared quite this badly, but readings of her work have suffered from the tendency to assign the women around Dante Gabriel to the subordinate (and satellite) positions suggested by his "sun." Critical responses have thus tended to reinforce the "splitting" of the Rossettis and their work into hierarchically structured symbolic universes.

The contrast between their almost identical and shared background and the marked disparities of their adult careers and lifestyles, played up by critics and biographers, suggests that their situation forms an ideal laboratory for testing the effects of gendered sibling rivalry. Florence Boos has already noted that "The contrast between Dante and Christina Rossetti in education, freedom of movement, life pattern, writings, formal religiosity, and in their treatment of each other, is ... much more likely the result of Victorian sexual mores and conditioning than of any accident of temperament."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Kent 160.

<sup>22</sup>J.Gere, quoted in Cherry and Pollock 210.

<sup>23</sup>*The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976) 11.

The hierarchical structuring of male dominance over female submission arising out of Victorian gender discourses is doubtlessly responsible for the retention by Dante Gabriel of the active, primary and prominent domain, and the displacement of Rossetti to the secondary, lesser, and obscured sphere. This structuring gives a fresh twist to Rossetti's espousal of a faith that promised the radical inversions of the apocalypse, and the reiteration in poems both dissident and devout, of the archaic doctrinal significance of the "lowest room" and the "last place." The textual development in Rossetti's corpus of the glorious subversion of the Gospel narratives that assured that the "last would be first, and the first last," begins to suggest more than simply religious orthodoxy; it promises a complex amalgam of consolation, a guarantee of justice in response to the age-old cry of the excluded or displaced child, "It isn't fair." Further, it acts as a spiritual trope of inversion, which would have enabled Rossetti to enjoy the satisfactions of piety -- making a spiritual virtue out of necessity -- while at the same time anticipating, quite legitimately, the heady glory and power which the next world would offer her.

However, the ranked and differentiated placing of Dante Gabriel and Christina was not simply the result of irresistible external political and social schematas, a fixed hierarchy to be piously endured until a new earth and heaven ushered in a different world order; and it would be simplistic to assume that Rossetti's only response was to take refuge in religion. The role of the artist in the family was a

fiercely, if covertly, contested one: Rossetti herself fought for a serious poetic identity of her own, rather than for the laurel wreath of their circle; Dante Gabriel, however, highly competitive at the best of times, mounted what at times resembled a campaign of subconsciously deliberate sabotage of his sister's career and art, in his efforts to maintain his claim to be the principal "genius," first in the family pantheon.

Dolores Rosenblum, in a personal interview, said that she believed that the impact of Dante Gabriel's oppression of his sister went deeper than his stringent objections to her poems and interference with the process of publishing them. She suggested that evaluating the differences in their personal habits and creative and artistic patterns would shed significant light on how their gender socialisation differentiated their poetry.<sup>24</sup> In her book on Rossetti, she had already pointed out that "[t]he division according to gender within the Rossetti family, an exaggeration of the division between the sexes within the culture ... inevitably polarized the brother and sister who were most alike in temperament and gifts. If he was self-indulgent, she was self-denying; if he was extroverted, she became introverted; if he was colour, she was black and white."<sup>25</sup> Certainly one is left with a strong suspicion that Dante Gabriel indulged his creative abilities at the

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<sup>24</sup>Interview, Philadelphia: November 1988.

<sup>25</sup>Poetry of Endurance 33.

expense of his sister's,<sup>26</sup> and one cannot help asking to what extent his stereotypical lifestyle of Bohemian excess forced her to take on the role of emotional caregiver to the family.

It cannot be denied that William Michael was obliged, by his brother's fiscal irresponsibility and his sisters' helplessness, to become the financial and practical caretaker of the family, the one whose job it was to pay the rent.<sup>27</sup> Yet it was Christina who undertook the emotionally arduous task of maintaining the family as a loving unit, who wrote thousands of dutifully affectionate and at times, anxious letters, often acting as a facilitator for family contact and communication,

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<sup>26</sup>Rossetti would not have been the only one in this position; several studies have demonstrated how Dante Gabriel used the women in his life, sometimes at great cost to their personal and creative development. The miseries of Elizabeth Siddal, as well as the drain on Jane Morris's energies, have been well-documented, by, among others, Gay Daly in **Pre-Raphaelites in Love**, and Jan Marsh, particularly in **Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood, Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story**, and **The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal**. During his early career, Dante Gabriel was a perpetual financial drain on his Aunt Charlotte and a constant source of anxiety to his parents. It was not only women upon whom he leant so heavily; he was notorious for begging from his friends, whose loans he invariably treated as gifts; he lived under William Morris's roof for months at a time, while at the same time involved with his wife. His use of his friends' resources is summed up in the famous remark by a disgruntled Ford Madox Brown: "Since the 12th Gabriel has still been here ... & all the time wearing my great coat which I want & a pair of my breeches, besides [needing] food and an unlimited supply of turpentine." (**The Diary of Ford Madox Brown**, ed. Virginia Surtees [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981] 107.)

<sup>27</sup>Dante Gabriel, although the eldest son, never contributed to the upkeep of his female relatives, or offered to share this burden with William Michael, even though he was to become the wealthiest of the Rossettis -- on paper. The huge sums he was eventually to command for his paintings were spent faster than they were earned. There is a stark contrast between Christina, who kept meticulous accounts, and who determinedly calculated (and repaid) every penny she owed William Michael for board and lodging, (see page 110 below) and the haphazardly spendthrift Dante Gabriel, who was notorious for not repaying his debts -- especially those to relatives and friends.

and constantly struggling to realise the myth of a devoted family far more united than was actually the case. To her fell the job of reminding other family members (usually Dante Gabriel) not to neglect their obligations; in a passage that William Michael omitted from the printed version of a letter to Dante Gabriel, she hints, "[Uncle Henry] is very sensitive as to any appearance of neglect on the part of friends; their not writing to him, for instance."<sup>28</sup> We also see her repeatedly organising family outings and visits, and at times pleading for the presence of her brothers on significant occasions and holidays; a letter in which she tries to persuade Dante Gabriel to visit his mother for Christmas, coaxes, "...your coming would give her so much pleasure that it may help to tempt you over amongst us."<sup>29</sup>

Further scrutiny of her family letters leaves one with the impression that the traditionally female and invisible role of caretaking by correspondence was in her case extremely hard work. For example, during her sister Maria's final illness, neither brother visited the dying woman with much frequency. William had the excuse of the real demands of a full-time job and a wife and five children to attend to; Dante Gabriel also pleaded pressure of work and delicate health, but probably shrank from the sickroom, with its attendant miasma of pain and suffering, further exacerbated by the austerity of the religious order of which

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<sup>28</sup>UBC, 1874?

<sup>29</sup>UBC, Dec 1874.

Maria was a member. Christina therefore undertook to write almost daily reports to both brothers; for months, as Maria lingered, she ground out letters that combined details of dreadful pain and delirium together with strained attempts to find something positive to report in each missive. William Michael's later presentation of these letters to the public is a revealing instance of censorship: he includes four letters to himself and three to Dante Gabriel, discreetly tidied up (for example, all references to vomiting are omitted, as are details of the liberal use of opium), in his edition of Christina's **Family Letters**. In the Rossetti-Angeli manuscript collection at the University of British Columbia, there are seventeen letters (written within the space of two months) to Dante Gabriel alone. What these disclose (which the sample in **Family Letters** does not) is that during this period, in spite of Christina's hints, suggestions and eventual pleading, Dante Gabriel visited his dying sister only once; Christina and her mother usually travelled to the convent twice a day to attend her.<sup>30</sup>

Another example of Rossetti's labour of letters, is her correspondence with her sister-in-law, Lucy Brown Rossetti. Although tradition judges Christina as antipathetic to Lucy, the sample of correspondence in **Family Letters** (twenty-

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<sup>30</sup>UBC, Sept-Nov 1876; FL 59-64. Although Maria was dying, she was herself concerned not to outrage the sensibilities of the cosseted idol of the family; in one of her letters to Dante Gabriel, Christina writes "...the All Saints Mother was thinking of herself writing to you to suggest one of your much enjoyed visits, but poor dear M. herself did not feel equal to the indulgence, so often is she seized with sickness; for your own sake she would not like you to be distressed by witnessing such an attack [of vomiting]." Apparently, no such anxieties were felt on Christina or William Michael's behalf; it was Dante Gabriel who had to be protected from any unpleasantness.

eight in all) once again does not do justice to the sheer volume of letters, many of them apologetic or conciliatory, that she wrote to her sister-in-law in the years between her marriage to William Michael and her death.<sup>31</sup> Neither do they fully represent how hard Rossetti tried to befriend a woman to whom she was "evidently displeasing."<sup>32</sup>

As far as other forms of domestic caretaking go, the extent to which Rossetti performed household chores is not known; the family employed at least one servant, but their financial straits suggest that the women would have undertaken some of the usual domestic responsibilities. The letter she wrote to a friend on the occasion of William Michael's marriage, confiding to the luxurious sensation of handing over responsibility for his domestic comfort to his wife, is one of the rare indications we have of Rossetti's dislike for conventional feminine tasks: "One thing I thoroughly enjoy, that my Mother and I can now go about just as we please at our own sweet wills, without any consciousness of man resourceless or shirt-buttonless left in the lurch!"<sup>33</sup>

One is also led to ask to what extent the austerity and modesty of Rossetti's life acted as an unconscious safeguard against the chaos which threatened to engulf

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<sup>31</sup>In the UBC collection alone, there are 108 letters from Rossetti to Lucy, covering the period from 1874 to 1892.

<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Thompson 307.

<sup>33</sup>Quoted in Thompson 296.

Dante Gabriel, and which did finally destroy him. She knew all too well his lack of self-control and outbursts; we already know that she too had a stormy temper, especially in childhood<sup>34</sup> (her father's letters refer to her "tears," "resistance" and "outcry," and describe her as "skittish," "restless" and "fractious";<sup>35</sup> and her older sister Maria noted reprovably that she had inherited the bad temper of both parents.)<sup>36</sup> She had once even gashed her arm open with a pair of scissors on being rebuked by her mother, an incident she herself revised into a form of moral tale, and recounted to her niece.<sup>37</sup> However, by early adulthood, she was modelling as the Virgin Mary for Dante Gabriel, emulating the qualities of "extreme patience" and "temperate respect" that he had assigned the Virgin in an explanatory sonnet.<sup>38</sup> During the painting of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, while she held the immobile pose demanded of the sitter, Dante Gabriel repeatedly and dramatically lost his temper with the child posing as an angel, and

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<sup>34</sup>In the **Memoir** which accompanied Rossetti's **Poetical Works**, William Michael notes that "In childhood she was of a lively, and a somewhat capricious or even fractious temper;...." (xlix) while Theodore Watts-Dunton, a family friend and biographer, went on to point out that this had, of course, been suppressed in adulthood: "A certain irritability of temper which was, perhaps, natural to her, had ... [been] chastened ...." (The **Athenaeum**, 5 Jan 1895: 16.)

<sup>35</sup>Thompson 22; Rosenblum, **The Poetry of Endurance** 31-32.

<sup>36</sup>Waller, R.D: **The Rossetti Family: 1824-1854** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1932) 172.

<sup>37</sup>Packer, **Christina Rossetti** 10. This itself demonstrates the socialization of the female child; whereas Dante Gabriel inflicted his rage and "storms" on others, Christina's uncontrollable rage was translated into self-mutilation, and self-abnegation. Years later, she was to write humbly to William Michael, "I am truly sorry for my ebullition of temper this morning (and for a hundred other faults) ...."(FL 42.)

<sup>38</sup>See 157 below.

tears and hysterics resulted. Christina was a helpless witness; it was Holman Hunt who eventually had to quiet him and who pointed out that his behaviour was unacceptable, even outrageous.<sup>39</sup>

However, watching her brother throw the tantrums that were denied her would have been only the beginning for Christina. What did it cost her, an extraordinarily scrupulous Christian of strict moral principles, to turn a blind eye of sisterly devotion to his hedonism and, by Victorian standards, extremely irregular personal conduct? Rossetti was someone who left the room, apparently outraged, and then fainted from distress, when presented to the second Mrs Holman Hunt; an otherwise inoffensive woman who had committed the "crime" of going abroad in order to marry her late sister's widower -- a practice still illegal in England.<sup>40</sup> Yet Christina entertained at home Dante Gabriel's model-cum-fiancée, Elizabeth Siddal, with whom he to all intents and purposes shared his living quarters. Although he usually kept Siddal at a safe distance from the women in his family, there was at times almost an element of flaunting in Dante Gabriel's manner of insisting that his mother and sisters acknowledge the unfortunate Siddal. In the same letter in which he warned Christina not to "rival" Siddal as an artist,<sup>41</sup> he paraded his infatuation: "Since you went away,

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<sup>39</sup>G. H. Fleming, *Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* 94-5; Daly 20.

<sup>40</sup>Quentin Bell, *A New and Noble School: The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Macdonald, 1982) 103.

<sup>41</sup>See 178 below.

I have had sent me ... a lock of hair shorn from the beloved head of that dear, and radiant as the tresses of Aurora, a sight of which perhaps may dazzle you on your return. That love has lately made herself a grey dress, also a black silk one, the first bringing out her characteristics as a 'meek unconscious dove,' while the second enhances her qualifications as a 'rara avis in terris,' by rendering her 'nigro simillima cygno.'"<sup>42</sup> The exchanging of locks of hair, to be proudly shown around the family circle, the assembling of a trousseau, the self-conscious adoption of endearments ("dear" and "love") with which to refer to the beloved: these were the prerogatives of a newly-affianced couple. Yet no official announcement was forthcoming; and the hasty and makeshift wedding to a desperately ailing bride was not to take place until eight years later. That Dante Gabriel was aware of the discomfort his female relatives experienced due to the unorthodox situation is demonstrated in a letter to his mother, written from a boarding house in Hastings where he was staying with Siddal during one of her illnesses. Here he finds it necessary to explain that although he keeps her company in her bedroom, "[n]o-one thinks it at all odd my going into the Gug's room to sit there."<sup>43</sup>

What was more, while *de facto* engaged to Siddal, he brazenly conducted several flirtations with women (such as the glamorous Ruth Herbert) engaged in the racy

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<sup>42</sup>FL 21.

<sup>43</sup>Letters of DGR I 190.

professions associated with the theatre and the modelling studio. One of these *amours* was with the model Annie Miller (another Galatea, then engaged to Holman Hunt, who was travelling in Palestine at the time.) This piece of gossip was very much public property, and wrecked his friendship with Hunt, who declared bitterly, "I will never forgive Gabriel." The Rossetti family certainly knew about this escapade; the cautious William Michael (who was himself somewhat taken with the fetching Annie) went so far as to censure his brother for it in his later memoirs.<sup>44</sup>

Christina also knew that Fanny Cornforth was Dante Gabriel's housekeeper for many years; did she, like everyone else in the Pre-Raphaelite circle, know that Fanny was both an unrepentant and unreformed prostitute and her brother's mistress, during his relationship with Elizabeth Siddal as well as after her death? If not, to what lengths did she have to go to avoid knowing? The only possible reference to Fanny in her letters to Dante Gabriel is her ambiguous response to a piece he sent her which featured an elephant: "Delicious is the prosperous elephant ladling out rice to mendicants: I wish all Elephants were prosperous."<sup>45</sup> It is hard to believe that this is coincidental, considering that it was well-known that Dante Gabriel's pet name for Fanny was "Elephant" and that in terms of

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<sup>44</sup>Susan Casteras, *The EJ and S McCormick Collection* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1984) 22, 71; G.H. Fleming, *That Ne'er Shall Meet Again: Rossetti, Millais, Hunt* (London: Michael Joseph, 1971) 128.

<sup>45</sup>TR 161.

ability to wheedle money, he had met his match in her.<sup>46</sup> The fact that the second "Elephant" is written with a capital letter makes Rossetti's seemingly casual remark all the more pointed.

Later, Dante Gabriel was to live adulterously with William Morris's wife, Jane, a *ménage à trois* only tolerated by society because William Morris (whose response was to remove himself to Iceland to investigate indigenous mythology and fables) magnanimously continued to pay the rent, thereby maintaining the polite fiction that Dante Gabriel was a guest in his home. Yet Rossetti cultivated a blithe unconsciousness of the real situation; she visited the pair at Kelmscott, she dutifully made up parcels of books to send to Jane to keep her occupied during sittings, and when writing to her brother during these highly irregular summer sojourns, she never failed to pass on her "cordial regards" to Jane, always referred to as the "beautiful Mrs Morris;" likewise, the locale of their unconventional idyll was invariably "beloved Kelmscott" in Christina's letters.<sup>47</sup>

Certainly Dante Gabriel fell into the category of male artists who batted off the women close to them, such as Branwell Brontë, Augustus John, Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, D.H. Lawrence, John Middleton Murray, Scott Fitzgerald and so forth.

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<sup>46</sup>See **Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Letters to Fanny Cornforth**, ed. Paul F. Baum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940) for particulars of their amicable wrangles over money (Dante Gabriel invariably came off worst) and the nicknames they called each other.

<sup>47</sup>FL 43, 53, 88.

Although most creative men could (and often still do) rely on the domestic and emotional support of women in their immediate family, the demands made by these particular artists crystallise into specific patterns of compulsion. Most were needy, even disturbed individuals who could afford the luxury of destructive and excessive behaviour largely due to the support (emotional, economic, domestic and creative) provided by the women in their lives, who found themselves obliged to act as the cohesive force in the family, the source of equilibrium, and in some instances, even as the provider of financial stability.<sup>48</sup>

The likeness between Branwell Brontë and Dante Gabriel is especially striking, and invites closer investigation: in both cases, there was a strong sibling alliance between four children close in age, with a clear-cut hierarchy in which the needs of a cosseted and idealised brother were placed first at the expense of the other children, and considerable belief and family loyalty invested in his artistic genius. In both cases the adored and venerated brother's adult life reeled from disaster to debacle: disastrous liaisons, adultery, drug addiction, suicide attempts and insanity followed in turn, although Dante Gabriel interposed periods of recklessness with long productive spells, and was never quite prostrated by his various demons. Also, thanks to the faithful William Michael, and a band of

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<sup>48</sup>The dynamics under scrutiny here are those of cross-gendered relations of coercive support; a further avenue worth exploring would be that of same-sex rivalry and support. In her work *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Helena Michie frames some useful paradigms for reading textual difference, competition and support between sisters, blood and otherwise, and uses these to further elucidate *Goblin Market*. (32-37.)

long-suffering squires, his mother and sisters were protected from some of the worst shocks: due to particularly valiant efforts on the part of his friends, Frances Rossetti and her daughters went to the grave without knowing that Dante Gabriel had deliberately attempted to take his own life in 1872, although Christina seems to acknowledge that his chloral addiction amounted to a form of slow and wilful self-destruction.

The women of both the Brontë and Rossetti families were forced to work as a result of the collapse of the male figures; just as the Rossetti women opened a school to support the family (and pay for Dante Gabriel's expensive art tuition) after Gabriele Rossetti's failing eyesight impeded his capacity to earn, the Brontë sisters banded together to try to earn a living from writing after their father developed cataracts, and Branwell returned home, dismissed in ignominy from a variety of posts, to give free rein to alcohol and opium abuse. (It was apparently his uncontrollably anti-social and self-destructive behaviour that eliminated the possibility of their setting up a school.)<sup>49</sup> One of the jobs Branwell botched was that of a railway clerk; in a quirk of historical coincidence, Dante Gabriel's only show of interest in any non-artistic employment consisted of a investigative visit

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<sup>49</sup>According to Maurianne Adams ("Family Disintegration and Creative Reintegration: the case of Charlotte Brontë and *Jane Eyre*," **The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses**, ed. Anthony Wohl [London: Croom Helm, 1978]), "home with [Branwell was] a hell on earth and a school at home an impossibility." (159.)

to a railway telegraph office, at the end of which he concluded that the work would not suit him.<sup>50</sup>

The extent to which Christina would have been affected by the supporting role assigned her in the ongoing family drama must be seriously considered. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to present Dante Gabriel (or William Michael) as wicked ogres, or their relationships with Christina as unmitigatedly destructive or restricting. To cast Dante Gabriel in particular in the role of a monster (no matter how tempting this becomes at times) would be to deny the complexities of his relation to his sister; this species of cruder polemic would no doubt also provoke unhelpfully defensive responses. William Fredeman, in his 1988 overview and update of Pre-Raphaelite scholarship has already remarked (not without a touch of anxiety) that "Feminist criticism, alas, is not always ... apolitical [sic]. The narrator of Rossetti's 'Jenny,' for example, has, perhaps predictably, been a target for the radical fringe, one of whom labelled him an aesthetic rapist who substituted a pen for a penis. Unhappily, the succession of 'fair ladies' that David Sonstroem identified as the 'principal motif' in Rossetti in 1970 will doubtless prove in due course a ripe preserve for later critics of a particular persuasion intent on radicalizing both poetic and visual texts."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Adams 152; G. H. Fleming, *Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* 150.

<sup>51</sup>"*Pre-Raphaelitism* Revisited; or, Dr. Frankenstein Reprograms the Monster," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies* I.1.2 (Spring 1988): 10.

Dante Gabriel clearly still has his champions; however, it is not simply out of deference to them that one must proceed with caution. It would be less than accurate to state categorically that Dante Gabriel was a drone who demanded care in one-way emotional transactions; the attempts down the years to exonerate him of his worse failings were often undertaken by those he had treated most shabbily, and testify to his compelling charisma and charm. Edward Burne-Jones, Val Prinsep and Arthur Hughes were to reminisce in glowing terms about the second flowering of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, especially the "Jovial Campaign."<sup>52</sup> This was the communal project of painting the Oxford Debating Union murals, an enterprise which lasted one enchanted summer during which Dante Gabriel reigned supreme, with Burne-Jones (who described it as the happiest period of his life)<sup>53</sup> and William Morris as faithful squires.<sup>54</sup> Val Prinsep noted that "Rossetti was the planet round which we revolved; ... we sank our own individuality in the strong personality of our adored Gabriel."<sup>55</sup> This charisma never quite failed Dante Gabriel; in the last years of Dante Gabriel's

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<sup>52</sup>G.H. Fleming, **That Ne'er Shall Meet Again** 100-107.

<sup>53</sup>Of the year in which he was befriended by Ruskin and Dante Gabriel, he was to reminisce nostalgically, "I think it never rained nor clouded, but was blue summer from Christmas to Christmas, and London streets glittered, and it was always morning, and the air sweet and full of bells." (Georgiana Burne-Jones's **The Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones**, quoted in Daly 267-68.)

<sup>54</sup>Nearly forty years later, Georgiana Burne-Jones was to write wistfully, "Gabriel was in his glory and Edward [Burne-Jones] and Morris sat at his feet -- and rejoiced in his light -- and they were so beautiful ...." (Quoted in Fleming, **That Ne'er Shall Meet Again** 109.)

<sup>55</sup>Quoted in Daly 75.

life, ailing, paranoid, and often hysterical, he was still able to extract the following tribute from a young admirer: "What a supreme man is Rossetti! Why is he not like some great exiled king that we might give him our lives to restore him to his kingdom!"<sup>56</sup>

Dante Gabriel may have been chronically irresponsible, but remained a devoted, if unreliable brother and son, who was especially attached to his mother; a typical letter to her begins "Dearest Darling," and goes on to state, "you are very often in my mind when I am away from you. I have been blessed with your love so long that I could imagine no good world, here or elsewhere, without it."<sup>57</sup>

During the succession of illnesses he experienced towards the end of his life, he would often insist on the presence and attention of his mother, then nearing her eighties.<sup>58</sup> While he made no effort ever to support other members of his family, his was the extravagant generosity of the wayward but affectionate son who has

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<sup>56</sup>Letter by Phillip Bourke-Marston, quoted in Weintraub, **Four Rossettis** 82.

<sup>57</sup>**Letters of DGR** III 933.

<sup>58</sup>All the Rossetti children seemed to have difficulty individuating or establishing an identity separate from their mother; Ford Madox Brown's son Nolly reported with amusement that William Michael's first serious fight with his wife was sparked by his insistence that he could not love her more than he loved his mother. (Weintraub 207.) However, it must be remembered that in a society innocent of Freud, family relationships remained smothering close well into adult life, and this was considered perfectly appropriate, even desirable. Anthony Wohl points out that "these ... families ... regarded their intimacy and protective hothouse atmosphere as an essential preparation for entering and influencing society." (Introduction, **The Victorian Family** 15.) Of course, the same hothouse could have stifling, even disastrous effects; the loving stranglehold Ruskin's parents exerted on their only son was to maim him both emotionally and sexually (see Michael Brook's "Love and Possession in a Victorian Household: The Example of the Ruskins," Wohl 82-100) and wreck his marriage (see Daly 138-174; Rose, **Parallel Lives** 51-94.)

fled the nest (he was the only one of the four to leave the claustrophobic embrace of his family early and for good), but who returns at erratic intervals to shower his relatives with lavish presents. He once impulsively ordered a Regent Street furrier to send a selection of its best cloaks to his mother, and urged her to choose the biggest and the best.<sup>59</sup> The quirky gifts he tried to press on Christina, however, brought out her most anxious traits of rectitude: in response to a promise of madeira wine, she writes, "the ½ doz. (please) you must let me with affectionate gratitude decline," going on to explain that it would be wasted on "a Goth who knows not wine from wine and who lumps all subtle distinctions in the simple definition 'nice'."<sup>60</sup> In spite of similar pleas that he not buy her drawings of crocodiles -- a pet predilection of Rossetti's, and a much relished family joke -- he nevertheless kept sending them, prompting her to protest, "I am not easy at so many kind presents."<sup>61</sup>

Neither was Dante Gabriel's behaviour flagrantly libertine or shamelessly deviant; although he lived the life of a bohemian, in a succession of establishments each more simultaneously squalid and luxurious than the last, holding riotous parties and sleeping through the day to carouse by night, he did so with distinct traces of unease and ambivalence. His outré lifestyle did not

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<sup>59</sup>Letters of DGR III 1385-6.

<sup>60</sup>UBC, May 1865.

<sup>61</sup>UBC, 1865; RP 72.

seem to give him uncomplicated pleasure; if in fact he had been unashamedly profligate, like John Chapman, the editor of *Homer*, who never allowed his marriage or children to interfere with his life as a roué,<sup>62</sup> or outrageously aberrant like Swinburne (who flaunted his deviance in the most performative manner possible, sliding down banisters blind drunk and naked, and paying prostitutes to flagellate him)<sup>63</sup> he might have been a far less tormented and complex man. But his devotion to his mother, his orthodox and pietistic upbringing in a shabby-genteel home, combined with other factors of social and class orientation and temperament, resulted in the anomalous situation whereby his behaviour had every *appearance* of social and sexual transgression, but was very probably much less scandalous in real life. It seems that although he and Siddal as near as makes no difference lived together before marriage,<sup>64</sup> it is likely that their relationship before matrimony was chaste, if "highly eroticised."<sup>65</sup> Likewise, his relationship with Jane Morris (although almost definitely adulterous) in actuality bore more of a resemblance to a fantasy romance, in which he relished playing Lancelot to her Guinevere, than a full-

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<sup>62</sup>Rose, *Parallel Lives* 199-200, 216.

<sup>63</sup>Daly 345; Weintraub, *Four Rossettis* 135.

<sup>64</sup>Laconic descriptions of their casual domestic and living arrangements during the years of their engagement are dotted throughout Ford Madox Brown's diary; Siddal was very close to his wife Emma, and the two couples spent a great deal of time together, not always harmoniously.

<sup>65</sup>Marsh (*PreRaphaelite Sisterhood* 68-71) and Daly (46) argue convincingly for this reading of the situation.

blown affair. Florence Boos provides the pragmatic reminder that "[i]t might be more ... realistic to keep in mind the situation's infirmities and constraints: Rossetti's obesity, addiction, hydrocele, [a painful condition in which fluid accumulates in the testes] bad eyesight and growing anxieties; and Jane Morris's ever-present children, [one of whom was epileptic] neuralgia, and bad back."<sup>66</sup>

Rossetti herself felt genuine affection, over and above family loyalty, for both her brothers, especially William, her "brother of brothers,"<sup>67</sup> to whom she wrote during an awkward stay with the female relatives of Collinson, her temporary fiancé: "The talk of *beaus* is ... perpetual here.... Ah Will, if you were here we would write *bout-rimés* sonnets and be subdued together...."<sup>68</sup> In an unpublished letter she wrote him when his engagement to Henrietta Rintoul, whom Rossetti had befriended, was broken off, she makes an warm partisan claim: "If her happiness and yours were compatible, I would make a sacrifice to secure hers; but if otherwise, she cannot be dust in the balance with me, weighed against my most dear brother whom I love better than any man in the world and who has brought my gratitude by life-long kindness."<sup>69</sup> A telling indication of the quality

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<sup>66</sup>"Dante Gabriel Rossetti" in *Victorian Poets After 1850, Dictionary of Literary Biography* vol. 35, ed. William E. Fredeman and Ira B. Nagel (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1985) 229.

<sup>67</sup>FL 37.

<sup>68</sup>FL 6.

<sup>69</sup>UBC, 30 Nov 1860; Battiscombe 86.

of relationship she had with both brothers is revealed in a heartsore letter she wrote to William soon after the dissolution of her engagement: "...I wish you would find out whether Mr Collinson is as delicate as he used to be: you and Gabriel are my resources, and you are by far the more agreeable...." <sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, she was to consistently express warmth and gratitude towards Dante Gabriel, and refused to allow the traumas of the last years of his life to cloud this affection. During the stress of his final collapse, made hideous by delusions, paralysis and unspeakable craving for the drug which was killing him, she wrote compassionately to William Michael, himself exhausted by the unequal battle of superintending his brother: "Pray do not ascribe all his doings and non-doings to foundationless fidgetiness, poor dear fellow. Don't you think neither you nor I can quite appreciate all he is undergoing at present, what between wrecked health ..., nerves which appear to falsify facts, and most anxious money matters? It is trying to have to do with him at times, but what it must be TO BE himself?" <sup>71</sup>

Her astute recognition of his inner collapse, as his mental stability was undermined by remorseful obsession, suggests that she was never deluded about his lifestyle, and that her sunny ignorance of its darker aspects was more likely assumed than not. On the last day of his life, she kept vigil by his bedside, the

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<sup>70</sup>FL 13.

<sup>71</sup>FL 106.

only time in her life she did not receive Easter Communion.<sup>72</sup> She was nothing if not loyal.

However, the pattern of their relationship had been established early on: at first, before she achieved notable success, Dante Gabriel brought the same degree of slapdash enthusiasm to her projects that he did to Elizabeth Siddal's initial attempts to establish herself as an artist. At the end of a 1853 letter in which he gives his female relatives detailed instructions on hunting up props for his paintings, he writes, "I suppose Christina has not been working much at the Art? Will you tell her that I am quite ashamed of not being able yet to tell her anything positive about *Nick* [a short story by Rossetti]? I am constantly remembering it when Hannay [an essayist with literary connections] is not in the way, and always forgetting it when he is."<sup>73</sup> When a collection of her early poems, privately printed and circulated when she was only seventeen, reaped criticism from one of its less sympathetic readers, Dante Gabriel passed on a message so fulsomely indignant that it reads as tongue in cheek: his advice was that she ought to "console herself with [an] inward sense of superiority ... and to consign the fool and his folly to that utter mental oblivion to the which I doubt

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<sup>72</sup>Battiscombe 176.

<sup>73</sup>Letters of DGR I 113.

not, she has long ago consigned all those who have been too much honoured by the gift of her book."<sup>74</sup>

His motives for trying to suppress or control her later work, while reprehensible, were human. In 1862, in a fit of extreme guilt, he had sealed a fair copy collection of his poems in his wife's coffin after her suicide;<sup>75</sup> two weeks after the funeral, the first copies of **Goblin Market and Other Poems** hit the stands, earning Christina considerable literary success and public acclaim.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Dante Gabriel's collection of translations, **Early Italian Poets**, which had come out several months previously, had gone virtually unnoticed.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, critical responses to **Goblin Market** were identifying Christina, rather than Dante Gabriel, as the foremost Pre-Raphaelite poet. Lionel Stevenson points out that **Goblin Market** had appeared shortly after publications of poetry and drama by Morris, Swinburne and George Meredith, and writes, "With the perspective of time, we see clearly that a significant new school of poets had emerged almost simultaneously. The moving spirit of the group, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was at

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<sup>74</sup>Letters of DGR I 31.

<sup>75</sup>Daly speculates that as Siddal lay in her coffin open for viewing for nearly a week, and Dante Gabriel made an issue of telling his long-suffering friend and factotum Ford Madox Brown of his plans to place the poems in the coffin, he was perhaps hoping that (as usual) Brown would take matters into his own hands and retrieve the poems before the burial took place. (93.)

<sup>76</sup>For an account of the critical reception of the **Goblin Market** volume, see Charles 31-33.

<sup>77</sup>Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic* 281.

the time the least conspicuous to the public .... Christina, on the other hand, was soon recognized as a major poet. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had died a few months before **Goblin Market** appeared, and so Christina Rossetti inherited her laurels as the leading English woman poet. Rather than being a modest camp-follower of Pre-Raphaelite poetry, she found herself in the forefront."<sup>78</sup> It is worth reminding ourselves once again that Rossetti was a published and successful poet for nearly ten years before her brother achieved similar status.

One cannot help speculating as to whether his sister's continuing success contributed to Dante Gabriel's macabre decision to exhume Siddal's grave seven years later, in order to retrieve his poems. Certainly, according to William Michael, his decision to "achieve something permanent in poetry rather than painting" was influenced by his belief that as artists "two living Englishmen, Millais and [Burne-] Jones show[ed] a higher innate executive power than himself."<sup>79</sup> Given this understatement of his almost pathological obsession with competition, is likely that Dante Gabriel wished to establish his dominance over his sister, as well as the other Pre-Raphaelite poets, in the literary arena, having failed to establish his ascendancy in the art world. There was in fact pressure to prove himself a poet; after the publication of both Christina's **Goblin Market** and **Prince's Progress** volumes, but before Dante Gabriel brought out his first volume,

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<sup>78</sup>**The Pre-Raphaelite Poets** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972) 107.

<sup>79</sup>**Letters of DGR II** 745.

a series of reviews in **Tinsley's Magazine** compared the works of Rossetti and her brothers (Maria was excluded.) These, with disingenuous condescension, announced that although Christina was even more poetically gifted than Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel was *potentially* the better writer, and urged him to publish.<sup>80</sup> Part of the subtext seemed to be that he was required to establish his poetic precedence over his female sibling in the public domain.

Thus it would seem imperative, first of all, to re-read certain aspects of Rossetti's own history, to determine, what (if any) strategies of survival, appropriation and reclamation she evolved in order to deal with family crises and the broader pressures of gender prescriptions. The tensions between the roles of sister and emotional caretaker on one hand, and artist and poet on the other emerge in her texts, as they do in various forms in the work of the many women artists who found (and still find) themselves caught between the demands of others and their own needs and desires. If indeed she was a poet not because of, but in spite of her brother, her degree of self-consciousness and self-determination as a poet require re-examination and re-evaluation.

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<sup>80</sup>Weintraub, **Four Rossettis** 169.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Singular Life; A Tenacious Vocation

Any even partial attempt to retrieve the personal history of Christina Rossetti confronts the researcher with the problems related to uncovering and transmitting the events of women's lives. Biographers with feminist agendas discover that they face a tradition of prurient over-emphasis on women writers' private (for which read romantic or sexual) histories, which assumes that passion, energy and verve, as well as melancholy, bitterness and rage expressed in fictional texts written by women are necessarily self-referential -- literary evidence of the joys, sorrows and crises of personal events. One thinks of the speculation as to whether or not romantic narratives or reflections (especially unhappy ones) by women writers are secretly autobiographical: "Does *Persuasion* tell Jane Austen's own love-story?" queried the blurb on the back of my first paperback copy. That the presumption that women's writing is confessional stems from gendered responses on the part of traditional biographers, hardly needs to be demonstrated.<sup>1</sup> The study of art and literature by men seldom collapses into

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<sup>1</sup>Just one example is that of C.M. Bowra; discussing the poem *Twice* by Rossetti, in which a first-person speaker confesses her love, only to be rejected by the man she addresses, he states: "No *woman* [italics mine] could write with this terrible directness if she did not to some degree know the experience she describes." (*The Romantic Imagination* [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1949] 261.)

biographical conjecture, or attempts to read literature through a lens of biography, unless the life of that artist is spectacularly deviant or defiant, such as Byron's or Swinburne's. For the most part, however, the details of lives of male artists have not been considered crucial in reading or interpreting their work. For example, it has been generally assumed that the peculiarities of Tennyson's courtship and engagement are irrelevant to a study of his poetry. Especially dramatic and unconventional behaviour on the part of male artists occasionally adds a gloss of bohemian romance which can colour critical responses to their work, but usually no more.

However, no such respectful boundaries have been drawn between the lives and works of women writers, and should there be no apparent emotional impetus or trauma to propel a woman to write fiction, biographers have often done their best to find one. This obviously has a deleterious effect on both biographies of women's lives and critical treatments of their works. For example, until recently, one had to wade through a morass of post- and pseudo-Freudian criticism which read either sexual deviance or secret lovers into the works of nearly all unmarried women writers who dared to describe passion in their works.<sup>2</sup> On the

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<sup>2</sup>Critical treatments of Rossetti's life and works demonstrate this only too fully. Probably the most well-known example is Packer's discovery of an illicit relationship lurking amongst the texts of Rossetti's poems, in spite of the lack of any "scrap of evidence" as William Fredeman pointed out in his review in *Victorian Studies* 8 (Sept 1964): 71-77. And in his biography of the Rossettis, Weintraub assumed not so much sexual guilt as sexual frustration to be a major component of Rossetti's life and writing. In both biographies, speculation has a tendency to ally itself with rather suspect sensationalism: Packer assures her readers that "Despite the fact that she was an engaged girl, Christina ... must have responded to the

other hand, however, many of the details of the daily lives of women writers -- those which might well contribute to the texture of their writing -- have been brushed aside by patriarchal scholarship as immaterial. The tendency to view housework and child-raising either as the natural and therefore invisible province of the female, or as a sacred and exalted vocation to which women alone are called, has meant that most histories have ignored the economic and domestic circumstances under which most women wrote (and still write). By now the observation that it is no coincidence that the major British women writers of the nineteenth century were mostly single, childless and middle-class with servants has become a truism;<sup>3</sup> for a cameo which vividly reveals the kind of data most biographers have skimmed over in the past, it is worth reading Harriet Beecher

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'singularly penetrating and deliberate gaze' of [Scott's] magnetic blue eyes under their bushy black Mephistophelian eyebrows" (51); and Weintraub writes that "the two repressed virgins [Rossetti and Henrietta Rintoul] held each other fast, Henrietta's thin body trembling in Christina's arms, as crying, she kissed her....", a slanted rewrite of a sympathetic letter in which Rossetti describes Rintoul's distress (115). Stevenson (**The Pre-Raphaelite Poets**) and Ralph Bellas (**Christina Rossetti** [Boston: Twayne Publishers] 1977) also apply dubious biographical assumptions about Rossetti's life fairly indiscriminately to discussions of her poetry. For examples of comments of this nature by Stevenson, see p.x; Bellas meanwhile entitles a chapter on Christina's poems of the 1850's and 1860's, "The Fire Burns: Desire and Frustration," (40-69) and treats the poems as straightforward records of emotional and romantic turmoil in Rossetti's life. It has already been demonstrated how Ellen Golub and others have treated *Goblin Market* primarily as clinical material with which to psychoanalyse its author, sometimes with rather crass results; and we already know of the school of early feminist criticism, headed by Germaine Greer, which argued that the startling sensuality and dissidence of certain poems are symptoms of the neurosis engendered by Rossetti's lack of sexual experience.

<sup>3</sup>Virginia Woolf's celebrated argument for the necessity of economic independence as a condition of female creativity, **A Room of One's Own** (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929) remains pertinent. Moers's **Literary Women** was the first recent work to provide a detailed survey of the economic factors which helped or hindered individual women artists, an investigation taken further by Russ in **How to Suppress Women's Writing**.

Stowe's own description of her efforts to write her anti-slavery novel while running a chaotic and impecunious household that included seven children, while her husband was left undisturbed in his study to write sermons. At the end of a saga of only partly comic woes involving difficulties with water supply and a recalcitrant plumber, housework that involves carpentry, varnishing and painting as well as the usual cooking and sewing, and the business of educating her children, Stowe describes yet another confinement with *relief*: "I was really glad for an excuse to lie in bed, for I was full tired, I can assure you."<sup>4</sup> No doubt these words could stand for the experience of the many women authors, such as Sylvia Plath and Tillie Olsen, who had to rise in the early hours of the morning in order to have uninterrupted time to write, and whose histories demonstrate that these problems are by no means confined to a past age. Elizabeth Gaskell, one of Rossetti's contemporaries, was also to complain of the difficulty of working from the heart of the domestic sphere: "If I had a library like yours, all undisturbed for hours, how I would write ... I would outdo *Rasselas* in fiction. But you see, everyone comes to me perpetually. Now in this hour ... I have had to decide on the following variety of important questions. Boiled beef -- how to boil? What perennials will do ... and what colours our garden wants. Length of skirt for a gown. Salary of nursery governess .... Settle twenty questions on dress

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Moers 3-4.

for the girls ...."<sup>5</sup> The business of housekeeping could act to undermine the women writer's understanding of herself as an artist; speaking of a devoted sister, Homans points out that "Dorothy Wordsworth, who never quite acknowledged her poet's vocation, ... closely approximated one of the expected patterns for women of her day; all the evidence suggests that she was happy to let her brother's extensive family occupy her time and care."<sup>6</sup>

Not only does the whole question of what constitutes the history of an individual woman's life require rethinking; it must also be stressed that a careful approach is necessary to avoid failing to distinguish between poetry and autobiography, literature and life. The Rossetti scholar has Packer's biography on Rossetti to act as a warning of how a minutely-researched and otherwise intelligent work can be ludicrously skewed by blurring these distinctions. Packer believed that Rossetti had a long-standing affair with a married man, William Bell Scott, or was at least guiltily in love with him, and treated her poetry as *prima facie* evidence, determinedly extracting historical clues from what remained indisputably

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<sup>5</sup>Quoted by Spender in *The Writing or the Sex?* 129. Gaskell's problems are characteristically middle-class; she is responsible for supervising the cook, gardener, seamstress or lady's maid, and governess. This cameo not only highlights the difficulties experienced by bourgeois women artists, but points to the almost insurmountable difficulties that must have been faced by working-class women aspiring to write, even if they were literate.

<sup>6</sup>*Women Writers* 5-6.

fiction.<sup>7</sup> One of the results was that when life did intersect with art, Packer failed to register its significance. The discovery of an erotic poem partially destroyed and sanitised has already been described: yet Packer's only response (rather ridiculous in retrospect) was that William, on discovering "evidence" of his sister's forbidden love, had acted to protect her reputation and hide her guilty secret.<sup>8</sup> This serves as a solemn warning not to manipulate literature to fit life -- as much of a temptation to the feminist critic as anyone else.

This is not to suggest that Rossetti's works do not reflect current social, political and cultural concerns, or to deny the influence and impact of immediate context (which would include personal experience and conviction) on her writing. Much fiction by women is frankly autobiographical, or written in response to current events, just as male authors can choose to draw on personal experiences and historical happenings. No-one who reads *In An Artist's Studio* can doubt for a

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<sup>7</sup>It is only fair to add that Packer may well have been correct in recognising that Rossetti had a romantic interest in Scott; after all, William Michael himself described Scott as "a man whom Christina viewed with great predilection. When in 1892 his **Autobiographical Notes** were published, containing ... several unkind and not too accurate passages about Dante Rossetti, she refused to look at the book, swayed, I think, as much by respect for Scott's memory as for her brother's." (**Memoir** lviii.) Moreover, in Crump's most recent volume of Rossetti's poems, there appears a previously unpublished humorous little jingle, apparently written for Scott on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, confessing to a tenderness for him "before I was twenty." (Crump, **CP III** 346, 510.) Nevertheless, Rossetti was extremely warm to a variety of men in her circle; she and Swinburne made up an extravagant mutual admiration society, and she was passionately concerned for Thomas Woolner, a member of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in the despair which drove him to emigrate to Australia. However, what is most problematic about Packer's thesis is not so much its degree of probability, but the extent to which it was used as a reductive interpretive key to Rossetti's poems.

<sup>8</sup>Christina Rossetti 112-3.

moment that it refers to Dante Gabriel, and his actual, not imagined, treatment of Elizabeth Siddal as perceived by Rossetti; and her prose tale *Maude*, written before the age of nineteen, is clearly partially a self-portrait. What is objectionable is the assumption that *all* fiction by women must have its origin in personal experience; in fact, to carry this to its extreme, as does Packer, who treats each poem by Rossetti as a cryptic diary entry, is to suggest that women cannot write fiction at all, and that female writers are simply reporters or recorders. Certainly critics have not permitted them to range from experience to imagination in the creative process with the same freedom allowed male poets. The fact that Tennyson's *In Memoriam* poem sequence and Shelley's *Adonais* were both written in response to the deaths of particular friends or role models, does not prompt the commentator to hunt through their personal histories seeking the emotional catalysts that triggered their other works.

Even if one conceded that Rossetti's poems describing the torments of love and parting might refer to contemporary experience, there is no need to assume that they form a transcript of the poet's private history; for most of her adult life, she was placed in the unenviable position of silently observing the high drama, griefs and passions experienced in unhappy relationships, as they were lived out by her closest friends and relatives. Many Pre-Raphaelites well-known to her were dogged by troublesome and even scandalous romantic histories; if Rossetti had

wished to "draw from life," she did not need to resort to her own reflection -- her immediate circle provided plenty of material.

Today's biographer proceeds with more caution than ever, aware not only that their research will invariably involve their own projections and personal investments, but that "original" material itself is not necessarily transparent and empirical: as Jean Strouse points out in her biographical review of Alice James's life, "The 'voices' biographers listen to constitute a very special kind of record: it is not always complete, and it does not always present a life *as it was lived*; instead, it presents what people (the subject, friends, relatives, other historians) had to *say* about that life. Language expresses a great deal, of course: it also conceals, misdirects, inverts, teases, gives away secrets inadvertently, and steadfastly refuses to give away any secrets at all [author's italics]." <sup>9</sup> Pollock and Cherry, writing of Elizabeth Siddal's life, draw on Foucault's notion of the "archive" to further describe the complex location and status of primary materials: "The archive is part of a system of representation by means of which the past seems to be deposited in the present; it is a fissured, uneven, contradictory monument of the past ... all these texts [letters, visual arts, journals, censuses, parish and council records, and so forth] offer differing registers of historical statement." <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>"Alice James: A Family Romance" in Moraitis and Pollock 80-81.

<sup>10</sup>"Woman as Sign" 211.

Even if one turns to the established "statements" of Rossetti's biography, one soon discovers that her life is fraught with paradox; it evades categorisation as adroitly as do her poems. In many respects, she played the part of the stereotypical genteel spinster of modest means. She refused marriage twice, ostensibly on religious grounds, and devoted her life, which was marked from beginning to end by ill-health, to the care of her mother and two aunts, charity work and the church. Her status as a spinster has drawn more patronising comment in this century than it did in her own, as current social norms still dictate pity and contempt (retroactively, if necessary) towards a woman who does not marry and have children -- in that order, of course. Although the highest duty of a Victorian woman was to marry, her failure to do so was usually more financially than socially disastrous, in an age when the first national censuses of 1841 and 1851 revealed that up to forty percent of British middle-class women were either widows or spinsters.<sup>11</sup> Rossetti's single status would have been considered unfortunate rather than unusual.

Yet Rossetti's irreproachable life did not correspond with the Victorian norm. Among her respectable middle-class relatives she counted some notorious and

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<sup>11</sup>The exact numbers are set out in some detail in J. A. and Olive Banks's **Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England** (New York: Schocken Books, 1964) 27-30. Barbara Rees, in **The Victorian Lady** (London and New York: Gordon & Cremonesi, 1977) notes that "In 1860 a girl's chances of marrying were one in three at the age of twenty-one, while at the age of thirty they were only one in sixteen." (28) These figures caused considerable alarm at the time, and the problem of "redundant" women was seriously canvassed in the press, with one commentator, William Greg, suggesting large-scale emigration of single women to the colonies as a solution. (See also Marsh and Nunn 25; Leder and Abbott 73-4.)

glamorous exceptions; her godmother was Lady Dudley Stuart, "originally the Princess Christine Bonaparte, niece of the great Napoleon,"<sup>12</sup> and her maternal uncle was the nefarious Henry Polidori, Byron's physician and diarist, and the author of the lurid Gothic saga, *The Vampyre*. He committed suicide at the age of twenty-six, possibly to escape gambling debts; nevertheless, his portrait hung in the Rossetti parlour until after Christina's death.<sup>13</sup> Her exiled Italian father, who taught his children to read Dante in the vernacular, brought an atmosphere of the exotic and flamboyant to the otherwise orthodox Victorian family. He was a man with a past: he was wanted for insurrection in his own country, and prior to his marriage, he had fathered an illegitimate son who had died in infancy.<sup>14</sup> The community of Italian political fugitives, artists and revolutionaries who met in his home were the Rossetti children's first introduction to the intrigue of secret societies and passionate debate. Their education, undertaken at home, stimulated precocious literary and artistic efforts, which were taken seriously and encouraged by their parents and maternal grandparents. As a teenager and young woman, Christina hovered on the edges of the tantalisingly proximate Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of innovative fledgling artists, poets and social rebels, drawn together by her brothers, John Millais and William Holman Hunt.

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<sup>12</sup>Memoir xiv.

<sup>13</sup>For an investigation of the possible impact of Henry Polidori's sensational life-story and novel on Rossetti's works, see David S. Morrill's "'Twilight is not good for maidens': Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in *Goblin Market*," *Victorian Poetry* 28.1 (1990): 1-16.

<sup>14</sup>Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic* 27.

(More will be said on the subject of Rossetti's ambiguous relationship with this group later.)

Even those features so typical of a middle-class Victorian woman's life, illness, charity work, and religious orthodoxy, reveal more than initially meets the eye. While genuinely frail in health, Rossetti was well aware of the advantages of illness. In a letter to William Michael, she confesses with relief that her health was in sufficiently poor a state to free her from the dreaded toils of "miscellaneous governessing *en permanence*."<sup>15</sup> Later she acknowledged to her publisher Macmillan, that she was "well content with the privileges and immunities which attach to semi-invalidism."<sup>16</sup> Sickness was furtively acknowledged by many of Rossetti's peers, such as Dora Greenwell, to have certain benefits for a woman who found household chores and social rituals tedious.<sup>17</sup> Ill-health was also a fine excuse for "unfeminine" behaviour; the uncontrollable distress, rebellion against orthodox social behaviour and open hostility that Elizabeth Siddal, Jane Morris and Lucy Brown Rossetti all displayed at times were invariably ascribed to (and explained away as) poor health. In some cases, it became a means of pursuing a career unhindered by

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<sup>15</sup>FL 24. William also recalled, "I have heard her dwell upon the satisfaction -- such as it is -- of being ill, and interdicted from certain exertions...." (*Memoir* I.)

<sup>16</sup>RML 123.

<sup>17</sup>Jones notes that Greenwell described her ill-health as "a little cave to run to," admitting in a letter that "a *professed* invalid has many social immunities, which I mean to take full advantage of...." (20, 84.)

social pressures; celebrated examples are those of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to whose bedside the best tutors, education, intellectual stimulation, fame, the world and finally a lover came;<sup>18</sup> and Florence Nightingale, who after winning reknown for her humanitarian accomplishments in the Crimea, retired (with a conveniently weak heart) for the rest of her long life to her bed, from whence she proceeded to change the face of nursing as a profession.<sup>19</sup>

Rossetti herself was able to protect the career she chose, and (as we noted) escape the governessing which would otherwise have been her lot (as the only paid employment available to respectable ladies of slender means) by means of the ill-health which every biographer has noted to be extremely conveniently timed. However, unlike Nightingale, Barrett Browning, and Elizabeth Siddal, whose vague complaints could never be specifically diagnosed, it seems that Rossetti was genuinely stricken. Nevertheless, the mystery which surrounds the sickness of her late teens suggests that while the disorder was severe, it was psychological in origin. (Thompson argues tentatively, but convincingly, that Rossetti suffered from spells of severe clinical depression;<sup>20</sup> certainly, to anyone familiar with the

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<sup>18</sup>Moers writes, "She wanted to do nothing but read and write; it has been established that her curiously convenient regime as an invalid gave her more time, daily, for these occupations than any other modern young person has ever enjoyed." (7.)

<sup>19</sup>Her bedroom was apparently described as the "little War Office," and Lytton Strachey remarked that in it she did more work "than most cabinet ministers." (Quoted by Myra Stark in Introduction, *Cassandra: an essay* by Florence Nightingale [New York: The Feminist Press, 1979] 17, 2.)

<sup>20</sup>Thompson 50-53.

suffering this illness involves, this would explain both the mental and physical debilitation Rossetti underwent at this stage of her life. It would also be consistent with the studied vagueness by her family on this point; Victorian medical science hardly distinguished between mental illness and insanity.) Even the prudent William suggests that his sister's decline was brought on by the crisis of facing adult responsibilities -- especially financial ones. The fact that it had been tacitly acknowledged that Dante Gabriel, on account of his genius, was to be exempted from his share of the family burden, must have exacerbated beyond endurance Rossetti's stark realisation that in the arena of competition for family resources, she was a non-starter on account of her sex. It is unlikely that she ever articulated the primal childhood protest at the rank injustice of the preferential treatment afforded her brother, or contested the socially entrenched gender bias which endorsed it. Instead, faced with a life of genteel drudgery, while Dante Gabriel was to be financially supported so that he could exercise *his* artistic vocation, Rossetti collapsed. *Her* vocation required the protection of physical fragility.<sup>21</sup> So although there were a few forays into teaching, from an early age Rossetti envisaged and planned for a life exercising her art, and earning a living by writing. William Michael tells us that by the age of twenty-four, his sister had thankfully given up "the necessity of teaching the small daughters of

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<sup>21</sup>Gilbert and Gubar point out that the repression of the female child is literally "sickening" (*Madwoman in the Attic* 54); to add to this the processes by which girls discover that the handicap of their gender means that sibling rivalry with their brothers is a losing battle, results in further unexpressed rage and grief at this manifest inequity. These are no doubt compelling contributing factors to the "illnesses" in which teenage girls both bury and reveal their anguish.

the neighbouring hairdresser or the neighbouring pork-butcher their p's and q's" and returned home from governing exile, "anxious to secure any literary pickings which might offer, and producing poems which the world has not as yet been willing to let die."<sup>22</sup>

Rossetti's charity work was also a means of deviating from the expected: in her twenties, she was eager to go to Scutari to nurse under Florence Nightingale's leadership<sup>23</sup> -- an ambition at odds with the popular picture which presents her as languid and reclusive. She was refused on the grounds of her youth,<sup>24</sup> but her Aunt Eliza was accepted, and although downcast to find herself appointed a stores manager instead of a nurse, was sufficiently stimulated to write an enthusiastic memoir of her experiences.<sup>25</sup> Unable to accompany her aunt, Rossetti looked around for something equally challenging closer to home, and found it: she worked at the St Mary Magdalene home at Highgate for

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<sup>22</sup>Memoir li.

<sup>23</sup>Nightingale herself was not exactly an orthodox role model or pattern of femininity; in *Cassandra*, she demanded "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity -- these three -- and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?" (25) and went on to complain bitterly that "women never have half an hour in all their lives ... that they can call their own .... a married woman was heard to wish that she could break a limb that she might have a little time to herself." (34.)

<sup>24</sup>Memoir lvi.

<sup>25</sup>Jones 66.

rehabilitating prostitutes and sheltering unmarried mothers,<sup>26</sup> a job she took seriously enough to wear the uniform of the order of nuns who ran the institution. Little is known of the precise kind of work she did, but she was sufficiently effective to be offered the post of superintendent, which she declined - to the relief of her family.<sup>27</sup> Her work with so-called "fallen women" does not tally with accounts which suggest that Rossetti was romantically and sexually naive; she would have been confronted with first-hand evidence of the frailty of human relationships and the sexual double standards of the Victorian age, which were later to be scathingly criticised in her poems *The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children* and *Light Love*. It would seem that she found her duties absorbing; she even stayed at the hostel on some occasions, obliging her publishers to send proofs of *Goblin Market* there to be corrected.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>It is worth stressing just how singular, even radical, both Rossetti's choices of charity work were. Nursing was considered an immodest profession suitable only for working-class women, and its practitioners were imputed with a reputation for lewdness and drunkenness. Moreover, Nightingale was at this stage not yet considered a national heroine, the "Lady of the Lamp," but a depraved lunatic; the women who accompanied her mostly did so against the express wishes of their horrified families, some of whom even disowned their errant daughters. Reform work with prostitutes, however, was considered suitable for middle-class women, and was a popular and respectable cause. Nevertheless, it was supposed to fall to the province of older, married women; for a young spinster to join their ranks would have been unorthodox, to say the least. Finally, both of Rossetti's concerns show that she was comfortable with the idea of working as part of a team of women, in contrast to the tradition of biographical presentation which hints at her condescending or reclusive withdrawal from female communities.

<sup>27</sup>Battiscombe 94.

<sup>28</sup>FL 26.

Rossetti's excursions into what might be today seen as social work (not only did she work with ex-prostitutes, she also practised "visiting" the homes of the poor, a fairly common form of charity work)<sup>29</sup> were inextricably linked to her religious observance. Her strict, even inflexible piety, and the time and effort she devoted to the practice of her faith, have drawn expressions of regret ever since her death: William Michael, himself an agnostic, tried to give a fair representation of his sister's religious beliefs, but could not abstain from regretting that the faith into which she poured so much, provided her with so little comfort.<sup>30</sup> Virginia Woolf's charge that the life of Christina Rossetti would be one of the first pieces of evidence she would produce in a case brought against God is well-known,<sup>31</sup> and more recent critics have often tried to balance tolerance of the religious rigidity of a previous age against dismay at the "waste" of a gifted woman's resources and energy. Yet Rossetti's relentless piety must be weighed against the social and intellectual vacuum that often made up the family life of an unmarried middle-class woman. Florence Nightingale railed against the unspeakable tedium and pointlessness of such a life in her essay *Cassandra*; and Isa Jane Blagden, a contemporary of Rossetti's, attributes the hypochondria of Victorian women to the complete lack of stimulation in families, in which "...grown-up daughters ... [are] debarred from freedom of action and freedom of

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<sup>29</sup>Thompson 127-130.

<sup>30</sup>*Memoir* liv-lv. Describing her last illness, he noted that "the terrors of her religion compassed her about, to the overclouding of its radiances." (lix.)

<sup>31</sup>Quoted in Thompson 379.

opinion, with miserable little occupations which fritter away, but do not occupy time -- often prohibited the healthy exercise which is as necessary to the mind as the body, and systematically leaving the intellect, the heart, the blood, in total stagnation...."<sup>32</sup> Rossetti was an intelligent and unusually well-educated woman, as were her mother and sister: it is possible, even likely, that the minutia of their daily religious observance and rituals -- bible study, devotional readings, prayers, fasting, daily communion, attendance at sermons, confession, saint's days to be noted and celebrated -- filled in some gaping blanks, as well as providing an impeccable excuse for avoiding a variety of unwanted social obligations. Nothing about Rossetti's history is as straightforward as it initially appears; in reading her life, its apparent ordinariness seems almost deliberately misleading.

Above all, Rossetti was a published and popular poet on both sides of the Atlantic in her own lifetime, financially unembarrassed, if not successful, as a result. Only one of her works failed to engage the interest of the general public (her collection of prose stories, aptly named **Commonplaces**), and even her religious works, unfashionable today, were widely read by her contemporaries. The response of the Irish poet Katherine Tynan Hinkson, in a letter to William Michael asking whether it would be an imposition to send Rossetti a book of her own poems, was typical: "...I am indebted to her for an insight into what religious poetry should

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<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Showalter's "Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion: Rebellion in the Novels of the 1860's," in Wohl 106.

be. Hitherto it seems to me to have been cold and colourless and often puerile; I do not see why one should not bring to it warmth and colour and ardent strength, and she knows how to do that. In religious poetry she is indeed the model whom I strive after and lift up my eyes to from my distance and lowliness...."<sup>33</sup> In her mature years, it was no doubt a source of satisfaction for Rossetti to read descriptions of herself as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, living female poets. Two years before she died, the critic Walter Raleigh announced simply, "I think she is the best poet alive."<sup>34</sup> Strangers wrote begging her for tokens: signatures, pictures, even locks of her hair. Acolytes called to do honour: in an 1888 letter, Rossetti wrote, "Yesterday two ladies called to ask if I was at home, would not come in, retired without leaving name or message, returned with a few very beautiful flowers; and vanished anonymously as they arrived...."<sup>35</sup> She never admitted to an overtly organised career, but she possessed an acknowledged vocation.

That she consciously chose this vocation is clear. What is more, the choice to be a poet, rather than a prose writer or novelist, was a daring one. Gilbert and Gubar argue that poetry is a literary arena from which women have been more actively discouraged than prose, pointing to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's

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<sup>33</sup>UBC, 5 August 1885.

<sup>34</sup>Battiscombe 13.

<sup>35</sup>FL 170.

complaint that she had no role models ("...where are the poetesses? ...I look everywhere for grandmothers, and see none") and Emily Dickinson's frustration ("They shut me up in Prose --/ As when a little Girl/ They put me in the Closet -- / Because they liked me 'still'--"), concluding that poetry by women was felt to be "in some sense inappropriate, unladylike, immodest."<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Mermin explores more fully the specific difficulties of the Victorian women poet (in comparison with her novelist sister) who "has to be two things at once, or in two places, whenever she tries to locate herself within the poetic world,"<sup>37</sup> who in effect has to encompass the positions of both rescuing "knight" and damsel, both subject and object, poet and poem simultaneously. Rossetti herself had difficulty crossing the gap between poetry and prose, although she exhibits a surprising reversal in her concentration of skills: it is poetry, the forbidden zone, in which she excels. Her prose generally lacks the visionary energy of her poetry, and tends to be uneven in quality -- some of it is pedestrian and occasionally tedious - - above all, it is respectable. Poetry seemed to offer Rossetti greater freedom to explore imaginative realms, and it was poetry that she chose as a primary calling.

In a letter that accompanies one of the first submissions (a series of six poems) she made to a literary editor, in this case a Professor Aytoun, the editor of **Blackwoods Magazine**, she states with unusual boldness her sense of herself as a

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<sup>36</sup>Shakespeare's Sisters xvi-xvii.

<sup>37</sup>"The Damsel, the Knight and the Victorian Woman Poet," **Critical Inquiry** 13.1 (1986): 67.

*poet* -- rather than a writer in the broader sense. This seldom-quoted letter, first published in Mary Sandars' 1930 biography, and more recently by both Harrison and Thompson, is worth paying close attention to:

As an unknown and unpublished writer, I beg leave to bespeak your indulgence for laying before you the enclosed verses.

I am not unaware, Sir, that the editor of a magazine looks with dread and contempt upon the offerings of a nameless rhymester -- and that the feeling is in nineteen cases out of twenty, a just and salutary one. It is certainly not for me to affirm that I am the one twentieth in question: but, speaking as I am to a poet, I hope that I shall not be misunderstood of egotism or foolish vanity when I say that my love for what is good in the works of others teaches me that there is something above the despicable in mine; that poetry is with me, not a mechanism, *but an impulse and a reality; and that I know my aims in writing to be pure and directed to that which is true and right.*

I do not blush to confess that, with these feelings and beliefs, it would afford me some gratification to place my productions before others, and ascertain how far what I do is expressive of mere individualism and how far it is capable of approving itself to the general sense. It would be a personal favour to me if you would look into the enclosed with an eye not inevitably to the waste paper basket; and a further obligation, whatever the result, [if] you would vouchsafe me a few words as to the fate of my verses. I am quite conscious that volunteer contributors have no right to expect this of an editor; I ask it simply as a courtesy. It is mortifying to have done something sincerely, offer it in good faith, and be treated as a 'non-avenue.' [my italics]<sup>38</sup>

Although cloaked with the politeness and self-deprecation which Rossetti usually adopted when engaged in any transaction with the male "outside" world, this is an unflinchingly determined, even fanatical letter. She identifies herself with the

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<sup>38</sup>Yale, 1 August 1854; Sandars 85-6; Harrison in Kent, 205-6; Thompson 115.

poetic community both as one poet writing to another, and in terms of comparative self-location among other writers of poetry, and is bent on almost forcing a response, whether it be recognition or rejection. One of the most compelling features of this letter, written when she was only twenty-three, is her insistence on being taken seriously. The mask of exquisite humility slips in her last sentence to reveal the anger and hurt experienced when what she has done "sincerely ... in good faith" is patronised or brushed aside as irrelevant or trivial.<sup>39</sup>

It is significant that she distinguished her calling as poet as a gender-free category, quite separate from that of poetess. The letter to Aytoun makes it clear that her temerity in asking for an evaluation stems not from her sex, but from her youth and inexperience. As early as the age of nineteen, in her semi-autobiographical novella, *Maude*, the heroine (a poet, of course) sets herself apart from lady writers who compose the "sweetly pretty" verses suited to valentines and nosegays, and refuses to identify with the accepted code of *feminine* behaviour associated with the lady poet: the projection of a certain aura of sensibility, sleepless nights spent thinking up maudlin poems, reading or reciting

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<sup>39</sup>At about the same age, Dante Gabriel submitted some of his poems to Leigh Hunt, considered a "man of letters," also asking for an assessment of their merits, and advice on whether he should choose painting or poetry as a career. The response was far more encouraging than in Christina's case (as far as is known, she did not receive a reply from Aytoun; certainly *Blackwoods Magazine* never published any of her poems), but Hunt nevertheless suggested that painting would be more financially profitable; a reply Dante Gabriel found disheartening, and which was evidently a factor in his initial concentration on the visual arts. (Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic* 62-4.)

aloud at genteel tea-parties and the like. The following is a description of a supper party, which Maude attends under duress; already mutinous at having to go through the social motions,

she was attacked on either hand with questions concerning her verses....did she continue to write? Yes. A flood of exstatic [sic] compliments followed...: she was so young, so much admired, and, poor thing, looked so delicate. It was quite affecting to think of her lying awake at night meditating those sweet verses -- ('I sleep like a top,' Maude put in drily,) -- which so delighted her friends, and would so charm the public, if only Miss Foster could be induced to publish. At last the bystanders were called to intercede for a recitation.

Maude coloured with displeasure; a hasty answer was rising to her lips, when the absurdity of her position flashed across her mind so forcibly that, almost unable to check a laugh in the midst of her annoyance, she put a handkerchief to her mouth. Miss Savage, impressed with a notion that her request was about to be complied with, raised a hand, imploring silence; and settled herself in a listening attitude.

'You will excuse me;' Maude at last said very coldly; 'I could not think of monopolising everyone's attention. Indeed you are extremely good, but you must excuse me.'<sup>40</sup>

Maude is scathingly contemptuous of such posturing, and by implication, the sentimental poetry considered the province of the poetess, and reverts to the ridicule insinuated by laughter, only half-stifled. She finds the diminution of the poet's art to the province of drawing room or social call "absurd", and the unfortunate Miss Savage, posing in a "listening attitude" is turned into a

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<sup>40</sup>Maude: Prose and Verse by Christina G. Rossetti, ed. R.W. Crump (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1976) 48-9.

burlesque parody of the lady with pretensions to taste. Neither Maude nor, by implication, her creator, writes poetry in order to "charm the public." The undisguised, almost arrogant harshness of Rossetti's sarcasm is somewhat reminiscent of Jane Austen's juvenilia, which also caustically mocked literary conventions of her day (especially those associated with women's writing), untrammelled by adult caution.<sup>41</sup>

Another revealing feature of **Maude**, if it is taken to be at least partly autobiographical, is Rossetti's deliberate self-irony in presenting the "world-weary" poetry that the fifteen-year old Maude writes:

This choice collection [her writing-book] she now proceeded to enrich with the following sonnet:--

Yes, I too could face death and never shrink:  
But it is harder to bear hated life;  
To strive with hands and knees weary of strife  
    To drag the heavy chain whose every link  
    Galls to the bone; to stand upon the brink  
Of the deep grave, nor drowse, though it be rife  
With sleep; to hold with steady hand the knife  
    Nor strike home; this is courage as I think....

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<sup>41</sup>This is not the only place we see the young Rossetti's wit at the expense of others; as a teenager she experimented with satire, either imitating eighteenth-century models, as in **On Albina**: "The roses lingered in her cheeks,/ When fair Albina fainted;/ Oh! gentle Reader, could it be/ That fair Albina painted?" (Crump, CP III 122) or deliberately parodying certain conventions, as in the mock-elegiac poem "Upon the Death of Aunt Eliza's Cat,/ aged ten years & a half." (Bodleian Library, 14 March 1846; also titled **On the death of a Cat** in Crump, CP III 82.)

having done which she yawned, leaned back in her chair, and wondered how she should fill up the time till dinner.<sup>42</sup>

By contrasting the drama, even melodrama, of the poem with the casual attitude of its bored author, Rossetti is mocking not only herself, but those who assume that melancholy art must necessarily spring from a "secret source of uneasiness."<sup>43</sup> Thus, by detaching the contents of the poem from the process of writing it, Rossetti eludes those who are determined to link her personal circumstances to her poetry; she insists on the right of the work of art to a separate existence.

She emphasised throughout her later life that her poetry was generated by imagination rather than emotion or lived experience, claiming that there was no reason, for example, why (as one with claim to "the Poet Mind") she could not enter imaginatively into the situation of an illegitimate child whose mother dare not acknowledge her, in her poem *The Iniquity of the Father Upon the Children*.<sup>44</sup> Her introduction to her *Monna Innominata* sonnet sequence manages to praise Elizabeth Barrett Browning, while simultaneously distinguishing and detaching herself from those women poets who "write not

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<sup>42</sup>Maude 30.

<sup>43</sup>Maude 31.

<sup>44</sup>TR 143.

from fancy but from feeling."<sup>45</sup> This seems not only to be a precaution against close scrutiny of her own life in order to explicate her poetry (which was in any case impossible to prevent), but a serious assertion that her poetry was the result of autonomous creative activity, the "impulse and reality" which was "directed to that which was true and right".

What is notable about the qualities that Rossetti claimed for her art, is that in an age which rigidly separated the spheres which the sexes were to inhabit, they are *transgendered*. Rossetti first invokes the notions of authentic creative impulse and inspiration, then those of truth and moral value, which had been initially expounded by the Romantics (characteristically in Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, with its summoning of an overwhelmingly masculine tradition, and its delineation of the poet as male, heroic and magisterial) and then further developed by Ruskin, Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, into the moral aesthetics of Victorian patriarchy, which were implicitly understood to refer to a masculine poetic tradition. Nevertheless, in a sweep of appropriation, she insists both on what might be called the "universal," or gender-transcendent nature of such qualities, and her right to possess and make use of them. Neither does she excuse her ability to do so as anomalous, as does Barrett Browning in her erasure of

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<sup>45</sup>Crump, CP II 86.

poetic "foremothers."<sup>46</sup> Instead of contracting herself to a category of one, Rossetti expands the notion of poetic genius, elliptically insisting on its inclusive potential. Given the entrenched Romantic poetics of the day, which inscribed the masculinity of the poet/subject, and assigned femininity to the poem itself, or located Woman as the object of the poet's gaze or scrutiny, the source of his inspiration, Rossetti's confident appropriation of poetic subjectivity becomes either a stance of sublime innocence, or an extremely radical act of agency; very possibly both.<sup>47</sup>

No matter how lofty her poetic standards, Rossetti (also like Austen) was to become more restrained in her attitude towards those she suspected of "emoting" drawing-room poetry in later years. What is more, she set up networks of communication with other women writers who were unmistakably "poetesses" of the kind that Maude would have despised. (It was in fact Jean Ingelow who put her in contact with Roberts Brothers of Boston, who were to become her

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<sup>46</sup>Janet Gray argues that Barrett Browning's philosophy of self-qualification for poetry consisted of claiming that she was "a woman so extraordinarily gifted with mind and will that she could aspire to perform female authorship to the standards of universal (male) criteria, not just to the chivalrously tempered ones beyond which it would be futile for most women to aim." (Unpublished and untitled dissertation, Princeton: 1992, 2.) Rossetti dealt with the problem much more efficiently; she simply degendered the "universal criteria."

<sup>47</sup>Writing towards the end of the Victorian age, Andrew Lang's words describing Rossetti herself, neatly demonstrate this particular dilemma with which the female poet was presented, and the construction of her gender which she was required to overturn in the act of writing: "She is the greatest poet of the sex that is born to inspire poetry, not write it." (Quoted in Charles 141.) Thus Rossetti is lauded at the same time as she is admonished for her transgression of the feminine role assigned to her by bourgeois Victorian patriarchal discourses.

American publishers.)<sup>48</sup> Rossetti also acknowledged her debt to poetesses of the earlier nineteenth-century, experimenting with their specifically female traditions of commemoration and inspiration, by writing a poem in honour of Letitia Landon, whose attempts to establish a poetic career had ended in defamation and tragedy. This is itself a useful example of female intertextuality; Rossetti's notes indicate that she was moved to write this poem, not necessarily by Landon's personal history, but in response to a poem by Barrett Browning which celebrated Landon; who in turn had written an elegy inspired by Felicia Hemans. Certainly Rossetti investigated the possibilities of the female poetic heritage.<sup>49</sup>

Yet what she shared with women writers such as Jean Ingelow, Dora Greenwell, Isa Craig, Adelaide Proctor, Katherine Tynan Hinkson and Augusta Webster, was often an affection based on common concerns quite distinct from poetry: the closely observed and deeply felt religious faith that she, Greenwell and Tynan Hinkson shared, the confiding of health problems, depressed moments and family anxieties, serious discussion of the role of women in society, support for each other's social and political projects (it was Greenwell who enlisted Rossetti as a passionate ally in the anti-vivisection campaign), and the communal experience of singleness with its social stigma, but stealthily enjoyed freedoms. Mutual support and encouragement in the business of writing was part of this Victorian

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<sup>48</sup>TR 161.

<sup>49</sup>Crump, CP I 153, 288.

sisterhood of letters, sustained by correspondence and visits; yet Rossetti was careful to hold herself aloof from any hint of either collaboration or rivalry, although she was satisfied to be identified as a superior and more skilled poet than her contemporaries, in the inevitable comparisons made by newspapers and literary magazines. In a letter to Macmillan, she writes discreetly, "How opportune just now the Times notice,"<sup>50</sup> referring to an article which compared her work to Jean Ingelow's and concluded that while Ingelow was more suited to the common taste, Rossetti was the better poet. She was rather less restrained in her comment on the same article to Dante Gabriel: "Of course I am crowing...."<sup>51</sup> and wrote to thank her friends the Heimanns, who had sent her a copy, for "the Times of all Timeses."<sup>52</sup> Her rarely glimpsed competitive edge was no doubt responsible for her exultation in being considered superior to the hugely popular Jean Ingelow, whose eighth edition she had confessed, "...impart[ed] to my complexion a becoming shade of green."<sup>53</sup>

Katherine Mayberry describes Rossetti as "th[at] rare phenomenon ...: a willingly unmarried, professional successful woman poet in Victorian England."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>RML 39.

<sup>51</sup>RP 73.

<sup>52</sup>Thompson 231.

<sup>53</sup>RP 70.

<sup>54</sup>Mayberry 2.

Rosenblum concurs, pointing out that Rossetti "assiduously cultivated a public literary career."<sup>55</sup> The key words here are "professional" and "career"; it was the amateur status of the "poetess" that Rossetti was so careful to distance herself from, in an environment where even consummate professionals among her contemporaries, such as Jean Ingelow, cultivated an amateur guise. Rossetti's impatience with what she called "versifiers" is attested to by William Michael, who writes in response to the question of whether Rossetti considered herself a great poet: "Truly a poetess, most decidedly yes; and within the range of her subject and thought ... a good one. This ... did render her very resolute in setting a line of demarcation between a person who is a poet and another who is a versifier. Pleadings of *in misericordium* were of no use with her, and she never could see any good reason why one who is not a poet should write in metre."<sup>56</sup> Here we find the adult persona of Maude, who refuses to allow emotional outpourings to constitute an excuse for bad poetry; a further indication of Rossetti's insistence on art as a privileged and "pure" form, distinct from personal record or private meditation.

By the time Rossetti reached middle-age, her established status as a poet meant that "nameless rhymesters" now approached *her* for evaluation, which was consistently exacting: in a letter to Lucy Rossetti, she writes, "Sad to say, another

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<sup>55</sup>Poetry of Endurance 5.

<sup>56</sup>Memoir lxix.

unknown has presented me with a volume of Sonnets of which (so far as I have waded) the less said the better *as poetry*; my note of thanks turned out jejune, though the spirit is admirable and I found one point to praise. Don't you ever publish a volume unless you are quite sure you can excel (say) Mr. W. Shakespear; [sic] or if not, at least don't bestow it on poor disconcerted me! a warning to be early and with absolute impartiality brought home to Olive, Arthur, Helen, Mary, [Lucy's children] who exhibit alarming tendencies."<sup>57</sup> The implication here, although lightly touched on, is that she herself considered (and had proved) herself a bard, even a successful prototype for Woolf's sister to *the Bard*. Woolf herself was to write of Rossetti, "She knew she was born with one genuine gift, and in order to be true to it she must see the world consistently in a certain perspective.... She was quite secure in her belief, and all the tremulous qualities of the most modest of maiden ladies are composed by it, so that her figure is at once dignified and curiously distinct."<sup>58</sup> Rossetti certainly had no false modesty about her abilities; hesitant about so much else, it was her firm certainty that hers was an authentic talent that lent her the distinctiveness that Woolf noted.

One other feature of her writing testifies to her singularity and determination to be identified as a poet: in an age, where as we have seen, women's writing was

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<sup>57</sup>FL 149.

<sup>58</sup>"Letters of Christina Rossetti," *Essays of Virginia Woolf 1904-1912*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich) 225-226.

invariably read as confessional (and therefore potentially immodest, boastful, and even sexually transgressive) Rossetti refuses to use a pseudonym. From the first, her literary submissions were always made in her own name, and she was initially published (in the *Athenaeum*) as Christina G. Rossetti. Yet her poems in *The Germ*, the Pre-Raphaelite journal, were assigned the *nom de plume* "Ellen Alleyne" -- a name dreamt up by Dante Gabriel as part of his insistence on the myth of her poetical reticence. (She was the only contributor so disguised; both her brothers printed their works under their actual names.) In spite of having this name ready-made by her brother, Rossetti never again used this or any other pseudonym. Given the anxiety her brothers felt about those of her poems which could be interpreted as biographical or personal statements, her refusal to mask her name is significant. She had plenty of precedents to follow: Mary Ann Evans, known to the Rossetti family, wrote as George Eliot, and all three Brontë sisters adopted male pseudonyms. Women writers were often extremely invested in the names (and thus the anonymity) they chose; Charlotte Brontë mournfully recounted that her sister Emily never forgave her for letting slip Ellis Bell's true identity to their publisher.<sup>59</sup> Female authors were generally all too conscious of the problems of having their work interpreted as a *cri de couer*; hence the large-scale adoption of pseudonyms, in order to achieve publication without risking notoriety or public opprobrium. Elaine Showalter points out twelve such

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<sup>59</sup>Bettina L. Knapp, *The Brontës: Branwell, Anne, Emily, Charlotte* (New York: Continuum, 1991) 48.

examples during the 1850's and 1880's.<sup>60</sup> The type of pseudonyms female artists used (if they did not simply remain anonymous, as did Jane Austen, who took the extra precaution of announcing that her books were by a *lady*) make for intriguing reflections on gender: they were either masculine (nineteenth-century women novelists in particular took male names, in spite of the wealth of role models afforded by eighteenth-century women writers) or what Showalter calls "hyperfeminine," such as the name initially assumed by Louisa Alcott -- Flora Fairchild.<sup>61</sup> Writers of poetry in particular opted for the latter strategy; this perhaps explains why the excessively "feminine" poetry of sensibility written by many of Rossetti's poetess peers, did not require masculine disguise; its authors could retain the names that identified them as women because their poetry was so explicitly feminised according to gender prescriptions. In Rossetti's case, her insistence on using her own name, in spite of the extreme modesty and "abhorrence of display" ascribed to her, confirms her sense of self-identification as a poet with a vocation.

It is likely that Rossetti's choice of the poetic vocation was linked to other life-choices that she made. She refused marriage twice, and although she seems to have suffered more from the drama and subsequent embarrassment of refusing James Collinson (a member of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) than

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<sup>60</sup>Quoted in Russ 28.

<sup>61</sup>Introduction, **Alternative Alcott: Louisa May Alcott**, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988) xxvi.

from any blighted hopes, she genuinely cared for her second suitor, Charles Cayley, and remained intimate with him until his death. On that occasion, she was the first person to be summoned by his family to see his body;<sup>62</sup> and when she herself lay dying, she made a touching little confession to William Michael that she had once visited Cayley against his (William's) advice, murmuring as an excuse, "I was so fond of him."<sup>63</sup>

Biographers in the traditional mode, assuming that any woman who rejects an opportunity to enter the desirable state of matrimony must have compelling hidden reasons for doing so, have speculated at length about why she did not leap at marriage when it was offered. Suggestions have varied from the reasonably convincing one of extreme religious orthodoxy (which would have forbidden marriage to a non-believer)<sup>64</sup> to the more sensational or spurious reasons that she was terrified of sex,<sup>65</sup> or secretly in love with an unavailable or married man

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<sup>62</sup>Jones 203.

<sup>63</sup>UBC, William Michael's diary of the last days of Rossetti's life, April 1894.

<sup>64</sup>William Michael in his *Memoir* and elsewhere, stated categorically that this was the case; most of the more orthodox biographers and critics writing up till 1955 concur. Thompson, however points out what seems to have occurred to no-one else; Rossetti had before her the precedent of a punctilious grandmother and a still more pious mother -- who in her daughter's eyes could do no wrong -- both of whom had married men of different faiths without any moral qualms.

<sup>65</sup>Stevenson is one example of those who opted for this explanation: "Modern psychoanalytical opinion ... would probably infer that she was afraid of sexual relations and relied upon the religious issues to rationalize her physical repulsion." However, his lack of sympathy with the sexual impasses in which Victorian women found themselves is even more marked in his justification of Dante Gabriel's infidelities on the baseless grounds of Siddal's supposed frigidity. (81, 37.) Fear of childbirth rather than sex was perhaps a more realistic

and nursing a broken heart. Mayberry pragmatically suggests disillusion:

"[Rossetti] was a close ... witness to a great number of relationships ... virtually all of them failures."<sup>66</sup>

It is only recently that critics have begun to consider that celibacy might have been a positive and desirable choice for Rossetti, rather than a position of wistful pathos, embraced reluctantly after the renunciation of marriage necessitated by extreme moral and doctrinal delicacy. Andrea Rose, writing of Victorian women in general, puts forward this more realistic view: "...a woman's assertion of her chastity was one of the few means by which she could affirm her integrity as an individual in a society where married women were legally classified with 'criminals, idiots and minors'. To remain pure, therefore, has a political significance, in that it is a conscious rejection of the subjection and exploitation by the "gentleman" classes, and a democratic stand for the essential humanity of womanhood, striving to survive independently of its usefulness to men."<sup>67</sup> The degraded legal status of wives was no small risk: during this historical period,

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deterrent; the four Rossetti children were born in the space of four years, and it is likely that their mother insisted on abstinence as a means of contraception after her difficult labour in giving birth to Christina. This event was clearly impressed on Rossetti, to the extent that she found it necessary to interrogate her earliest history: on discovering a letter her father had written announcing her birth, which claimed, "Her mother suffered a little and now lies nursing the dear pledge..." she added the indignant gloss, "How could my dear Father give such a report? Dearest Mama had a fearful time with me." (Quoted by Rosenblum in *Poetry of Endurance* 32.)

<sup>66</sup>Mayberry 8.

<sup>67</sup>*The Pre-Raphaelites* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977) 6-7.

"[o]n marriage, [a woman's] legal existence was suspended.... She was, in fact, civilly dead. Property, liberty, earnings, even a wife's conscience, all belonged to her husband, as did the children she might bear."<sup>68</sup> The strongest statement of all comes from Florence Nightingale; explaining why she refused the proposal of a man she loved, she wrote that "to be nailed to a continuation, an exaggeration of my present life without hope of another would be intolerable ... voluntarily to put it out of my power ever to be able to seize the chance of forming for myself a true and rich life would seem to me like suicide."<sup>69</sup>

In the poem *A Triad*,<sup>70</sup> which explores various romantic options, including matrimony, for women, and finds them all lacking, Rossetti herself sets out a view of marriage which closely resembles Olive Schreiner's denunciation of married middle-class women as "sex-parasites."<sup>71</sup> The woman who marries in the poem is debased by her choice: "one temperately/ Grew gross in soulless love, a sluggish wife ... [who] droned in sweetness like a fatted bee." The conclusion

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<sup>68</sup>Crow, *The Victorian Woman* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971) 147.

<sup>69</sup>Introduction, *Cassandra* 10.

<sup>70</sup>Crump, CP I 29.

<sup>71</sup>"Sex-parasitism," for Schreiner, was the inevitable result of curtailing dignified labour or occupation for women: "the females of the dominant class or race ... have sunk to a state in which, performing no species of active social duty, they ... [exist] through the passive performance of sexual functions alone ... in place of the active labouring woman, upholding society by her toil, has come the effete wife ... waited on and tended by the labour of others.... The need for her physical labour having gone, and mental industry not having taken its place ... she sought by dissipations and amusements to fill up the inordinate blank left by the lack of productive activity." ("The Women Question," *An Olive Schreiner Reader: Writings on Women and South Africa*, ed. Carol Barash [London and New York: Pandora, 1987] 86-7.)

suggests that neither this option, nor other conventional romantic choices, fully liberate women's potential: "All on the threshold, yet all short of life."

Even if Rossetti's motives for declining her suitors' proposals were strictly religious, this in itself was unorthodox, possibly even a subtle show of defiance: Charles Kingsley's well-known contemporary play on the life of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary, who renounced her crown and all her temporal duties for the love of Christ,<sup>72</sup> made it clear that women who placed religion before their duty to family and society were frowned upon. Religious fanaticism and insurrection are not uncommonly linked; perhaps there was a rebellious streak in Rossetti's piety, which both permitted and empowered her to put all else aside, regardless of the expectations of society. As Harrison points out, the choice to be the Bride of Christ was not only radical, but "the only vital alternative to the stereotypical roles of prostitute, wife and lovelorn spinster."<sup>73</sup> Her rejection of marriage (which for a woman of her class and morals necessarily meant also rejecting

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<sup>72</sup>In one of the coincidences between life and art which are so common to histories of the Pre-Raphaelites, this was the subject of the painting Collinson was working on when his relationship with Christina finally limped to an end.

<sup>73</sup>"Rossetti and the Sage Discourse of Feminist High Anglicanism," **Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power**, ed. Thaïs Morgan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990) 97.

sexual experience and parenthood) was very likely an assertion of both her independence and her sense of vocation.<sup>74</sup>

Catherine and Andrew Belsey point out the especial threat to a literary career that marriage would probably entail for a Victorian woman: "...she might have had a husband who disapproved of her being a writer, or who thought it a scandal that his wife's name should appear on the title-page of a book."<sup>75</sup>

Rossetti herself must have been aware of the fate of women artists who married, even when their husbands were relatively enlightened; her own sister-in-law, Lucy Rossetti, daughter of Ford Madox Brown and a gifted and experienced artist, insisted on a studio as a condition of her marriage to William Michael.

Nevertheless, five children followed in quick succession, and Lucy was not able to complete one painting after the wedding.<sup>76</sup> According to Jan Marsh, Elizabeth Siddal also hesitated when Dante Gabriel first proposed marriage, for very similar reasons: as a young woman first exposed to the potential for an artistic

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<sup>74</sup>She would not have been the only woman writer of her time to make this decision; in her autobiography, Harriet Martineau wrote: "The older I have grown, the more serious and irremediable have seemed to me the evils and disadvantages of married life ...: and I am provided with what it is the bane of single life in ordinary cases to want, -- substantial, laborious and serious occupation.... freedom is itself a positive and never-failing enjoyment to me...." (Quoted in **Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States**, ed. Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen [Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1981] 153.)

<sup>75</sup>"Christina Rossetti: sister to the Brotherhood" 46.

<sup>76</sup>Marsh, **Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood** 313.

career that her contacts with the Pre-Raphaelites made possible, she wrote in her letters that she shrank from marriage before she had established herself as an artist and made a name for herself in her own right.<sup>77</sup> Sadly, her association with Dante Gabriel, even though short of marriage, meant that she was seldom considered more than a protégé of his. By the time that she had realised that she had compromised her reputation beyond redemption, and was not growing any younger, Dante Gabriel was enjoying the company of various other women, and reluctant to marry the fiancée he had once wooed so obsessively.

In a poem which was to anger Dante Gabriel and embarrass William Michael, Rossetti wrote her own irreverent account of what it meant to be on the receiving end of courtship; the acid and witty *No, Thank you John*.<sup>78</sup> Not only a superb example of how her poems create positive assertions out of refusal, denial or non-disclosure, it acts as a powerful critique of the current social conventions of wooing, and the accompanying assumptions that women were desperate for a match: seizing with a triumphant flourish upon the only social power granted a woman in courtship, the right of refusal ("I'd rather answer 'No' to fifty Johns/ Than answer 'yes' to you"), it proceeds to mount an attack on the expectations, affectations and arrogance written into the script of the aspiring male. The text interrogates (quite literally) the very words spoken by the suitor ("Why will you

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<sup>77</sup>Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood 85-87.

<sup>78</sup>Crump, CP I 50-51.

tease me day by day,/ And wax a weariness to think upon/ With always 'do' and 'pray'?" ), and deconstructs their authority by means of a favoured strategy: by mimicking the linear logic of rational discourse, the flaws of male romantic discourse are exposed and disrupted, and ultimately displaced by a bravura demonstration of more rigorous and astute analysis by the narrative voice. ("I have no heart? -- Perhaps I have not;/ But then you're mad to take offense/ That I don't give you what I have not got:/ Use your own common sense.") The poem opens with an emphatic statement by a first-person speaker ("I never said I loved you, John;") and rapidly moves to confront the second-person "you" with the absolutism of the first-person claim: "You know I never loved you, John." The whole piece reads as a confident demolition of masculine thought and assumptions about love and marriage, and an exposé of their cognitive dishonesty (rather like the comments and criticisms written into a poor essay by a discriminating teacher.) It also audaciously offers to replace the gendered courtship-seduction model of male-female relations with a politically equal relationship -- the camaraderie of "hearty" friends who shake hands as peers:

...Catch at today, forget the days before:  
I'll wink at your untruth.

Let us strike hands as hearty friends;  
No more, no less; and friendship's good:  
Only don't keep in view ulterior ends,  
And points not understood

In open treaty. Rise above  
Quibbles and shuffling off and on:

Here's friendship for you if you like; but love, --  
No, thank you, John.<sup>79</sup>

That Rossetti was fiercely, even pigheadedly independent, we know: she chafed at the knowledge that as a single woman, she was dependent on the charity of her brother William, although she did not experience the same discomfort living on her mother's income. As she grew older, and accumulated various inheritances from deceased relatives as well as an income from writing, she insisted that the first claim on her finances was to repay William Michael for twenty years of board and lodging, which she calculated at a generous £2000.<sup>80</sup> She settled this debt in spite of his protests, demonstrating not so much the "over-

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<sup>79</sup>This poem was to have some interesting repercussions; in response to Dante Gabriel's fulminations about its impropriety (see 223 below), Rossetti calmly dissembled, claiming that it referred to no actual person. This was later to give William Michael quite a headache, when he attempted to reconcile this letter with her notes to the poem announcing that "the original John was obnoxious because he never gave scope for 'No thank you!'" His chief problem was that in the early eulogies and biographical material, he had made much of his sister's inability to fabricate even a socially tactful falsehood, and he was equally anxious to reassure the readers of Rossetti's **Family Letters**: "She says that John never 'existed ...'; and this she must have alleged in some sense not inconsistent with the truth, for I question whether in her whole life she ever 'told a lie.'" His efforts to explain the resulting anomaly are amusingly convoluted: "This John was, I am sure, the marine painter John Brett, who ... had appeared to be somewhat smitten with Christina. I presume the point of reconciliation between her two rather conflicting statements is that there never existed any John to whom 'No thank you' had been, or could have been, said. John there was, but not a John who was negated." Not for the first time, William Michael inadvertently highlighted his sister's hedging tactics in the face of Dante Gabriel's criticism, rather than smoothing them over. (FL 54.)

<sup>80</sup>FL 125, 155.

scrupulousness" which William complained was her only fault,<sup>81</sup> as a desire to be beholden to no-one and no *man* in particular.

In the light of all this, Rossetti's assertion towards the end of her life that she "might have married two or three times"<sup>82</sup> no longer sounds like the pathetic claim by an aging woman that men once found her attractive, but a reiteration of her *choice* to remain single, in spite of tempting alternatives. It could even be argued that she felt herself to be wedded to her God and her Art -- mere men could not compete. C.M. Bowra was one of the first to suggest this: "Only in God could she find a finally satisfying object for the abounding love which was the mainspring of her character."<sup>83</sup> Battiscombe supports this view in her biography of Rossetti, noting the "passionate nature of her love of her love for God", and remarking that "[such] Love is none the less genuine because it is 'sublimated'...."<sup>84</sup>; and according to Phyllis Rose, "Christina's relationship with God was the great erotic experience of her life. Mortal suitors ... seemed puny by

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<sup>81</sup>Her touchy insistence on fairness and exactitude in financial matters was well-known; when Macmillan kindly advanced her a minute sum on hearing that she had a wedding-gift to purchase, she was characteristically rigid: "Will you think me too eccentric for returning -- but with cordial sense of your liberal kindness -- your cheque (herein) for 15£, & begging you to favour me by substituting for it one for that precise £5-9-0 which is all that I have earned? I have more than enough for my wedding-present ...." (RML 99.)

<sup>82</sup>Katherine Tynan Hinkson, *The Bookman*; quoted in Jones 208.

<sup>83</sup>Bowra 270.

<sup>84</sup>Battiscombe 130-1, 181-2.

comparison with the love she could generate wholly from her own imagination."<sup>85</sup> In a rush of purple prose, Katherine Tynan Hinkson, who insisted on meeting the ageing Rossetti, and fastened on her as a role model, asked: "What on earth had she to do, this flame-hearted saint, with the grey streets of London ... more than all, with the Mid-Victorian or Early Victorian woman...?"<sup>86</sup> Although Rossetti deplored exaggerated personal praise,<sup>87</sup> she might have nevertheless conceded that Hinkson was correct in recognising that the poetic vocation drew her apart from the enclave of the stereotypical Victorian woman.

The tensions between this vocation and the expectations that she would nonetheless have as her primary function the role assigned to women of her marital and social standing by the likes of Coventry Patmore and Ruskin -- that of the "angel in the house"<sup>88</sup> -- exhibit themselves throughout her life and

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<sup>85</sup> *Writing of Women* 48.

<sup>86</sup> Jones 208.

<sup>87</sup> When her nephew Ford Madox Ford [Hueffler] claimed that many wished to see her appointed Poet Laureate, she requested that he detail the precise amount that constituted "many," and pared the list down to nine names. (*Memories and Impressions: A Study in Atmospheres* [New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1911] 64.)

<sup>88</sup> This catch-phrase was originally the title of Coventry Patmore's sentimental poem on ideal womanhood, which was a common wedding gift; and Ruskin's influential tract, "Of Queens' Gardens," (London: 1865) which relegated women to the "sanctuary" of the home, was regularly cited. Here Ruskin preached the notion that whereas men were morally and constitutionally tough and coarse enough to engage with "rough work in the open world", women were too delicate and susceptible to be similarly exposed, and therefore ought to exercise their powers of domestic influence unsoiled and uncorrupted by the outside world. Women were to be "incorruptibly good, instinctively, infallibly wise, ... not for self-

writing. Even as a single woman, she would have been expected to "rehearse" the domestication, docility and sweetness required of a potential wife. Pointers to her conduct saturated popular poetry and painting; George Hick's well-known 1863 picture of a wife comforting her husband sported the didactic title: "Women's Mission: Companion of Manhood."<sup>89</sup> As a spinster, Rossetti would have been constrained by the unspoken social pressure to make herself as useful and amiable as possible, in tacit consideration of the fact that she had failed to attract a husband who would take on the responsibility of supporting her financially. Dora Greenwell, herself an "old maid," poignantly described this burden:

Single women must surely feel a little alarmed at discovering how much is expected from them -- at finding themselves looked upon as a hitherto Unclaimed Dividend, which society is at length bent on realising. They have, it is true, gained much ... in passing from the traditional type -- the 'withered prude' -- ... to ... the gentle, dovelike Old Maid, ... who is supposed to have some tender secret buried in her heart, some letter or lock of hair shut within a secret drawer, but who, ever serene and cheerful, flits in and out between the scenes, listening, consoling, cheering, at all times ready to take up a little of existence at second hand.... It has sometimes occurred to us, that such intense application to amiability, such persevering interest in everything that has to do with every other person, must be very hard work; that single women, on the whole, have done nothing to merit such a destiny; and that there might be safety -- if

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development, but for self-renunciation...." (127-46.)

<sup>89</sup>Susan Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art* (London: Associate University Press, 1987) 50-1.

of an ignominious kind -- in falling back upon old-fashioned crustiness and angularity!<sup>90</sup>

Rossetti herself acknowledged, even preached, the same distinction between the sexes that Greenwell was also to go on to admit in the same essay, once writing to Dante Gabriel, "Here is a great discovery, 'Women are not Men'....";<sup>91</sup> she certainly acquiesced to the hierarchical organisation of society that placed women in submission to men, taking her position from the tenets of orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless, she was aware of the contemporaneous movements towards legal reform and women's rights, and in fact, Augusta Webster (a feminist active in the struggle for women's suffrage, and herself a poet whose work *The Sentence* Rossetti greatly admired, rather to William Michael's surprise)<sup>92</sup> tried to enlist Rossetti to the cause. The latter combined religious conviction with an effort to be fair in her response:

You express yourself with such cordial openness that I feel encouraged to endeavour also after self-expression -- no easy matter sometimes. I write as I am thinking and feeling, but I premise that I have not even to my own apprehension gone deep into the question; at least, not in the sense in which many who *have* studied it would require depth of me. In one sense I feel as if I had gone deep, for my objection seems to myself a fundamental one underlying the whole structure of female claims.

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<sup>90</sup>"Our Single Women," *Essays* (Alexander Strahan, London and New York, 1866) 2-3.

<sup>91</sup>FL 31.

<sup>92</sup>*Memoir* lxx.

Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood unalterable distinction between men and women, their position, duties, privileges? Not arrogating to myself but most earnestly desiring to attain to the character of a humble orthodox Xtian, [sic] so it does appear to me; not merely under the Old but also under the New Dispensation. The fact of the Priesthood being exclusively man's, leaves me in no doubt that the highest functions are not in this world open to both sexes: and if not all, then a selection must be made and a line drawn somewhere. -- On the other hand if female rights are sure to be overborne for lack of female voting influence, then I confess I feel disposed to shoot ahead of my instructresses, and to assert that female *M.P.*'s are only right and reasonable. Also I take exceptions at the exclusion of married women from the suffrage, -- for who so apt as Mothers -- all previous arguments allowed for the moment -- to protect the interests of themselves and of their offspring? I do think if anything ever does sweep away the barrier of sex, and make the female not a giantess or a heroine but at once and fullgrown a hero and giant, it is that mighty maternal love which makes little birds and little beasts as well as little women matches for very big adversaries....

Nor do I think it quite inadmissible that men should continue the exclusive national legislators, so long as they do continue the exclusive soldier-representatives of the nation, and engross the whole payment in life and limb for national quarrels. I do not know whether any lady is prepared to adopt the Platonic theory of female regiments; if so, she sets aside this objection: but I am not, so to me it stands....

Many who have thought more and done much more than myself share your views, -- and yet they are not mine. I do not think that the present social movements tend on the whole to uphold Xtianity [sic], or that the influence of some of our most prominent and gifted women is exerted in that direction: and thus thinking, I cannot aim at 'women's rights'.

Influence and responsibility are such solemn matters that I will not excuse myself to you for abiding by my convictions: yet in contradicting you I am contradicting one I admire.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>These quotations come from two letters printed as one continuous piece in Mackenzie Bell's hagiography of Rossetti, 111-112. However, neither are printed in their entirety; the omissions are Bell's own.

What is striking about this piece is the serious consideration Rossetti brings to the matter;<sup>94</sup> she is not dismissive of Webster's position, and her orthodoxy nevertheless permits some radical circumlocutions: she thought it "only right and reasonable" that female M.P.'s should defend issues pertinent to women (possibly a reference to Parliament's ignominious failure to raise the age of consent for women from twelve to sixteen, and thus stem the abuse of children sold into prostitution, in spite of an urgent campaign led by Josephine Butler, and supported by Rossetti);<sup>95</sup> her objection to female conscription consequent upon suffrage stems from a pacifist resistance to participating in the pointless slaughter of "national quarrels"; and her perception of maternity suggests a powerfully fierce and de-gendering force, rather than the conventional ideal of sweet and self-denying maternal love. Nevertheless, although she regarded those who fought for women's rights with respect, even admiration, the singularity of her opinions was ultimately circumscribed by religious dogma.

Although she was on friendly terms with several contemporary feminists such as Webster, Bessie Parkes, and Barbara Bodichon, the conservative bent of some of her views are hardly surprising for a Victorian woman of her class, education, and religious conviction in particular. In 1837, when the seven-year old Rossetti

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<sup>94</sup>Years later, she was to describe this exchange of views as a "courteous tilt in the strong-minded woman lists," adding that this made it "doubly incumbent upon me to fall short in no observance" towards Webster. (FL 97.)

<sup>95</sup>Thompson 345-46. Rossetti (who solicited signatures for petitions on the matter) and other reformers at last had the satisfaction of seeing this law amended in 1885.

was composing her first couplets, Robert Southey, then the poet laureate, wrote to Charlotte Brontë that "Literature cannot be the business of a women's life, and it ought not to be."<sup>96</sup> Rossetti was to fall into the category of several women writers, who, while they were to make literature their lives, nevertheless subscribed to orthodox views of gender relations, perhaps as a cautionary compensation for having already breached the rules once. The more rigidly conventional of her views, however, are seldom overtly stated in her non-devotional poetry, and mostly appear in her religious works. For example, we read Eve's words in one of the sonnets from **Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets**: "Let woman fear to teach and bear to learn/ Remembering woman's the first mistake...";<sup>97</sup> and in the dramatic poem *All Thy Works Praise Thee O Lord*, the women chorus: "God makes our service love, and makes our wage/Love", whereas the men respond, "God gives us power to rule...."<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that Rossetti's religious poems were usually written with a specific readership in mind, as D'Amico notes in her review of Crump's third volume;<sup>99</sup> many of them were published in religious magazines, or under the auspices of the SPCK. Thompson points out that one of Rossetti's more atypically conventional poems, *A Helpmeet For Him* ("Woman was made for

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<sup>96</sup>Quoted in *Shakespeare's Sisters* xvi. Brontë noted sadly, but fortunately not prophetically, "Southey's advice to be kept for ever." (Quoted by Adams in Wohl 154.)

<sup>97</sup>Crump, CP II 144.

<sup>98</sup>Crump, CP II 137.

<sup>99</sup>*Victorian Poetry* 30.1 (Spring 1992): 87-91.

man's delight;/... His shadow by day, his moon by night") was written for the parish magazine of the Rev. Charles Gutch; a zealous, but austere and forbidding priest, and one of her spiritual counsellors. The orthodoxy of Rossetti's piece is rather to be expected in the circumstances.<sup>100</sup>

Statements on the roles of the sexes in her secular poetry include the often quoted line from the **Monna Innominata** sonnet sequence, "... woman is the helpmeet made for man,"<sup>101</sup> although this must be placed within the context of the singular, even radical nature of Rossetti's project in these poems; that of giving speech to the traditionally silent lady, the object of the male convention of courtly love. An interesting variation on Rossetti's perception of gender roles is voiced in *An Immurata Sister*: "Men work and think, but women feel" which goes on rather ominously, "And so (for I'm a woman, I)/ And so I should be glad to die...."<sup>102</sup> This sentiment is developed in the poem **From the Antique**, which begins "It's a weary life, it is; she said:--/ Doubly blank in a woman's lot:/ I wish

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<sup>100</sup>Thompson 222. Rossetti chose to match her poems, their medium of publication, and the intended audiences quite deliberately; poems donated towards welfare projects tended to be more overtly political. She chose *A Royal Princess* (in which a princess, sickened by her autocratic father's abuse of the poor, strips herself of her wealth in order to give it to the hungry) as her contribution towards a collection of poems in aid of the Lancashire Cotton Workers Relief; William Michael was impressed at the "markedly appropriate" nature of this offering. (PW 461.)

<sup>101</sup>Crump, CP II Sonnet 5, 89.

<sup>102</sup>Crump, CP II 120.

and wish I were a man;/ Or, better than any being, were not:...."<sup>103</sup> Even though the speaker's voice is carefully presented in the third person, it can be seen that the poet's orthodoxy in accepting the implications of separate gender roles was nevertheless subject to serious tensions.

Rossetti kept up an appearance of deference to her male relatives, and in fact to almost any male figure, be it publisher, critic or fellow poet, and made strong efforts to submit to their automatically superior judgement, a superiority she never questioned in principle. On a few occasions she even resorted shamelessly to the stereotype of helpless femininity, imploring William Michael to help her to sort out her income tax returns: "Income tax pursues not to say persecutes me .... Vainly too have I declared myself a woman and not a man. Weakest minded of my sex I am only too glad to betake myself to you for rescue."<sup>104</sup> (However, it must be remembered that her brother did after all work for the Inland Revenue Service.)

However, whereas the popular picture of Christina Rossetti is of a writer who managed to remain both a perfect lady and a poet (one thinks of the descriptions of the "exquisite good taste and spiritual good manners," "delicacy" and "shy

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<sup>103</sup>Crump, CP III 231.

<sup>104</sup>Quoted by Packer in *Christina Rossetti* 376. Rossetti was not as financially clueless as she suggests herself to be; her account-books in the UBC collection are testimony to her careful and competent book-keeping.

reserve" of her poetry by the editors of the *Pelican Guide to English Literature*,<sup>105</sup> among others -- one wonders if they had ever read *Goblin Market*), a review of the facts seems to indicate that Rossetti quietly repudiated any claims to "ladylike" behaviour, at times even choosing the "crustiness and angularity" that her friend Greenwell felt tempted to fall back on. William Michael, in one of the unintentionally revealing passages of his *Memoir* writes that "...no-one felt more strongly than she the Christian obligation of being at charity with all men. This she found in the long-run a pleasant duty; but it had not been exactly in her nature from the first, as she was certainly born with a marked antipathy to anything which savoured of vulgarity or 'bumptiousness,' and with an instinctive disposition to 'hold her head high,' though not to assert herself in express terms."<sup>106</sup> Georgiana Burne-Jones was more succinct, describing Rossetti as "gently caustic of tongue."<sup>107</sup>

We have already seen that her rejection of marriage, supposedly the chief goal of any good Victorian woman, was not necessarily a painful relinquishment, but very possibly a deliberate choice. There were other unconventional traits: Edmund Gosse, in a biographical sketch which first appeared in 1895, noted with some dismay, "...that she had no small talk whatever, and that the common topics

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<sup>105</sup>Quoted by Armstrong, "A Feminist Diary" 121.

<sup>106</sup>*Memoir* lxvi.

<sup>107</sup>Quoted in Thompson 118.

of the day appeared to be entirely unknown to her.... I have seen her sitting alone, in the midst of a noisy drawing-room, like a pillar of cloud, a Sibyl who nobody had the audacity to approach."<sup>108</sup> Other sources suggest that it was perhaps the "small talk" and "common topics" that middle-class ladies were expected to be versed in -- social niceties, flirtation and flattery -- that Rossetti was found to be lacking in. Certainly Ellen Proctor was surprised and pleased by the poet's grasp of the problems experienced by the British militia in the Cape colony, and her interest in a world beyond the confines of the home counties, when they first met at a tea party.<sup>109</sup> It was not that Rossetti showed any desire to overturn the conventions of courtesy and social doctrine: rather, she consciously chose, with subtle distinction, to be a Christian first and a poet second, rather than a lady first and a poet second.

Then there was the matter of dress. Rossetti refused to follow the fashions of the day with an insouciance that resembles a snub to orthodoxy. While still in her teens, she included in her novella *Maude* a ruthlessly satiric *bout-rimés* sonnet on fashion, which concluded by suggesting drowning as a suitable punishment for "Certain old ladies dressed in girlish pink." The author underscored the savagery of her own poem by having the pacific character Agnes refuse a copy of the poem for a friend, at which the unrepentant Maude declares: "Oh! I suppose

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<sup>108</sup>"Christina Rossetti: 1834-1890," *Portraits from Life* by Edmund Gosse, ed. Ann Thwaite (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1991) 50.

<sup>109</sup>*A Brief Memoir of Christina G. Rossetti* (London: S.P.C.K., 1895) 42-4.

she has some reprehensible old lady in her family, and so might feel hurt at my Lynch-law."<sup>110</sup>

As regards her own costume, while she obeyed her mother's injunction to satisfy propriety<sup>111</sup> and appear neat at all times, Rossetti remained remarkably unremarkable in appearance, resisting any pressure to dress attractively. That this was no minor breach of conventional behaviour is demonstrated by the fact that Max Beerbohm later satirised her appearance in a well-known cartoon, which showed Dante Gabriel berating her with exasperation: "What *is* the use, Christina, of having a heart like a singing bird and a watered shoot and all the rest of it, if you insist on getting yourself up like a pew-opener?" (Probably unintentionally, Beerbohm drew attention to the double-standards that applied to male and female dress by having Christina, enveloped in a costume that is a cross between widow's weeds and a nun's habit, respond to her equally shabby brother, "Well, Gabriel, I don't know -- I'm sure you yourself always dress very quietly.")<sup>112</sup>

Rossetti remained impervious to such gibes, despite the fact that contemporary interviews and descriptions written by those meeting her for the first time

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<sup>110</sup>Maude 37, 41.

<sup>111</sup>When she received the news of her grandmother's death, she wrote to reassure her mother that she had "managed to put on nothing contrary to mourning." (FL 23.)

<sup>112</sup>Rossetti and his Circle (London: 1922) plate 12.

invariably began with expressions of dismay and surprise at her austere and unfashionable garb.<sup>113</sup> She was aware that her appearance disconcerted others; when a review of *Pageant: A Calendar* took her description of the advent of November ("Here comes my youngest sister, looking dim/ And grim,/ With dismal ways")<sup>114</sup> to be a reference to herself as perceived by her brothers, she was more amused than concerned, enjoying a "quiet grin" and writing to Dante Gabriel, "Pray appreciate the portrait."<sup>115</sup> These words remind us that Rossetti was an erst-while model, and her brother a portrait painter; that both brothers were extremely concerned with her appearance (and its paintability), is demonstrated by the fact that William Michael devoted seven pages of his twenty-six page *Memoir* to minutely describing Christina's physical attributes, and cataloguing every known portrait of her, discussing the merits of each. He wrestled earnestly with the question of whether or not she was attractive, reluctantly concluding that it was a near-miss:

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<sup>113</sup>One example is the disapproval expressed by Edmund Gosse; he wrote "I think that tasteful arrangement of dress might have made her appear a noble and even a romantic figure ... but ... an ascetic or almost methodistical reserve caused her to clothe herself in a style, or absence of style, which was really distressing; her dark hair was streaked across her olive forehead, and turned up in a chignon; the high stiff dress ended in a hard collar and plain brooch, the extraordinarily ordinary skirt sank over a belated crinoline...." (*Portraits* 50.) Katherine Tynan Hinkson was another whose first response to Rossetti was that she was wearing "garments fit for a ten mile walk over ploughed fields" (Jones 207.) And her niece, Olive Rossetti, described her as "a short, stout elderly woman ... dowdily dressed in black and with an unbecoming bonnet set on her greying hair...." (Weintraub, *Four Rossettis* 262.)

<sup>114</sup>Crump, CP II 72.

<sup>115</sup>FL 98.

A question has sometimes been raised as to the amount of good looks with which Christina Rossetti should be credited. She was certainly not what one understands by a 'beauty'; the term handsome did not apply to her, nor yet the term pretty. Neither was she 'a fine woman'. She has sometimes been called 'lovely' in youth; and this is true, if a refined and correct mould of face, along with elevated and deep expression, is loveliness. She was assuredly much nearer to being beautiful than ugly; ... although the traces left upon her by disease as well as by time, marred her comeliness.<sup>116</sup>

Rossetti not only refused to make any concessions to fashion; she also bypassed conventional feminine accomplishments. She disliked needlework and was bad at it in an age when all women, both rich and poor, were expected to prepare a lavish bottom drawer in anticipation of marriage, and middle-class women practised embroidery as evidence of their accomplishments. Her occasional references to sewing or knitting in her letters to William suggest that she found these occupations trivial and boring: "In my desperation I knit lace with a perseverance completely foreign to my nature"; "My overwhelming business consists of nothing more important than needlework and such like."<sup>117</sup>

In their article on the significance of the work performed by women embroiderers in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, J. Anne George and Susie Campbell argue that Rossetti "risked appearing to compromise her womanhood" by refusing to locate

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<sup>116</sup>Memoir lix-lxvi.

<sup>117</sup>FL 6, 11.

her writing within the context of other "feminine" accomplishments such as sewing.<sup>118</sup> Among other sources, they refer to an article in the **Athenaeum** which appeared shortly after Ingelow's death, and within a few years of Rossetti's.<sup>119</sup> This raised the subject of needlework, and claimed that "these ladies [Rossetti, Jean Ingelow and Dora Greenwell] lived in the days when the cry 'Go spin, ye jades, go spin!' was still not infrequently heard if a woman wished to devote herself to any branch of art." According to this piece, at about the same time that Rossetti was establishing her fame with her **Goblin Market** collection, the other two writers were supposed to have "challenged" her to demonstrate that she was as proficient with a needle as with her pen. However, it seems likely that the **Athenaeum** invented this "contest" from scraps of ambiguous material. There is no doubt that Ingelow and Greenwell exchanged gifts of embroidery, and that a letter in which Ingelow described the exquisitely stitched workbag she was confecting for Greenwell included the perhaps provocative announcement, "When I next see Miss Rossetti, I shall ask for proof that she can do hemming and sewing." However, neither Greenwell nor Rossetti seemed to read this in any way as a challenge, and in fact Ingelow's gesture towards the already recognised poet may have been made for placatory reasons. Janet Gray suggests that this could have been a means whereby Ingelow "invited Rossetti to replicate Greenwell's welcome into the company of established women poets and, at the

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<sup>118</sup>"The Role of Embroidery" 57.

<sup>119</sup>"A Poetic Trio," **The Athenaeum**, 7 August 1897: 193-4.

same time, ... displaced competition between them from poetry to a differently valued skill...."<sup>120</sup> Yet the only gifts that passed between Rossetti and the other two women were verses. The letter from Rossetti to Greenwell that the *Athenaeum* seized on as evidence of the "contest" no doubt refers to Greenwell's recent published book of verse: "Your very kind gift reproaches me for so late an acknowledgement, but indeed I have been so busy as to feel excused for not having thanked you for it. Even now I have not made myself acquainted with its contents, but I must soon do so having just succeeded in clearing off a small batch of work...."<sup>121</sup> It is implausible, even ridiculous, to suggest that Rossetti would have required time to scrutinise the "contents" of a piece of embroidery or lace tea-cloth. Moreover, this letter follows her pattern of immediately writing to thank authors for offerings of their work before reading them, a practice which, according to William Michael, she deliberately held to "so as to save herself the disagreeable alternative of either 'damning with faint praise' or else attempting a strain of eulogy beyond her real belief."<sup>122</sup> What is thus most revealing about the assumption on the part of the editors of the *Athenaeum* that this letter refers to offerings of needlework, not writing, is their need to locate Rossetti and her contemporary female writers within the confines of a sphere that was exclusively

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<sup>120</sup>"Dora Greenwell: An Introduction to her Life and Works" (unpublished paper, Princeton: Sept 1989) 2.

<sup>121</sup>It is unlikely that Greenwell, whose gifts of sewing were usually donated to those in need of charity, and whose response to Ingelow's offering was a "humble" kettle-holder, would have sent Rossetti a similar token.

<sup>122</sup>FL 149.

the province of the female. Thus, having first conjured up, then apparently removed themselves to a safe moral distance from the prejudices of a previous age, in which creative work by women was regarded in the same light as sexual transgression ("ye *jades*"), they resort to an anxious patchwork of half-truths to reassure themselves and their readers that the three female poets were after all in fact primarily and properly concerned with correct female deportment, and that their writing did not detract from more feminine accomplishments. Later feminist readings, such as the one by George and Campbell, have retrieved Rossetti from this charge, correctly demonstrating her disregard for this particular indication of femininity, but at the cost of manufacturing a polarisation between herself and Ingelow and Greenwell that did not necessarily exist. According to Jones, the episode reflects a mutual anxiety on all sides "to prove that poetry did not detract from normal womanly duties."<sup>123</sup> One is struck by the lingering sense of discomfort, even fear, associated with the archetypal image of the three spinning Fates, which resonates in the *Athenaeum*'s article; it evokes more than it exorcises.<sup>124</sup>

Rossetti also maintained those eccentricities which did not conflict with her idea of Christian propriety; throughout her life, the Rossetti family passion for

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<sup>123</sup>Jones 126.

<sup>124</sup>Gilbert and Gubar, remarking on the mythic and ritual overtones of sewing as a female activity, note that "such powerful weaving women remind us of figures like Philomel and Penelope, both of whom ... exercise their art subversively and quietly in order to control the lives of men." (*Madwoman in the Attic* 521.)

animals, which expressed itself in Dante Gabriel's habit of collecting exotic beasts, showed in Christina's less glamorous, but decidedly "unfeminine" fondness for bugs, slugs and frogs especially. Friends were either disconcerted or amazed at her fascination with and fearless handling of such creatures. In an 1896 article, Grace Gilchrist Frennd reminisced: "Most of all I used to wonder at and admire the way in which she would ... hold in the hollow of her hand, cold little frogs and clammy toads, or furry many-legged caterpillars, with a fearless love that we country children could never emulate."<sup>125</sup>

It can be concluded that when the expectations of feminine behaviour threatened to interfere with Rossetti's chosen vocation as a poet, she was ruthless in her dismissal of such pressures. Virginia Woolf was one of the first to recognise this, and to contradict the whitewashed presentation of Rossetti to the public: "...you were not a pure saint by any means. You pulled legs; you tweaked noses. You were at war with all humbug and pretence. Modest as you were, still you were drastic, sure of your gift, convinced of your vision. A firm hand pruned your lines; a sharp ear tested their music.... In a word, you were an artist."<sup>126</sup> It is certain that while not as intransigently disregarding of gender or social conventions as, for example, Emily Brontë or George Eliot, Rossetti chose to be singular in the exercise of her art.

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<sup>125</sup>Quoted in Bell 42.

<sup>126</sup>"I am Christina Rossetti," **Collected Essays**, IV (London: The Hogarth Press, 1967) 59.

Nevertheless, Rossetti was less than certain of her reception in the male world of letters, and a placatory note tends to creep into any communication concerning her poetry. There seems to be an awareness that while not quite transgressing, she is tolerated in the patriarchal realm of Victorian letters on sufferance only. She addresses her publishers with the hesitant tone of a child in an adult and masculine world, apologising for her temerity. An undated letter to Macmillan is typical: "Pardon my troubling you for advice on a point which very likely does not affect you at all, and can only seem of importance to a person [perhaps it significant that she does not use the word woman] small in the literary world as I am...."<sup>127</sup> The matter under discussion was not as trivial as appears from Rossetti's letter; she was trying to establish whether another magazine, a religious anthology, could print some of her devotional works while Macmillan was in the process of publishing her poems. Another letter begins humbly, "I don't know who to bore, so I arbitrarily select you, counting on your kindly excusing the trouble I give you...."<sup>128</sup>

Yet her tone often masks the stubbornness with which she clung to her convictions; a determination which usually only asserted itself in the manipulation, part coaxing ("...I may count (may I not?) on no 2 poems sharing pages or part-pages, and on all sets of sonnets being treated as so many separate

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<sup>127</sup>RML 14.

<sup>128</sup>RML 44.

sonnets. Please favour me with a reassuring line...."),<sup>129</sup> part reproachful ("I have been asked more than once how my last edition has fared and I never know. Perhaps now that it has been out these 2 years I may venture to enquire whether it has had any degree of sale, or whether it has suffered under the general trade depression and failed"),<sup>130</sup> that is often resorted to by the powerless -- or by those who fear punishment or exposure, should they directly reveal their needs.

The complexity of Rossetti's stratagems for dealing with the male preserve of the public literary sphere is hardly surprising, given the delicate negotiation of intellectual territory that took place much closer to home. In the next chapter, the situation of Rossetti *vis-a-vis* the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and her own brothers comes under scrutiny; we find that Rossetti was surrounded, in a series of concentric circles, by hierarchically ranked creative communities in which she was to be permitted only a limited or prescribed role, and within which she had to negotiate strategies of survival and resistance. Radiating inwards, these constituted firstly the Victorian world of letters, and within this, the Pre-Raphaelite circle of poets and painters; then, at the nucleus, came the most significant cluster of all: the *dramatis personae* of her own family.

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<sup>129</sup>RML 137-8.

<sup>130</sup>RML 122.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Brothers and the Brotherhood

The tension between Rossetti's sense of herself as artist, and her awareness of the lack of status afforded her gender in the marketplace of ideas, was heightened, and her tactics correspondingly both more desperate and adroitly ingenious in Rossetti's dealings with her brothers, Dante Gabriel in particular. In the early years of girlhood, the separation of sex-roles could be surmounted; as a child she studied alongside her siblings, and was indulgently encouraged, as they all were, to practice the arts of poetry and drawing. It can hardly have been usual for a teenage Victorian girl to have her verses privately printed on her maternal grandfather's press; a privilege also extended to Dante Gabriel's youthful romance, *Sir Hugh the Heron*.<sup>1</sup>

Rossetti was in fact more prolific in her teens than at any other period in her life, filling notebook after notebook with (for a large part) excruciatingly bad, if robust poetry, written at melodramatic full tilt, much of it featuring swooning heroines, raving madmen and all the trimmings of Gothic Romance, culled from

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<sup>1</sup>Grandfather Polidori had printed this "Legendary Tale in Four Parts" when Dante Gabriel was fifteen. (Weintraub, *Four Rossettis* 10.)

her highly-coloured reading matter.<sup>2</sup> Several things stand out from these early works: the first that strikes the reader is the sheer energy of the young writer (rather than the enervated semi-invalid of traditional portraits.) Secondly, the steady progress of a student learning and practising her craft is very much in evidence in these early works; Rosenblum points out that as the young Rossetti deliberately wrote poems modelled on the works of other poets such as Dante, Herbert, Crabbe, Coleridge and others, she was at this stage of her life "studying" to be a poet, in the same the same way that her brother was copying casts of antique sculptures in his apprenticeship to become an artist, and reading Blake and Browning in the British Museum.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, these early exercises witness to Rossetti's growing technical skill as a crafter of poetry; by the age of sixteen, her control of the structural accomplishments of metre, rhythm, and rhyme scheme was exceptional. Battiscombe, writing of one of these youthful poems, remarks: "...to produce nine technically flawless verses in this difficult metre [feminine rhyme] is no mean achievement for a fifteen-year old."<sup>4</sup> As an

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<sup>2</sup>Some of these attempts are almost farcical: an extract from *Sonnet: Tasso and Leonora* reads, "He starts:- what <melts> meets his full awakening sight?/ Lo! Leonora with large humid eyes,/ Gazing upon him in the misty light." (Bodleian Library, 19 Dec 1846; Crump, CP III 82.) Others testify to the powerful influence of the Gothic literary tradition; *To A Murderer* has the following meaty lines: "What time thou stoopest down to drink/ Of limpid waters, thou shalt think/ It is thy foe's blood bubbles up/ From the polluted fountain's cup,/ That stains thy lip...." (Bodleian Library, 16 Sept 1846; Crump, titled *Will These Hands Ne'er Be Clean?*, CP III 96.) For a closer account of the serious influence of Rossetti's sensationalist reading on her earlier poems, see Diane D'Amico's "Christina Rossetti: The Maturin Poems," *Victorian Poetry* 19.2 (1981): 117-37.

<sup>3</sup>*Poetry of Endurance* 36-37.

<sup>4</sup>Battiscombe 40-41.

adult poet, probably only Tennyson and Hopkins among her contemporaries matched her technical skill.<sup>5</sup>

This would have been an age, however, of growing awareness of the widening gap between her brothers' prospects and her own. The financial pressures faced by the Rossetti family made the disparity of their choices even more stark; at great cost and sacrifice,<sup>6</sup> Dante Gabriel's talents were to be launched into the world via art school, private lessons, apprenticeship to the Antique Academy and a studio of his own (none of which opportunities he used to the full, deploring any system of education that demanded discipline and regular application.)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Whereas Tennyson (who apparently enjoyed her poems) refused to be drawn on them in print, (RML 7) Hopkins greatly admired her work, and paid her metrical innovations the sincerest compliment of imitation. (Packer, **Christina Rossetti** 185.) For a fuller account of the influence of her poetry on his, see Bump in Kent, 330-338, and Sharon Smulders' "'A Form That Differences': Vocational Metaphors in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins," **Victorian Poetry** 29.2 (Summer 1991): 161-173.

<sup>6</sup>William Michael remarked tersely of this period, "Dante Gabriel, until 1848, could earn nothing, and for some ensuing years very little, and the expenses of starting him in his pictorial vocation were not inconsiderable." (**Memoir** li.)

<sup>7</sup>Dante Gabriel remained inexplicably impervious to the financial crises that affected his family, and to the sacrifices made by other family members on his behalf; in a letter home while on holiday, in response to a stinging rebuke from his mother for ignoring the illness of his father (who had gone blind, thus depriving the family of its breadwinner), he airily assures his father that his loss of sight is no doubt a temporary aberration, and that matters cannot really be as bad as they seem (**Letters of DGR I** 22). He is even more frivolous in a letter that responds to the news that Maria has had to take a governessing post, treating the matter with thoughtless hilarity, and suggesting that she arm herself with a bamboo stick. (**Letters of DGR I** 31). Perhaps it would have been too costly to acknowledge how desperate the situation of his family was; what appears to be monstrous selfishness was in retrospect probably a complex combination of self-delusion and subconscious resistance to the distress of others, developed as a form of defense by a chronically immature man incapable of responsibility, and threatened by the practical demands of real life.

Christina's light, however, was to shine from under a bushel at home. William Michael, admittedly, had been dispatched to work while still a teenager as a clerk for the Excise Board (later the Internal Revenue) to help keep the wolf from the Rossetti door, but although he had practised writing poetry alongside his siblings, it was clear that he had no noteworthy creative talents. According to his biographer, his dream, relinquished with fortitude, was to study medicine.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it was some compensation when, in spite of being neither artist nor poet, he was allowed to become part of the magical circle of young artists who made up the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood -- something Christina failed to qualify for.

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<sup>8</sup>Weintraub, *Four Rossettis* 13.

### Significant, yet marginalised: Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

In the early and heady days of its inception, Rossetti was passionately enthusiastic about this "new and noble" group, and a close examination of her early letters to William Michael<sup>9</sup> shows that she considered herself a member of sorts, not only as a writer, but as an artist. During the late 1840's she executed woodcuts until quelled by Dante Gabriel (crestfallen, she wrote to William Michael, "[f]inding that Gabriel receives my woody gleanings with such scorn ..., I question whether your Scrap Book is worthy of any more of my benefactions...");<sup>10</sup> next she enrolled for painting and drawing lessons supervised by Ford Madox Brown, Dante Gabriel's own teacher. William Michael remarks rather languidly that "towards this date [the early 1850's] she had a certain disposition to cultivate any aptitude which she might possess for art-work. She never carried the attempt far, but could catch a likeness pretty well."<sup>11</sup> However, this spate of artistic activity came to an end when she was enlisted by her mother to help teach at the private school in Somerset that the Rossetti women set up in an abortive attempt to support the family, including Dante Gabriel.

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<sup>9</sup>Troxell Collection, Princeton; see also Anthony Harrison's "Eighteen Early Letters by Christina Rossetti" in Kent 192-207.

<sup>10</sup>Princeton, 11 Aug 1846.

<sup>11</sup>FL 20. Dante Gabriel was even more patronising; according to William Michael, he "always considered that our sister, had she chosen to study and take pains, might have done something as an artist." (PW 464.)

Nevertheless, if she was not to be a Pre-Raphaelite artist,<sup>12</sup> Rossetti could still be a Pre-Raphaelite poet; just as William Michael appointed himself the archivist and prose recorder of the movement, she gleefully provided doggerel poems as a running commentary on its history, the most celebrated of which ("The P.R.B. is in its decadence") describes the demise of the original Brotherhood and the scattering of its initial members.<sup>13</sup> Her involvement with the Pre-Raphaelite journal, the oddly named **The Germ**, was that of a concerned party: writing "Do not think the Germ fails to interest me: indeed the forthcoming number is continually in my thoughts,"<sup>14</sup> she eagerly debated its declining fortunes with

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<sup>12</sup>She never entirely gave up her artistic aspirations, continuing to sketch sporadically until late in life. William Michael considered her pencil drawings of small animals good enough to print in her collected **Family Letters**. As late as 1874, she submitted a design for printing to William Morris, a gesture that indicates her tenacious sense of herself as a Pre-Raphaelite artist (William Michael once again acknowledged that "at rare intervals [she] adventured upon some such performance.") She wrote of its rejection to Dante Gabriel: "This a word to tell you the upshot of my fruitless 'Apple-tree.' Mr Morris has written me a truly obliging letter, finding something to praise, but setting-up a standard of such complicated artistic perfection as (I fear) no alterations of mine can ever ... attain." (FL 45-6.)

<sup>13</sup>Crump, CP III 223. See also "The two Rossettis (brothers they)", a series of couplets humorously describing the original Brotherhood. (Crump, CP III 332, 502.) William T. Going argues that *Goblin Market* is actually a poem about Rossetti's experiences at the hands of the Brothers, pointing out that both this work and "The PRB is in its decadence" employ images of luscious fruit, and suggesting that in *Goblin Market*, she enshrines both her fascination and her disillusion with the Brotherhood. ("Goblin Market' and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood," **The Pre-Raphaelite Review** III. 1 [Nov 1979]: 1-11.) *Goblin Market* is far too complex a poem to be reduced to a single reading, and the problems of reading Rossetti's poems as straightforward journals of actual experience have already been pointed out. Yet this is one of the few articles which has remarked on Rossetti's significance to the Brotherhood and vice versa, and suggests the disenchantment she may well have felt as they abandoned certain artistic and idealistic principles (such as the earnest spirituality of their earlier "natural" presentations of religious subjects) which she still held dear and adhered to in her poetry.

<sup>14</sup>Princeton, 25 Jan 1850.

William Michael (describing it on one occasion as "our Germ"),<sup>15</sup> commiserated with his editorial difficulties, offered advice and suggestions ("I seriously urge on your consideration the increase of prose and decrease of poetry in the Germ, the present state of affairs strikes me as most alarming"),<sup>16</sup> commented closely on individual contributions, solicited readers and subscribers, and produced a wonderful fantasy: if all else failed, **The Germ** should "boldly publish" her own letters, disguised as if written from a titled personage at "B--ck--m P--l--e," and create "an immense sensation."<sup>17</sup> The vision of herself as a noble princess sweeping to the rescue of the Brotherhood and restoring them to fame and fortune, remained for Rossetti a mirage, although it was later to become ironically prophetic. Her sense of gratification, although laced with humour, at the idea of being publicly presented in letters suggests a panache and sense of self-importance entirely absent from her brothers' descriptions of her shyness and modesty. This idea of herself as heroic rescuer of a tight-knit group under siege is also seen in a similar, very funny fantasy she outlined a few years later for William Michael (who thought it "rather thin fun"):

**I have conceived a first-rate scheme for rebuilding the shattered fortunes of our house. Hannay ... forwards "Nick" ... to ... A[ddey]'s man of business; accompanying the work by my portrait. Man of business (a susceptible individual of great discernment) risks**

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<sup>15</sup>Princeton, 30 July 1852.

<sup>16</sup>Princeton, 31 Jan 1850.

<sup>17</sup>Princeton, 31 Jan 1850.

the loss of his situation by immediately forwarding me a cheque for £20, and sets his subs to work on an elegant edition.... Addey returns; is first furious; but seeing the portrait, and with a first-rate business head perceiving at a glance its capabilities, has it engraved, prefixed to "N," and advertised all over the civilized world. The book spreads like wildfire. Addey ... struck by a late remorse, and having an eye to future contingencies, sends me a second cheque for £200; on which we subsist for a while. At the publication of the 20th edition Mrs A[ddey] (a mild person of few words) expires; charging her husband to do me justice. He promises with one suppressed sob. Next day, a third cheque for £2000 reaches me. This I divide; assigning half to Maria for her dowry, and handing the rest to Mamma. I then collapse. Exeunt Omnes.<sup>18</sup>

This glorious scenario, with its bombastic insistence not only on her genius, but her beauty, is once again very reminiscent of Austen's early writings, apart from the inevitable self-sacrificial ending. Yet, no matter how attractive the idea of combining public recognition with redeeming "the ... fortunes of our house," her family experience had imprinted her with a sense of community and group membership, as well as hierarchy in which it was prudent for her to assume the lowest rank; describing her family to Edmund Gosse, she named herself "the least and the last of the group."<sup>19</sup> She carried this sense of humble membership over to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and as early as April 1849 (before *The Germ* had been thought of, and her contributions towards it solicited), she wrote tentatively, but unambiguously to William Michael that her interest in Pre-

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<sup>18</sup>Princeton, 13 August 1853.

<sup>19</sup>British Museum, 26 Mar 1884; Sandars 88.

Raphaelite concerns was "in right of my double sisterhood" -- a phrase he was to delete in the typescript version of the letter he prepared.<sup>20</sup>

However, even this modest claim went too far. Rossetti could not be a member of the group she identified herself with, even though she could be its Queen, as William Michael sentimentally described her years later in one of the memoirs he wrote after her death.<sup>21</sup> The name "Brotherhood" itself makes it quite clear that she was excluded on the basis of gender, in spite of the initially liberal attitudes of the Brothers towards women artists. Yet she was strategically extremely important to them in the early days of their struggle for credibility. Her initial scattered successes in print reflected favourably on the Brotherhood, who were only too happy to claim her for their own, and she was asked to contribute to *The Germ* as a poet who had already published in the *Athenaeum*. Due to the laxness of the real Brothers in meeting publishing deadlines, the first two editions of the magazine would have been too thin to print without her poems. After she had submitted her poems under her own name, Dante Gabriel replaced it with a pseudonym he devised, but it could not have escaped either his

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<sup>20</sup>Princeton, 28 April 1849.

<sup>21</sup>With rather nostalgic hindsight, he described his sister as "rather closely associated with [the P.R.B.'s] early proceedings.... not only on the ground of her engagement to Collinson, but also because of her general mental gifts and sympathies, and especially because of her contributions ... to *The Germ* ... no one else could, in the dawning P.R.B. days, have disputed this title [queen]." (*Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti*, 2 vols [London: Brown, Langham, 1906] I 74.) He was not the first to use it, however; the *Catholic Review* had already pronounced Rossetti to be the "Queen of the Pre-Raphaelite school" in October 1876. (Charles 44.)

notice or the rest of the Brothers, that the few kind words said about **The Germ** - - later described as one of literature's most successful failures -- were largely in response to the poems she had written. (Everything else was not so much panned as ignored, which must have been far more galling.)<sup>22</sup> Her supremacy was certainly acknowledged; later, she was even boasted of as a "Jael who leads our host to victory."<sup>23</sup> However, this praise was lavished on her by Swinburne, who remained on the outskirts of the movement, rather than by members of the Brotherhood themselves. It is also a somewhat double-edged, if not alarming analogy when we remember that Jael used the arts of seduction and treachery to achieve her aims, not to mention the small matter of hammering a tent-peg into Sisera's skull.<sup>24</sup>

The anomaly of Rossetti's position must have been a source of strain to all concerned, and her brothers attempted rather clumsy explanations: apparently it was their sister's distaste for "display" that made her membership of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood impractical. Thus, as Dorothy Mermin points out, "Exclusion is explained away, in an entirely typical interpretation of Rossetti's

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<sup>22</sup>Introduction, **The Germ**, ed William Michael Rossetti (1850; London: Elliot Stock, 1901) 11-15.

<sup>23</sup>Edmund Gosse, **The Life of Charles Algernon Swinburne** (London: Macmillan, 1917) 136-7.

<sup>24</sup>Judges 4: 17-22.

life, as withdrawal."<sup>25</sup> Dante Gabriel rationalises this supposed withdrawal in a letter to Holman Hunt, in which he explains rather huffily that he had no intention of suggesting that Christina should participate in their gatherings: "When I proposed my sister should join, I never meant that she should attend the meetings, to which I know it would be impossible to persuade her, as it would bring her to a pitch of nervousness infinitely beyond Collinson's. I merely intended that she should entrust her productions to my reading; but must give up the idea, as I find she objects to this also, under the impression that it would seem like display, I believe, a sort of thing she abhors."<sup>26</sup> This letter is generally quoted in support of the belief that he encouraged the idea of her membership; however, it is more likely that this is an early version of his desire to present, orchestrate and "own" her poetry, by literally taking and putting *her* words into *his* mouth, in an unusual reversal of the conventional contestation over who owns or produces speech.

William Michael, however, seemed simply unable or reluctant to take his sister seriously as a Pre-Raphaelite contributor; in the minutely detailed diary of Pre-Raphaelite affairs he kept during this period, with its dutiful record of every suggestion, letter or contribution by the Brothers and others of their circle, there

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<sup>25</sup>Foreword in Rosenblum, *Poetry of Endurance* xiii.

<sup>26</sup>*Letters of DGR* I 45. Rossetti displayed no such qualms about his reading her works at other literary gatherings; neither was there any demurral on her part at Macmillan's reading *Goblin Market* before audiences. (RML 7.)

is no mention of the eager and enthusiastic letters he was receiving from Rossetti on matters Pre-Raphaelite, or of her advice or proposals concerning **The Germ**. It is likely that his personal view of the proper and decorous presentation of his sister as a lady poet, later described in his **Memoir** ("in a room full of mediocrities she consented to seem the most mediocre as the most modest of all")<sup>27</sup> had already begun to crystallise.

The insistence by her brothers on her poetical reticence is hardly supported by Rossetti's determination to secure a reputation as a poet, or her assertiveness in sending off her pieces in search of publication, her bold letter to Aytoun, and her refusal (after being assigned a pseudonym in **The Germ**) to ever use one again, even though to have done so would have smoothed over several disputes concerning poems Dante Gabriel was later to find disturbing or "unsuitable." Their explanations reveal a certain amount of discomfort (and defensiveness) about the issue of their sister's disqualification from membership. Perhaps this awkwardness was justified in view of the nature of the group and its meetings: the Brothers constituted a band of very young men who delighted in puerile and scatological jokes and puns at their often raucous meetings over beer and cigars; Dante Gabriel coined the schoolboy sobriquet "the Arse-inaeum" for the arts magazine the **Athenaeum**, to be evoked whenever it annoyed the Brothers,<sup>28</sup> and

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<sup>27</sup>**Memoir** lvi.

<sup>28</sup>Weintraub, **Four Rossettis** 171.

one acolyte quipped that the letters P.R.B. stood for "Penis Rather Better."<sup>29</sup>

One can imagine their embarrassment and dismay at the thought of a *gentlewoman* in their midst.

However, the real possibility of sibling rivalry as a contributing factor to Rossetti's exclusion from the charmed circle has been skimmed over by almost all Rossetti critics and biographers,<sup>30</sup> although Jerome Bump argues convincingly that both Christina and Gerard Manley Hopkins were barred from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, despite showing keen interest and providing literary contributions, as a result of Dante Gabriel's professional jealousy. He claims that "[Christina] was excluded partly because her brother was at least as oriented to competition as he was to cooperation in art,"<sup>31</sup> and goes on to argue that Gerard Manley Hopkins's approaches were cold-shouldered because the initial poems he submitted in the hopes of joining forces with the Brotherhood clearly showed that he was a superior poet to Dante Gabriel (whereas none of the other members of

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<sup>29</sup>John Tupper, quoted by Mary Lutyens, "Walter Howell Deverell (1827-1854)" in Parris, *Pre-Raphaelite Papers* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1984) 245.

<sup>30</sup>This omission becomes more glaring when one encounters Weintraub's "His Brother's Keeper: William Michael and Dante Gabriel Rossetti" in Kiell. Weintraub examines the relationship between the two men minutely for traces of fraternal envy and competition with each other, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Christina posed a far greater threat as a rival to Dante Gabriel than the uninspired William Michael. The title of Kiell's book seems to suggest that only male siblings really count as competitors, as do its opening words: "The ... essays in this collection -- on brothers who are writers -- attempt to show how kinship affects creativity." (3.)

<sup>31</sup>"Christina Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood," in Kent 323.

the inner sanctum posed any real *poetic* competition). Although Bump does not go on to explore this particular implication of his thesis, the inference is that Christina was excluded for the same reason; she was *too good*.<sup>32</sup> Yet it was a great deal simpler to exclude her, for the "obvious" reason that as a woman she did not qualify for membership. That this "obvious" reason might have served as a respectable and apparently reasonable guise for Dante Gabriel's envy at his younger sister's poetic successes (initially more spectacular than his own) does not seem to have occurred to many critics, although Bump sums up his argument with the words: "... Rossetti suffered the special melancholy of a creative artist excluded from the creative "brotherhoods" of her time.... To what extent was this fate the result of her brother's decision to name his group the "Brotherhood" and the group's collective decision (or unquestioned assumption) that no women were to be included?" He concludes that Dante Gabriel "deliberately excluded a highly qualified rival."<sup>33</sup>

Rossetti's exclusion is all the more suspicious in view of the fact that women were to be involved in the Sketching Club proposed by Dante Gabriel as a substitute for the Brotherhood. Although the project never got off the ground, the

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<sup>32</sup>Years later, Hopkins himself compared brother and sister as poets, and found Dante Gabriel lacking: commenting on the fact that Rossetti was "thrown rather into the shade by her brother," he claimed that "For pathos and pure beauty of art I do not think he is her equal: in fact the simple beauty of her work cannot be matched." (Quoted in Thompson 406.)

<sup>33</sup>Bump in Kent 344-5.

membership list included both the Hon. Mrs Boyle and Lady Waterford.<sup>34</sup> Also, in her review of Thompson's biography of Rossetti,<sup>35</sup> Isabel Colegate points out that Georgiana Burne-Jones, daughter of a clergyman and the wife of the painter Edward Burne-Jones, an eminently respectable middle-class "lady," was a regular participant in the activities of the Pre-Raphaelites during the second flowering of the "Brotherhood" (which began with the painting of the Oxford Union murals in the summer of 1857); by this stage Rossetti herself was completely excluded from even peripheral involvement. Given the subsequent history of Dante Gabriel's anxious involvement and active interference with his sister's work (which will be closely scrutinised in the next section of this chapter), it seems that the argument for the deliberate disqualification of Rossetti by her brother is a persuasive one.

It was not only in the field of literature that Christina stood in the wings of the Brotherhood, while denied an active role. She posed regularly as a model for Dante Gabriel and the other members of the original Pre-Raphaelite circle, at a time when they were peculiarly dependent on obliging models, partly due to their lack of funds with which to pay professionals, and partly due to their earnest creed of painting only from life.<sup>36</sup> Her likeness featured in most of the early

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<sup>34</sup>Letters of DGR I 163.

<sup>35</sup>The Spectator, 6 June 1992: 45.

<sup>36</sup>The exhibition catalogue *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery in conjunction with Allen Lane, 1984) details a number of examples where progress of paintings was interrupted and delayed by the erratic attendance and sometimes justifiable impatience of certain models. A reliable one was worth rubies.

Pre-Raphaelite exhibitions, framed, posed and arranged by male hands. According to Ronald Parkinson, hers was the image of both austerity and vulnerability that shaped the initial Pre-Raphaelite presentation of women, in their early period of painting religious topics and scenes. He writes, "It was as much the appearance of Christina Rossetti that determined the emaciated and angular style of the Brothers as any return ... to the Pre-Raphael frescoes ... at Pisa."<sup>37</sup> Her image, or what Dolores Rosenblum describes as the "mask" she was assigned, and also in some senses assumed, partly as a defense, partly as a means of "observ[ing] without being noticed,"<sup>38</sup> had already been constructed for her (and was to become a significant feature both of her writing and her life.) It is round about this time that Dante Gabriel refers to Christina's smile as "almost stereotyped."<sup>39</sup> The double message must have been clear: as an image she was both vital and visible; as competition, she was to be eradicated.

The use to which her image was put, is also significant; by the age of nineteen,<sup>40</sup> she had been captured on canvas as both a saint and a virgin -- no less than the Virgin Mary herself, the ultimate feminine paragon, sinless and spotless.

Although she sat for both Dante Gabriel's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and his

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<sup>37</sup>"James Collinson," in Parris 64.

<sup>38</sup>"The Inward Pose," *Shakespeare's Sisters* 85.

<sup>39</sup>*Letters of DGR I* 148.

<sup>40</sup>The same age at which she broke off her engagement with James Collinson -- for religious reasons.

Annunciation, *Ecce Ancilla Domine!*, she was never painted as a Madonna or as part of a nativity scene. The mantle of a perpetually childless maiden had been firmly draped over her. Dante Gabriel makes this explicit; writing to F.G. Stephens of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, he states that "That picture of mine was a symbol of female excellence. The Virgin being taken as its highest type. It was not her Childhood but her Girlhood."<sup>41</sup> He was to be even more specific in the sonnet he wrote to accompany the picture, and which was inscribed in the original frame:

This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect  
God's Virgin....  
Her kin she cherished with devout respect;  
Her gifts were simpleness of intellect  
And supreme patience. From her mother's knee  
Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity  
Strong in grave peace; in duty circumspect.  
So held she through her girlhood; as it were  
An angel-watered lily, that near God  
Grows, and is quiet.<sup>42</sup>

This construction of feminine docility is particularly interesting in its insistence on the Virgin's "<profound> simpleness of intellect" -- possibly wishful thinking

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<sup>41</sup>Bodleian Library, 8 Sept 1852; quoted by Alastair Grieve in *The Pre-Raphaelites* (1984) 65.

<sup>42</sup>*Poetical Works of DGR* 353. The first version of this sonnet, included in a letter to William Michael differed somewhat in lines 4-6: "Loving she was, with temperate respect:/ A profound simpleness of intellect/ Was hers, and extreme patience. From the knee...." (*Letters of DGR* I 50-51.)

or certainly projection on the part of Dante Gabriel with regard to Christina. He had previously explained to his godfather, Charles Lyell that his younger sister was to assume this role of feminine perfection, "her appearance being excellently adapted to my purpose."<sup>43</sup> Holman Hunt, who described her after their first meeting as "exactly the pure and docile-hearted damsel that her brother portrayed God's Virgin pre-elect to be," went one better, painting her features (valued specifically for their "gravity and sweetness of expression")<sup>44</sup> into the face of his Christ-figure, in his **The Light of the World** -- an extraordinarily popular and much-copied work, initially sold for 400 guineas --then considered a huge sum. One copy "toured the colonies" and ended up in a post of honour in St Paul's Cathedral.<sup>45</sup> (Rossetti and her mother paid the painting the occasional visit during its various exhibitions; surely bizarre instances of her living eyes regarding their painted representation in the face of Christ.) Edmund Gosse also picked up this religious pigeonholing when he later bestowed upon her the title, "the high priestess of Preraphaelitism."<sup>46</sup> Thomas Dixon, a minor artist on the

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<sup>43</sup>**Letters of DGR** I 48. Susan Casteras, however, disagrees that Christina was specifically chosen to be the Virgin, or that this role was necessarily dovetailed into her own sense of identity, claiming that her sitting for the painting constitutes "accidental portraiture." ("The Double Vision of Portraiture," in Ainsworth, **Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Double Vision of Art** 12.) Even so, Dante Gabriel still chose Christina over the more pious (and presumably equally available and economical) Maria. One cannot help wondering to what extent Dante Gabriel's selection of his younger and prettier sister as "the chosen one" over the older Maria complicated the ramifications of family rivalries.

<sup>44</sup>Holman Hunt's **Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood** (London: Chapman & Hall, 1913) 154; 254.

<sup>45</sup>**The Pre-Raphaelites** (1984) 119.

<sup>46</sup>**Portrait** 50.

fringes of Ruskin's circle, read her as an exemplary "book" of spiritual patterning; he wrote to William Michael, "The pieces by your sister are ... full of that quiet peaceful piety and faith, such as I always remember in thinking over the few hours' conversation I have had the pleasure of having in her presence. I see now ... in my mind's eye, the quiet face, and hear the quiet calm voice -- so full of the spirit that one finds in the simple though expressive old Fathers' a reflection to me of a deep lover of Thomas à Kempis, and of one who had achieved that rare and arduous task ..., the realization in actual life of the teachings of that beautiful book...."<sup>47</sup> As a symbol, Christina's power was invariably translated into religious terms of purity and asceticism; here she is rendered into a living parable, her life a moral tale of instruction. She was made not only into a saint, but also a catechism.

This in itself is interesting in view of the rather confused (and sometimes exploitative) attitudes of the Brothers to their models. Their medieval creed of honouring women was a factor in the Pre-Raphaelite habit of plucking unknown working-class beauties from obscurity, worshipping them as "stunners" and then attempting to play Pygmalion not only in paint, but also in real life, often with disastrous results. Nevertheless, they were not immune to the crude attitudes and prejudices towards artist's models held by much of the general public, which

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<sup>47</sup>Quoted in Weintraub, **Four Rossettis** 101. Weintraub however, reads this as referring to Maria. Which sister is under discussion is not made clear in the letter, but the reference to writings suggests Christina, a view with which Nina Auerbach concurs. (**Woman and the Demon** [Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982] 115.)

assumed that any woman prepared to pose for a picture (with the implications of undressing) was a whore. This is demonstrated in Millais's description of the progress of his painting *The Proscribed Royalist*, which shows a lovely young Puritan surreptitiously meeting her Cavalier lover in a wood: "Today I have been drawing the girl's figure in the landscape. Yesterday it was too small, and today too large. Tomorrow ... I hope to get it between the two sizes\*\*I don't mean her legs."<sup>48</sup> This almost automatic lewdness was sometimes combined with casual callousness; writing of a model who had sat for Dante Gabriel, his fellow artist George Boyce remarks, "the poor girl got her face sadly cut about and disfigured by a brute of a soldier, and then of course she was of no more use as a model."<sup>49</sup> Certainly when Dante Gabriel and Walter Deverell set up a studio at 17 Red Lion Square, the landlord stipulated "gentlemanly restraint" as a condition of tenancy, warning them that "some artists sacrifice the dignity of art to the baseness of passion."<sup>50</sup>

Thus there was a certain element of anomaly in Christina Rossetti, a shabby-genteel young lady of formidable piety, being a principal sitter for the Pre-Raphaelites. Unable to decide among themselves whether or not she qualified for honorary membership of their circle, they were now confronted with the

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<sup>48</sup>Huntington Library, 11 Nov 1852?; quoted by Malcolm Warner in *The PreRaphaelites* (1984) 105.

<sup>49</sup>Quoted by Marsh in *PreRaphaelite Women* 24.

<sup>50</sup>*Letters of DGR* I 97.

necessity of painting a woman of their own social class, sister to two of their founding members, and temporarily the fiancée of another. One circumstance set Rossetti apart from most of the other women who modelled for the Pre-Raphaelites; except when modelling for her own brother, she was always chaperoned during sittings by her mother. It is hardly surprising that she was translated into images of either "female excellence" or, on occasion, saintly androgyny -- the face of Christ, and even one of his disciples, in Ford Madox Brown's *Christ Washing the Feet of Peter*.<sup>51</sup>

One of the problems with having been clearly identified as a flesh-and-blood icon during the early phase of Pre-Raphaelitism, was that when the artists moved on to painting secular female beauty rather than sacred female virtue, new models were found, leaving Christina behind, literally frozen in paint. The exemplum of ideal "girlhood" could not advance to "womanhood," much less "adulthood." Her image was usurped by the more spectacular (and increasingly sensuous) ones of Elizabeth Siddal, Fanny Cornforth and Jane Morris. Even in subsequent religious paintings, which progressed to scenes of the Visitation and the Holy Family (thereby involving maternity), Christina was no longer considered a suitable model. In a painting by her brother of the Holy Family preparing for Passover, Siddal had replaced her as the Mother of God; and in a stained-glass window designed by Dante Gabriel, and depicting the Visitation with St

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<sup>51</sup>Christopher Wood, *The PreRaphaelites* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1981) 48.

Elizabeth, Mary (tactfully, but unmistakably delineated as pregnant) was this time modelled on Jane Morris.

The Pre-Raphaelites were nothing if not literal in the associations they made between the model and the paintings; Elizabeth Siddal, initially worshipped by Dante Gabriel as a source of inspiration, and later tormented by his neglect, was repeatedly painted as a medieval noblewoman in a series of romantic cameos in which she either awaits or embraces her courtly lover. She was also portrayed both by Dante Gabriel and Millais as Ophelia, ironically prefiguring her own suicide; and after her death, Dante Gabriel "immortalised" her as his Muse by painting her as Dante's Beatrice at the hour of her passing. Fanny Cornforth, a prostitute who was Dante Gabriel's mistress for many years, was painted first as the fallen woman in *Found*, then portrayed in the far more sensuous *Bocca Baciata* (literally, the "kissed mouth"), one of a series of paintings presenting her as a concubine or siren, in which she is shown reclining provocatively, her flowing hair and loosened, sumptuous clothing communicating an aura of slightly illicit eroticism. Jane Morris, with whom Dante Gabriel conducted an obsessive love affair in spite of the fact that she was his close friend and business partner's wife, was painted as Guinevere, Prosperine, Pandora and the Assyrian Venus<sup>52</sup> -- a revealing catalogue. The iconographic categorisation of Rossetti was equally

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<sup>52</sup>The *Astarte Syriaca* paintings borrowed from ancient Middle Eastern legends of an archaic Venus more powerful and ruthless than her later Western counterparts.

literal: like the Virgin Mary (prior to the birth of Jesus), with whom she was now permanently visually identified, she was to remain pure and "spotless" -- a daunting obligation to have to assume. Betty Flowers points out that Rossetti was in some senses captured in "the ascetic virgin's room of Dante Gabriel's painting."<sup>53</sup>

This presentation of Rossetti in relation to her physical surroundings, invariably as enclosed, provides much food for thought. Elaine Shefer provides a lively feminist critique of Rossetti's entrapment in man-made and male-defined images, focusing on Millais's *Mariana* (inspired by Tennyson's *Mariana*), a painting of a frustrated and exhausted woman stretching herself in front of a closed and partially opaque window;<sup>54</sup> and various feminist critics and

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<sup>53</sup>Flowers in Kent 160.

<sup>54</sup>"The Woman at the Window in Victorian Art and Christina Rossetti as the subject of Millais's *Mariana*," *The Pre-Raphaelite Journal*, 4.1 (Nov 1983): 14-25. The author argues that Millais is actually sensitive to the dilemma of the women artist, caught in conflict between her "need for self-expression as opposed to her self-effacing tendency." (21.) Certainly, the painting of a thwarted woman confronted and blocked by a representation of the Annunciation could be read as an illustration of the tension between Rossetti's authentic need for self-definition and her conscription into the virginal imagery of her brother's paintings. However, this fascinating article is also infuriating in that it provides not one scrap of historical evidence that Rossetti ever sat for this painting, or even that Millais had her situation in mind; neither can I find any material that either verifies or disproves Shefer's supposition. (Jan Marsh, in a letter to *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 5.1 (Nov 1984): 105, raises the same objection.) The only evidence which suggests to me that Rossetti was the model, is the strong resemblance her face bears to the woman in the picture's, as well as the reproduction of her characteristic and severe hairstyle. However, it seems most unlikely that the model's figure is based on Rossetti's body: the woman in the painting is extremely voluptuous, whereas Rossetti was slender, even angular at this age. It is also unlikely that she would have posed in the sensuous stance dictated by the artist, in which the model's breasts and buttocks, sheathed in a tight velvet gown, are clearly outlined and emphasised. Perhaps Millais made use of a photograph or sketch of Christina from the neck up to paint the head, and used a professional

art historians have remarked on the Pre-Raphaelite (and indeed, Victorian) penchant for drawing women literally physically restricted.<sup>55</sup> One thinks, for example, of Holman Hunt's *The Awakened Conscience*, which shows a kept woman starting to her feet, yet checked by her lover's restraining arm. The painting is crammed with visual metaphors, should the viewer miss the point: a cat pins down a bird with cruel claws, the piano is adorned with cut and wilting flowers, a soiled glove lies discarded, the threads of a tapestry project are hopelessly tangled and a glimpse of the outside world is restricted to a mirror (another symbol often deployed in nineteenth-century paintings of women, whose efforts to reach out to the outside world are thwarted by mirrors which either reflect themselves back again or mediate wider horizons in inverted second-hand glimpses.) The mirror as only permissible access to the world "out there" appears again in the numerous Pre-Raphaelite paintings and illustrations of Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* in her tower, where the sense of physical restraint is often disturbingly reinforced by implications of bondage, as the female figure struggles to free herself from the tangle of threads from her loom.

*The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, Dante Gabriel's first major work of art, and the first exhibited painting of Christina, shares some significantly similar features.

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model for the rest of the figure.

<sup>55</sup>Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women* 106, 150-2; Lochnan, "Images of Confinement," *Victorian Studies Bulletin* 2 (Dec 1978): 11-19; Adrienne Auslander Munich, "The Poetics of Reserve, The Politics of Bondage," *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 8-37.

The link between its compositional organisation and that of the above paintings is more symbolically weighted than might at first appear; according to certain Victorian aesthetic treatments of femininity, both virgin and whore were to be presented as confined. Susan Casteras argues that "virgin and fallen woman unite iconographically";<sup>56</sup> and Munich points to the anxiety of the Pre-Raphaelites concerning the moment of defloration, read as a fulcrum on which a woman swung from one pole to the other, and reads the paintings of Victorian Annunciations as attempts to regulate this transition. She also notes that Dante Gabriel possessed a seventeenth-century work by Heywoode in which "Chast Women" and "Women Wantons" were both classified as servants of Eros, although they took the opposite stances of service through virtue and vice.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the Virgin/Whore binary was one in which the poles were tied tightly to their common axis; one stereotype invariably conjured the other.

The initial painting of Rossetti as the Virgin shows her sitting in the left-hand corner of the painting, not so much enclosed as literally "hemmed" in; a partially drawn curtain cuts her off from the landscape visible to the observer, and she sits behind a medieval-looking piece of furniture that suggests both desk and *prieu-deu*. Her sewing is presided over by her mother, St Anne (for whom Christina's

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<sup>56</sup>Auerbach provides this summary of Casteras' unpublished dissertation "Down the Garden Path: Courtship Culture and its Imagery in Victorian Painting." (*Woman and the Demon* 151, 241.)

<sup>57</sup>Munich 90.

mother posed); this activity was specifically chosen by Dante Gabriel in preference to the traditional presentations of the Virgin reading: "In order ... to attempt something more probable and at the same time less commonplace, I have represented the future Mother of Our Lord as occupied in embroidering a lily ...."<sup>58</sup> Sewing was not necessarily any more "true to Nature" than reading, but was symbolically indicative of proper feminine conduct. The act of sewing, spinning or weaving kept a woman literally in her place -- locked in the enchanted tower, like the Lady of Shalott,<sup>59</sup> Rapunzel and the nameless spinning princess who was at the mercy of Rumpelstiltskin; or indefinitely unconscious and passive, like the Sleeping Beauty. In fact, to lay the needle down could be construed as an act of disobedience, punishable even by death, in Victorian iconography: contemporary art depicted the sewing Virgin as the exemplary female model, whereas paintings of the Lady of Shalott warned against feminine disobedience. In *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, the sitter is shown gripping her needle with stubborn awkwardness (we already know that Rossetti hated sewing), and is surrounded by various weighty symbols. A pile of huge, unwieldy books

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<sup>58</sup>Letters of DGR I 48.

<sup>59</sup>Contemporary critics have noted the gender politics associated with the Lady of Shalott as a Victorian figure-type, as well as the significance of the symbols of the mirror and the "web" (needlework) discussed above. Catherine and Andrew Belsey ("Christina Rossetti: sister to the Brotherhood" 41-47) and Marsh (*Pre-Raphaelite Women*) both look at the various presentations of spinning in versions of the Lady of Shalott, and demonstrate the ways in which representations of sewing in Victorian works of art functioned simultaneously as exemplary feminine occupation and female constriction, even bondage, while surreptitiously also operating as female creative process. Jennifer Gribble goes on to investigate how the symbols within the larger allegory of Shalott operate as tropes in the novels of the period. (*The Lady of Shalott in the Victorian Novel* [London: Macmillan, 1983.])

listing the cardinal virtues, faith, hope and charity, as well as one particularly required by the female pilgrim, fortitude, stands uncompromisingly ahead of her, while an ominous bundle of thorns lies at her feet. Aspects of the painting communicate a watchful and a watched quality both within the work and in its engagement with the viewer; St Anne gazes fixedly at the Virgin's sewing, the Virgin herself is self-consciously tense, and avoids eye-contact with both the painter/viewer and other characters represented in the painting; the Holy Ghost, signified by a haloed white pigeon, fixes the Virgin with a steady stare.

The completed embroidery of a Madonna lily (associated both with virginity and loss of that virginity) features in the next painting, the sequel, whose title *Ecce Ancilla Domine!* labelled Christina firmly as the "the handmaid of the Lord." Here she is seen with her back literally to the wall: she half-lies, half-sits on her bed, backed into a corner, with her knees defensively raised. Once again, she refuses eye-contact with anyone either "inside" or "outside" the painting. This was a particular modelling mannerism Rossetti developed as a response to the experience of being placed as the object of visual beholding; in other words, sited as a sight. Presented as a spectacle, she evades any engagement with spectators.<sup>60</sup> In this case, she ignores the angel (an imposing apparition), and

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<sup>60</sup>This would corroborate the notion that the female model is never entirely without agency, even at moments of real exploitation; her engagement, or lack of it, could enable her to reformulate the final work of art to some degree.

fixes her eyes on the long phallic stalk of the lily he holds pointed at her womb; her expression is one of resignation, even gloom, rather than of rapture or piety.

The discomfort that at least one (if not both) of her brothers had with the idea of their sister being portrayed in her nightie at the moment of conception (no matter how immaculate), is revealed in William Michael's fussy and needless explanation that the Virgin is seen "in bed, but without any bedclothes on, an arrangement which may be justified in consideration of the hot climate," a rationalisation he attributes to his brother ("so he told me.")<sup>61</sup> The question of incestuous nuances between the Rossetti siblings is an intriguing and a complex one. Although the pre-Freudian Victorians were relatively untroubled by self-consciousness concerning sexually symbolic readings of familial interaction, the Rossetti brothers and other Pre-Raphaelites were more conscious of the issue that we might suppose. For example, they were uneasily fascinated by the emerging story of Byron's incestuous relationship with his half-sister. In the first of several long letters in which Dante Gabriel canvassed the issue with his brother and other friends, he urges Brown, "Do explain yourself by *return of post* about Byron. I know of nothing bearing on the subject, and am most excited to hear."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>DGR: *His Family Letters* 160. An almost identical explanation is offered in the 25 Nov 1849 entry, *The P.R.B. Journal: William Michael Rossetti's Diary of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood 1849-1853* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 29.

<sup>62</sup>*Letters of DGR* II 733. The editors muffle his evident titillation by explaining that "[d]espite D.G.R.'s assertion that an artist's or poet's works were all that the public had a right to know, he was ever interested in their lives as well as their works."

However, to William Michael, he affected a worldly nonchalance: "Lastly if Byron f----d his sister he f----d her and there is an end -- an absolute end in my opinion as far as the vital interest of his poetry goes ...."<sup>63</sup> Dante Gabriel's rather salacious eagerness to get the dirt on Byron, and William Michael's uneasiness about Christina's state of undress in *Ecce Ancilla Domine!* suggest that neither brother was completely unaware of the potential for overtones of sexual desire within the family. As I will argue in the next chapter, Dante Gabriel developed in his poetry a sexualised aesthetic of art, in which the act of painting itself becomes a trope for making love (and literally *making* the female object out of the artist's desire.) This would have made painting his own sister an extremely delicate business; it too possibly informs the fact that she was painted first and foremost as *the* Virgin Mary (whose obdurate maidenhood, according to Catholic doctrine, remained impervious even to the experiences of pregnancy and parturition) and subsequently as figures both androgynous and sacred.<sup>64</sup> Consideration of this issue also adds a further dimension of complexity to the vehemence with which differing ideologies of sexuality, especially female sexuality, are debated in certain texts by Christina and Dante Gabriel. Psychoanalytical readings of their poems could certainly consider the displacement of subconscious

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<sup>63</sup>Letters of DRG II 743.

<sup>64</sup>See also Munich's "Typologies of Defloration" 86-131 for further discussion of potentially incestuous scenarios represented in art, and their reflections of unease within Victorian cultural aesthetics.

desire and discomfort, as well as anxiety about breaching taboos, within the currents of their works.

Rossetti was thus firmly relegated to the "white room" of Dante Gabriel's *Annunciation*, the niché of the virgin; and whereas the image of feminine enclosure in art and poetry was clearly both romanticised and eroticised by members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and other Victorians, such as Tennyson, she herself was undoubtedly uneasy with its connotations. This becomes evident in poems such as *The Lowest Room*, whose speaker chafes rebelliously at the confines of her life, and by implication, the role assigned her as a woman. What male poets presented as "embowered" enclosure<sup>65</sup> was often experienced as exclusion, as demonstrated by poems such as *Shut Out*,<sup>66</sup> which begins: "The door was shut. I looked between/ Its iron bars; and saw it lie/ My garden, mine, beneath the sky ..." When the speaker asks for "Some buds to cheer my outcast state" or "one small twig from shrub or tree;/ And bid my home remember me/ Until I come to it again", a malevolent but strangely impersonal and impervious spirit responds by building a wall to block off the speaker's view of her "delightful land." The speaker comforts herself with a

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<sup>65</sup>For an account which demonstrates complete aesthetic seduction by the presentation of women confined in Dante Gabriel's art, see David Sonstroem's *Rossetti and the Fair Lady* (Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1970.) For a discussion which begins to problematise the question of women "embowered" in Dante Gabriel's texts, see Pauline Fletcher's *Gardens and Grim Ravines: The Language of Landscape in Victorian Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 133-163.

<sup>66</sup>Crump, CP I 56-7.

nearby violet and lark, but mourns "...good they are, but not the best;/ And dear they are, but not so dear."

Demonstrated here is a shifting experience of being not only shut out, but hemmed in; the poem begins with the premise of orthodox "romantic" enclosure, and moves rapidly to reveal this first to be a traumatic and manifestly unjust exclusion, and then uses this disclosure to rewrite the experience of enclosure, now beginning to resemble incarceration. Thus Rossetti provides a radically deconstructed account of what enclosure means for the aesthetically sensitive woman; not only is the speaker denied access to what is rightfully hers, she is harshly punished for her protestations by having even the inspirational glimpse of her stolen and now forbidden territory taken from her. There is a claustrophobic sense of the narrator's vision and range being curtailed, of walls arising around her. Disbarred from her heritage, she is not even permitted the occasional reference to it, or memory of it; she has to make do with borrowed alternatives that are explicitly described as paltry and second-best.

What Rossetti ultimately experienced as a result of her association with the Brotherhood, was an unusually distinct experience of being displaced to the subordinate pole of explicitly gendered binary opposites: in literature, the figure of the female is often posed as muse to the male artist, inspiration for his creation and spur to his action. In the visual arts, this process becomes more vivid,

literally more obvious. The tension Rossetti experienced between being observed object, passive and voiceless, and herself an observer and creator, has been sensitively explored by Rosenblum, who feels that this provides a key to the frequent double perspectives in Rossetti's poetry -- what she identifies as the paradox of "seeing and being seen."<sup>67</sup>

The poem *In an Artist's Studio*<sup>68</sup> demonstrates that Rossetti was acutely aware of the problems associated with being both an artist and an artist's "vision," and she is relentlessly critical of Dante Gabriel's exploitation of his models, in this particular case Elizabeth Siddal:

One face looks out from all his canvases,  
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans;  
We found her hidden just behind those screens,  
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.  
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,  
A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,  
A saint, an angel; -- every canvass means  
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.  
He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,  
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:  
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;  
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

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<sup>67</sup>Poetry of Endurance 110.

<sup>68</sup>Crump, CP III 264.

This provides a clear exposition of the process of reverse transubstantiation whereby the living woman becomes the symbol that means all to the artist, at the cost of being reduced, cannibalised and finally eradicated in the process of "consumption." The text presents art (as found in this particular studio) as a series of fictions that project and illustrate the artist's needs and desires while obliterating the real identity and experience of the model. The impetus of the text doubtlessly draws on Rossetti's own experience of being represented and masked by artists to whom her image was a source of inspiration and energy, but who rendered her passive and mute in the process of painting her. The deliberately vague and ambiguous use of pronouns ("We found *her* ... behind those screens") suggests the blurring between the real woman and the one in paint; and there is an array of canvases, screens and mirrors behind which the subject is simultaneously endlessly masked (at times by a process of double layering: "*behind the screen*") and endlessly recreated and rendered object according to the artist's own projections. These are initially presented as a catalogue of female icons ("queen," "angel" and "saint"), then further diminished to the non-specific category of "A nameless girl," and relentlessly and finally reduced to the "same one meaning." This is a journey of devaluation in which the model is translated from individual to anonymity, and then simply into a useful aesthetic meaning or essence -- no longer even human. Rossetti's suggestion that the artist has vampirised his model, feeding from her face, that he

has somehow, to use Susan Gubar's phrase, "killed her into art,"<sup>69</sup> becomes a powerful indictment of her brother's usurpation of the role of artist.<sup>70</sup>

The potency of this critique of Dante Gabriel's exploitation of his female "muse" in the name of creativity is all the more extraordinary given the deafening silence maintained by Rossetti regarding her brother's far more flagrant breaches of social propriety. These Rossetti, usually morally fastidious to an extreme degree, somehow managed to ignore, or at least repress; yet she was the beholder who observed most acutely his *aesthetic*, rather than *moral* exploitation of the women in his life, herself included. On what seems to be the only occasion she made a tentative creative recommendation to her brother, she reminds him in a roundabout way of the artist's "responsibility in use of an influential talent," suggesting that really worthwhile works are those that "are worth celebrating and leave no sting behind."<sup>71</sup> Although this was ostensibly a reference to his

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<sup>69</sup>"'The Blank Page' and Female Creativity" in **The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory**, ed. Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 296. Gubar here develops her thesis, "The woman killed into art often bleeds into print," which translates well as a reading of Siddal's creative efforts. She not only wrote poetry (none of which, however, was printed during her lifetime) but doggedly, if unsuccessfully, attempted to establish an independent artistic style and career. Marsh in particular argues for Siddal's struggle to develop an artistic identity of her own, separate from that of Dante Gabriel's; see, for example, chapters 14 and 15 in **The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal**.

<sup>70</sup>Even more bizarre is the way this poem ominously prefigures what lay ahead for Elizabeth Siddal; Rossetti wrote it six years before her sister-in-law's death, and long before Dante Gabriel's celebrated portrait of his wife in *Beata Beatrix* transformed not only her likeness, but the actual event of her death, into a highly romanticised, even necrophiliac memorial.

<sup>71</sup>UBC, 9 and 14 August 1880.

poetry, it also translates to his paintings. On occasion, Rossetti was to read both as irresponsible variants of the process of rendering women constructs of art; she was also (as we shall see) to provide alternative readings and stringent critiques in her own texts.

### Brother the First: Dante Gabriel

This record of cross-referencing gender tensions leads inevitably to a reappraisal of Christina's relationship with Dante Gabriel. A careful reading of their history suggests full-blown sibling rivalry, all the more virulent for being largely covert. This began in childhood, when it was still permissible to acknowledge it, and in fact a record exists of Dante Gabriel's first critique of his six-year-old sister's writing: "The earliest thing which Christina wrote (or got someone to write for her) was ... a tale called **The Dervise** .... In the thick of the plot, it occurred to Christina that she had not yet given her dervise a name, so she interjected a sentence, 'The Dervise's name was Hassan', and continued his perilous performances. This outraged the literary sense of Gabriel...."<sup>72</sup> Later, the whole family used to write *bouts-rimés* (the highly specialised skill of writing a sonnet complete with correct scansion from a given set of rhyming words), each taking turns to provide the rhymes, and then seeing who could finish first; according to William Michael, Christina and Dante Gabriel used to compete specifically with one another to win these family competitions,<sup>73</sup> with Christina

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<sup>72</sup>Memoir xlix - 1.

<sup>73</sup>Jones 6.

once racing to finish in five minutes flat.<sup>74</sup> There is no doubt that she was alive to competition; in fact, it affected her so powerfully that she gave up the game of chess apparently because "it made her too eager for a win."<sup>75</sup> This suggests that by the time she reached her teens, she had internalised that it was somehow forbidden, or wicked, or both -- to "win"; although it could be said that she continued to "play the game" metaphorically with Dante Gabriel until his death. This, of course, was one way of dealing with latent sibling rivalry; Rosenblum describes how Rossetti set herself the task of learning "*not to be first*," of absorbing herself in the feminine world of her mother and sister, with "[n]ever, never, a word of bitterness that *he*, the talented, sensual, extroverted brother should be first. [author's italics]"<sup>76</sup> The struggle to relinquish her own claim to this position was a silent one, and in her mature years, she was cheerfully to deny feeling any pang at reading an account of their family in *The Pen*, which judged her skills as secondary to his: "Don't think me such a goose as to feel keenly mortified at being put below you, the head of our house in so many ways."<sup>77</sup> Like so many of Rossetti's statements, there is a needling suggestion of ambiguity;

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<sup>74</sup>Crump, "Eighteen Moments' Monuments: Christina Rossetti's *bout-rimés* Sonnets in the Troxell Collection" in *Essays on the Rossettis: Princeton University Library Chronicle*, ed. Robert S. Fraser, 23.3 (Spring 1972): 227. (210-229.) A reading of the mostly fairly sophisticated and certainly technically accomplished eighteen *bout-rimés* sonnets that Crump discusses in this article, leaves one astounded that Rossetti could have written them in an average time of seven minutes each.

<sup>75</sup>*Memoir* lxvi.

<sup>76</sup>"The Inward Pose" 85.

<sup>77</sup>FL 87.

in what ways was Dante Gabriel, the oldest Rossetti male, *not* the head of the family?

Dante Gabriel himself touched on the subject of competition only uneasily and indirectly; on hearing that during an absence from home Christina had taken up sketching (her efforts in her late teens and early twenties had been considered promising), he wrote to her, "...I find that you have been perpetrating portraits of some kind. If you answer this note, will you enclose a specimen, as I should like to see some of your handiwork. You must take care however not to rival the Sid [Elizabeth Siddal], but keep within respectful limits."<sup>78</sup> One wonders how much the injunction to "keep within respectful limits" was a subconsciously voiced warning not to encroach on *his* position as much as Siddal's.

Letters written to her publisher, as well as family letters, reveal an even more disturbing pattern. Dante Gabriel would write repeatedly to his sister's publishers, Macmillan (whom he did not share with her, his own publisher later being F. Ellis), insisting that the firm clear proof copies with him as well as with her. The following extracts from his letters are typical: "... I do not know whether Sheet M of *Goblin Market* is finally reprinted. If not, would you delay till you hear from my sister, as I am suggesting a <correction> change of line to

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<sup>78</sup>FL 21.

her...";<sup>79</sup> "I wish you'd always send a proof to me at the same time as to [Christina] and not print off till both are returned...";<sup>80</sup> "Would you let me have ... a complete set of the revised sheets ... as I want to see what corrections my sister has made in some instances...."<sup>81</sup> Even if one ignores the often peremptory tone, it is hard to explain all this away as solicitude when one notes his tendency to delay publication until he had persuaded Christina to make the changes he deemed necessary.

The above sequence of letters refers mostly to the publishing history of the **Prince's Progress** volume. A close study of the battle which ensued between Christina and Dante Gabriel over this anthology reveals the intensity of the struggle for power over Christina's creative and publishing processes, and it is worth assembling as much of the full story as possible from various fragments.

The saga begins with the pressure Dante Gabriel put on his sister to produce another volume similar to the successful **Goblin Market**. His motives can only be guessed at: we know that he had buried his own poems in his wife's coffin, as a gesture of remorse after her suicide, and both their immolation and the guilt he felt about her death were preying on his mind. Possibly his own sense of identity

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<sup>79</sup>British Library, 11 Jan 1865; RML 38.

<sup>80</sup>RML 49.

<sup>81</sup>RML 50.

as a poet sought vicarious expression: Florence Boos notes that between 1862 (the year of both Siddal's death and the publication of **Goblin Market**) and 1867, Dante Gabriel wrote no poetry whatsoever,<sup>82</sup> and it is tempting to speculate as to whether the double traumas of 1862 "blocked" him as a writer, and had him searching for other poetic projects in which he could participate. Perhaps, with his own future as a poet literally in the grave, he felt that he could nevertheless pursue a literary career by using his sister as a proxy; a mediated experience of a poet's successes, stage-managed by himself. As they shared the same surname, she could quite literally "make a name" not only for herself, but for him as well. It seems probable is that he had no conscious objection to Christina publishing successful poetry -- *as long as he could control every aspect of the process.*

Whatever his reasons, we can only surmise (as most of his letters to her were destroyed) that he began to put pressure on her to publish at a stage when her health was precarious. She was suffering a relapse into the bronchitis that so terrified the Victorians, haunted as they were by the spectre of tuberculosis, and the reference in her response to her poems becoming "remains" was no idle remark. She queries, "But why rush before the public with an immature volume? I really think not of communicating at all with Mac at present; but waiting the requisite number of months (or years as the case may be) until I have a sufficiency of quality as well as quantity. Is not this after all my best plan? If

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<sup>82</sup>"Dante Gabriel Rossetti" in **Victorian Poets After 1850** 226.

meanwhile my things become remains that need be no bugbear to scare me into premature publicity."<sup>83</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems that she capitulated,<sup>84</sup> as the next we hear, she is preparing the title poem of the **Prince's Progress**, writing to Dante Gabriel, "True, O Brother, my Alchemist still shivers in the blank of mere possibility; but I have so far overcome my feelings and disregarded my nerves as to unloose the Prince, so that <string> wrapping paper may no longer bar his 'progress.'"<sup>85</sup> William Michael notes that "It was Dante Gabriel who got her to turn a brief dirge-song into that longish narrative, as *piece de résistance* for a new volume,"<sup>86</sup> adding elsewhere that this was "almost the only instance in which she wrote anything so as to meet the views of another person."<sup>87</sup> The choice of topic was Dante Gabriel's, although ironically, this was to backfire when critics later identified him as the self-absorbed and faithless "hero" of the piece. The original was a six-stanza poem mourning the death of a princess, a figure-type (the fair

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<sup>83</sup>UBC, 1874?; RP 50.

<sup>84</sup>She never quite forgave Dante Gabriel for coercing her into writing before she felt ready, however: she was to remind him pointedly, "I hope after this vol. (if this vol. becomes a vol.) people will respect my nerves, and not hint for a long long while at any possibility of vol. 3. I am sure my poor brain must lie fallow and take its ease, if I am to keep up to my own mark." (RP 100.)

<sup>85</sup>UBC, 23 Dec 1864; RP 69.

<sup>86</sup>RP 68.

<sup>87</sup>PW 461.

but lifeless lady, whose dead body articulates a powerful reproach to the lover who came too late, or never before recognised her value) Rossetti had made her own. Her brother insisted that she rewrite it as an extended narrative imitative of *Goblin Market*, a suggestion more commercially than aesthetically astute. Rossetti was not at her most skilled when it came to sustaining a lengthy chronicle, not even one functioning as allegory. Her longer poems almost always take the form of dialogues or dialectically evolving characters or arguments, and reflect more interior modes of expression than the traditionally masculine epic of the quest settled on by her brother. Perhaps this "writing to order" explains the sense of what can only be described as drudgery that dogs this volume of verse (and which was to colour *The Prince's Progress* itself): with all the enthusiasm of an accountant, Rossetti notes that "Also I have computed pages of the altogether unexceptional, and find that they exceed 120. This cheers though not inebriates."<sup>88</sup> In the title poem, the original section (written five years previously) in which a Cassandra-like female attendant castigates the latecomer whose tardiness has been responsible for her mistress's death, was added as a dramatic conclusion: it is noticeably more fluent and compelling than the rest of the poem. Rossetti seemed to struggle with transferring her focus from the stricken Princess to the irresponsible Prince, and her confidence in articulating an assertive sage female narrative voice from the boudoir, relentlessly declaiming

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<sup>88</sup>RP 69.

another woman's suffering, is not matched any where else in the completed saga.<sup>89</sup>

If Dante Gabriel had envisaged a bloodless annexation after this early capitulation, he was wrong. The struggle battered down into trench warfare once Dante Gabriel's revisions of his sister's poems began. It is here that one is able to gauge just how pervasive (and invasive) his attempts to mould the poems were; some he discarded, and many he submitted to rigorous editing that, to judge from Christina's detailed defenses, often resembled a rewrite. We know that he suggested changes (sometimes dramatic) to the actual texts, replaced words, altered rhyme schemes, and rewrote lines,<sup>90</sup> but even with Crump's meticulous record of the editorial changes the poems underwent in between fair copy and printed piece, it would be difficult, given that only Christina's letters remain, to establish precisely which of these changes were as a result of his suggestions and insistence, and which were her own revisions. It is also hard to establish precisely what his criteria were, especially as his letters on the matter no longer exist; but to begin with, it would seem that his objections were overtly phrased as aesthetic ones.

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<sup>89</sup>Later Rossetti was to acknowledge that "...my Prince lacks the special felicity (!) of my Goblins;...." (RP 83.)

<sup>90</sup>This pattern of revision had also been in force during the preparation of the **Goblin Market** volume: on her fair copy of *L.E.L.*, Christina noted "Gabriel supplied the double rhymes with a brotherly request I should use them." This was clearly more of an order than a suggestion. (British Museum, 15 Feb 1859; quoted in Thompson 158.)

From the original material which deals with the **Prince's Progress** poems, and from other surviving criticisms Dante Gabriel made of her writing, it can be seen that certain patterns emerge from his apparently aesthetic critiques. Not surprisingly, they break down into different manifestations of gendered responses: certain topics, including any form of social critique and questioning, were not considered "suitable" for treatment by a woman; poems with a first-person narrative voice were assumed to be confessional when written by a woman, and were therefore deemed unacceptably indiscreet; and any vigour, ruggedness, or attempt to forge a "heroic" style constituted heretical aping of masculine forms.

Another frequently used means of opposition to certain poems was that they were imitative of those by other writers; while this was almost never true, it was hard to refute, and Christina had to resort to pointing out that she had never before read the works she was supposedly plagiarising. In response to an objection on these grounds to a stanza of *The Royal Princess*, she writes, "'Some to work on roads,' etc., is by so much one of the best stanzas that I am reluctant to sacrifice it. Is it so very like Keats? I doubt if I have ever read the lines in question, never having read the Isabella through."<sup>91</sup> In another similar defense, she writes, "Unless memory serves me false, Mrs Browning's My Heart and I does not clash with my Tomorrow: if it does, I could easily turn my own "heart" into

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<sup>91</sup>RP 99.

"wish" and save the little piece, for which I have a kindness."<sup>92</sup> The accusation of imitating the work of others does not immediately seem to be a gendered one, until we consider that women artists were assumed to be far more derivative, more reliant on external suggestion, in their creative tactics than male writers -- who were assumed to have easier access to the wellsprings of detached imagination.<sup>93</sup>

However, Dante Gabriel's critical criteria did not necessarily follow any consistent pattern, and were sometimes contradictory; he would urge his sister to broaden the topical scope of her writing, then object strongly to those poems which dealt with current social issues. Likewise, he would rank her with other poetesses, encouraging to her to write identifiably "feminine" work, then attack her when her poems resembled theirs, as can be seen from the letter cited on 186-187 below, in which Rossetti responds to the "taunt" of being compared to Isa Craig and Adelaide Proctor. To another similar charge, she was to riposte with sharp sarcasm: "'Bessie Parkes' is comparatively flattering; call me 'Eliza Cook' at once and be happy."<sup>94</sup> This points towards a particularly intractable double-

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<sup>92</sup>RP 81.

<sup>93</sup>See 224-5, 261 below.

<sup>94</sup>RP 88. Isa Craig, Adelaide Proctor, Bessie Parkes and Eliza Cook were sentimental poetesses of differing degrees of ability. It is hard to generalise about the common qualities of their works, or to establish the reasons Dante Gabriel held them in such low esteem; perhaps the popular appeal of their often florid or extravagantly "pathetic" poetry aroused his sense of aesthetic snobbery. It is also possible that although he was to attack *The Lowest Room* for its "masculine" tone, what disturbed him was its explicitly feminised narrative voice; possibly the

bind: Rossetti could not write "heroic" (i.e. masculine) work, not even if such projects were modelled on similar efforts by women poets, such as Barrett Browning; yet any of her writings which bordered on the "pathetic" or the "sentimental" styles fostered by the vigorous company of nineteenth-century poetesses, came in for denigration; she was charged with "bogeiism," "dreamings" which "smack of the old shop," "groans," and posturing "by the grave of buried hope" (which phrase, according to William Michael, was the "invention of Dante Gabriel as defining the tone of some of Christina's poems.")<sup>95</sup>

Rossetti's reactions to such critiques are a great deal more complex than is usually surmised, and usually run a gamut of often contradictory responses. Mostly she begins with effusive thanks (although occasionally irritation and even fury surface) but she generally goes on to wheedle, debate and occasionally resist outright. A careful analysis of the **Prince's Progress** correspondence demonstrates that roughly one-third of her responses involve capitulation; one-third firm rejection, and one-third compromise. A typical letter begins "Thanks many. On almost all points I succumb with serenity: now for remarks ... [and] meek divergence from your programme." Having moved as unobtrusively as possible from "succumbing on almost all points" to "divergence," she proceeds to

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one feature it shared with most of the writings by the poetesses deprecated above.

<sup>95</sup>FL 95.

outline a plan of alterations that corresponds to her almost deliberately mathematical allocation of surrender, resistance and compromise: "Meggan and Margaret [the names of the characters in the poem *Maiden-song*] are, I suppose, the same name: but this does not disturb me. Do you think it need? ... L.E.L. Adapted, your enormous improvement.... Margery has lost her 3 stanzas, and gained thereby. By the Sea has superseded A Yawn; for which, however I retain a sneaking kindness.... I incline to reinstate The Bourne, partly because Mac likes it and it is already in the Magazine, partly because I like it .... could you reconsider your verdict on Come and See? It is, to own the truth, a special favourite of mine; ... I have moreover altered what you call the queer rhyme. In short, I should like particularly to put this piece in .... If however after all you cannot bear it, would you rather see Easter Even put back?"<sup>96</sup>

Another similar letter, answering her brother's criticisms point by point, is particularly interesting for what it reveals not only of her methods of keeping her poems relatively intact, but of her understanding of what it meant to be a creative artist, with certain privileges attached. She begins with a by now familiar catalogue of compliance and resistance:

1. The *Prince* shall keep your modification of stanza 2 ... though 'I am I' is so strong within me that I may again modify details....

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<sup>96</sup>UBC, April 1865; RP 98-99.

2. **Lowest Room** please eject if you really think such a course advantageous, though I can't agree with you: still it won't dismay me that you should do so; I am not stung into obstinacy even by the Isa [Craig] and Adelaide [Proctor] taunt in which I acknowledge an element of truth....

*Under the Rose*<sup>97</sup> ... I meekly return to you, pruned and re-written to order. As regards the unpleasant-sided subject I freely admit it ... though I thought *U. the R.* might read its own lesson, but very likely I misjudge. But do you know, even if we throw *U. the R.* overboard, and whilst I endorse your opinion of the unavoidable and indeed much-to-be-desired unreality of women's work on many social matters, I yet incline to include within female range such an attempt as this: where the certainly possible circumstances are indicated merely in skeleton ..., where the field is occupied by a single female figure whose internal portrait is set forth in her own words. Moreover the sketch only gives the girl's own deductions, feelings, semi-resolutions; granted such premises as hers, and right or wrong it seems to me she might easily arrive at such conclusions: and whilst it may truly be urged that unless white could be black and Heaven Hell my experience (thank God) precludes me from hers, *I yet don't see why "the Poet mind" should be less able to construct her from its own inner consciousness than a hundred other unknown quantities.* [my italics]<sup>98</sup>

This articulation of her own sense of vocation, and confident claim to "the Poet mind" with its infinitely imaginative "inner consciousness" can hardly have been reassuring to her brother. This letter is also significant in its reiteration of what

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<sup>97</sup>Rossetti later changed the title of this poem, which deals with the dilemma of a mother first forced to reject, and then unable to acknowledge her illegitimate child, to *The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children*, for fear "of being thought to treat a serious subject lightly." Whatever her motives, Dante Gabriel apparently disapproved not only of the poem, but its new title; hardly surprising, considering the explicit rebuke it aims at the male sex, in shifting the responsibility for illegitimacy to the male parent. Troxell adds that "as he wished to change 'Husband and Wife' to 'Grave Clothes and Baby Clothes' ... Christina may have felt a natural distrust of his taste in titles." (TR 142.)

<sup>98</sup>TR 142-3.

we have already seen to be Rossetti's conscious choice of vocation, and self-conscious sense of identity as "Poet."

The confidence that must have stemmed from this awareness is occasionally glimpsed: Rossetti was not always defensive in discussing her poetry with her brother, in spite of the barrage of criticism; at times, her pride in her work is revealed notwithstanding the cautious humour with which it is couched: "Also (but this you may scorn as the blind partiality of a parent) my actual Prince seems to me invested with a certain artistic congruity of construction not lightly to be despised:... See how the subtle elements balance each other, and fuse into a noble conglom! [sic] ...."<sup>99</sup>

This certainty also surfaces in the aesthetic defenses she mounts over certain points of contention in her poems; she was to argue as earnestly for the retention of a single word as she was for an image, stanza or entire poem: "'Hairy' I cannot feel inclined to forego, as it portrays the bud in question;"<sup>100</sup> "Stanza 2 [of *Jessie Cameron*] I cannot consent to sacrifice; to my conception of the plot and character it really is essential: concede me that Stanza 2 with a good grace."<sup>101</sup> Even concessions were often negotiated with the same spirit of aplomb; arguing to

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<sup>99</sup>RP 77-8.

<sup>100</sup>UBC, March 1865; RP 88.

<sup>101</sup>UBC, 31 March 1865; RP 93.

keep certain elements of *The Prince's Progress* intact, she concludes with a flourish of arrogance: "...the obnoxious pipe having been immolated on the altar of sisterly deference, Now the moon's at full seems to me happily suggestive of the Prince's character. Of course I don't expect the general public to catch these refined clues; but there they are for such minds as mine."<sup>102</sup>

As this shows, compromises were often strategically negotiated. Rossetti developed a bargaining tactic in which she would offer to sacrifice one poem in order to keep another one that had occurred fraternal disfavour. For example, she would justify the insertion of a particular favourite that had incurred Dante Gabriel's disfavour by pointing out that she had capitulated on another poem he disliked. A typical example of this method reads, "...don't you think it will after all be well to put in Martyrs' Song and the terza rima ... and using these, I will soothe your feelings by suppressing my Captive Jew without a murmur. There's a bait!"<sup>103</sup> It was by this method that she managed to keep *Under the Rose* in the *Prince's Progress* volume; as well as setting out the passionately earnest "Poet Mind" defense quoted above, she innocently suggested that if Dante Gabriel really found this poem unsuitable, it could be replaced with *The Lowest Room*, a

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<sup>102</sup>UBC 3 March 1865; RP 81.

<sup>103</sup>UBC 6 March 1865; RP 83.

poem she knew he loathed: "...if you think the performance coarse or what-not, pray eject [*Under the Rose*], retaining *Lowest Room* and *Royal Princess*."<sup>104</sup>

Yet another bargaining strategy emerges; when arguing to keep a poem, or to resist changes to it, Rossetti would muster together any praise it had already been given, especially if this had been administered by a male member of Dante Gabriel's circle. This was often combined with the unassailable fact of publication: Rossetti would point out that poems under fire had been successfully previously published separately. The poem's prior existence in print and credentials would be set out -- any favourable reviews or remarks, status in anthologies, settings to music, and so forth would be paraded, and specific wording under attack would be defended on the grounds that it corresponded exactly with that which had been previously printed: "[Easter Even] is no particular liking of my own; but Mrs Scott told me that Scotus [William Bell Scott] was struck by it quite remarkably, in Mr Shipley's volume where it is";<sup>105</sup> "[The poems] have won a word of praise from Mr Cayley, and a review (I forget which) has been enthusiastic ....";<sup>106</sup> "the Judgement is already published in one of Mr Shipley's books: and Martyr's Song (in the same volume) was so honourably mentioned in a review we saw, that that seems to constitute

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<sup>104</sup>TR 143.

<sup>105</sup>UBC, April 1865; RP 99.

<sup>106</sup>UBC, 6 March 1865; RP 83.

some claim on reprint."<sup>107</sup> The retention of another poem is defended on the grounds that "it has been set to music very prettily by Alice Macdonald."<sup>108</sup>

Rossetti also made frequent use of a rear-guard action to protect the authenticity of her work: the author's license to alter the final proofs. She writes "Amongst your ousted, I recognize sundry of my own favourites, which perhaps I may adroitly re-insert when publishing-day comes round. Especially am I inclined to show fight for at least one terza-rima, in honour of our Italian element."<sup>109</sup>

With or without a sentimental or patriotic excuse, this was Rossetti's favourite strategy for reclaiming her poems, and this explains why the battles over who was ultimately responsible for proof-reading were so bitterly loaded.<sup>110</sup> (She was to pointedly remind Macmillan on another occasion, "...Of course I like to correct my own proofs, as heretofore: an author's privilege I cling to.")<sup>111</sup> This also

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<sup>107</sup>UBC, 3 March 1865; RP 81.

<sup>108</sup>UBC April 1865; RP 99.

<sup>109</sup>UBC, 23 Dec 1864; RP 69. This method of resistance included evading criticism on the grounds that it was too late to change the material: "I don't think your critique on Sheet M can profit me this edition, as surely M must already be printed off: but thanks all the same. Foreseeing inutility, I have not grappled with the subject by comparing passages. (N.B. Nerves)." (RP 73.) In this case, the anticipated printing had not yet taken place.

<sup>110</sup>Brother and sister vied uneasily over taking charge of proof-reading: Dante Gabriel is quick to point out to Macmillan, "There are still by some misadventure several faults of print in the volume. One occurring at page 70 in a very beautiful poem is well worth a cancel in my opinion.... I am writing my sister about it." (RML 54.)

<sup>111</sup>RML 107.

explains Dante Gabriel's suspicious insistence that Macmillan send proofs to him as well as to Christina, "author's privilege" notwithstanding.

Even on topics both had initially agreed on, Rossetti resisted writing to order: "He's not precisely the Alchemist I prefigured, but thus he came and thus he must stay: you know my system of work..."<sup>112</sup> Dante Gabriel was able to coax her into at least compromising on this section, a part of the title poem he wanted written to certain specifications. In spite of her compliance, Rossetti next wrote, "Do you know, I don't think it would have done to write the Alchemist without the metric jolt, however unfortunate the original selection of such rhythm [sic] may have been: but we will file and polish."<sup>113</sup>

When it came to new ideas concerning the content of her poems, Rossetti was able to be more assertive about refusing to comply than she was during the editing process; when Dante Gabriel enthusiastically recommended that she include a tournament in the Prince's adventures, Rossetti was adamant in her refusal: "How shall I express my sentiments about the terrible tournament? Not a phrase to be relied on, not a correct knowledge on the subject, not the faintest impulse of inspiration, incites me to the tilt: and looming before me in horrible bugbeardom stand 2 tournaments in Tennyson's Idylls. Moreover the Alchemist

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<sup>112</sup>RP 75.

<sup>113</sup>UBC, Feb 1865; RP 77.

according to original convention took the place of the lists: remember this in my favour, please. You see, were you next to propose my writing a classic epic in quantitative hexameters or in the hendecasyllables which might almost trip up Tennyson, what could I do? Only what I feel inclined to do in the present instance, plead goodwill but inability."<sup>114</sup>

She was equally firm, if carefully tactful, in her rejection of his next suggestion -- that she include Elizabeth Siddal's poems in her own volume. Initially keen on the idea (until she read the poems), she intimated that the proper place for a dead wife's works were in a collection of his own, thus resisting the gender categorisation that lumped women's poetry together, and insisting that the marital link took precedence over the gender grouping. ("I think with you that, between your volume and mine, their due post of honour is in yours.")<sup>115</sup> She went on to point out delicately that Siddal's poems were marred by relentless morbidity, and not suitable companions for her own: "... their tone is to me even painfully despondent: talk of my bogieism, [sic] is it not by comparison jovial?"<sup>116</sup> Moreover, her choice of Siddal's best poem might just have been too

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<sup>114</sup>UBC, 10 Feb 1865; RP 77.

<sup>115</sup>This is another example of extremely fancy footwork; she phrases her opinion as if it is in agreement with his (which it wasn't); and she cheerily ascribes to him a volume of poetry that did not exist outside of Siddal's coffin; as has already been pointed out, Dante Gabriel was writing no poetry whatsoever at this stage.

<sup>116</sup>RP 78. This is interesting in the light of Rossetti's awareness that her own writing was often charged with being morbid and gloomy -- although Siddal's poems were far more so. It is possible that Christina rejected her dead sister-in-law's poems simply because they did not

uncomfortably pointed ("Perhaps III [*Dead Love*] is my own favourite, piquant as it is with cool bitter sarcasm;...")<sup>117</sup> and Dante Gabriel dropped the subject.

Certainly Rossetti found her brother's editing procedures time-consuming, and in an attempt to speed him up, resorted to the "bugbear" she had originally scorned: "One motive for haste with me is fear lest by indefinite delay I should miss the pleasure of thus giving pleasure to our Mother, to whom of course I shall dedicate: suppose -- but I won't suppose anything so dreadful; only knowing her intense enjoyment of our performances, I am keenly desirous to give her the pleasure when possible."<sup>118</sup> Rossetti, who could be extremely manipulative at times, here resorts to a double strategy: the picture of a mother proudly delighting in her child's achievement and the far more dramatic threat of the possibility of her own death, are both invoked to shame Dante Gabriel into speedier co-operation. However, her brother remained apparently impervious.

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meet her own high standards; while Siddal's poems are an absorbing and important contribution to the history of Pre-Raphaelite women's poetry, they are nowhere near as skilful as Rossetti's own.

<sup>117</sup>RP 76. The poem, which begins "Oh never weep for love that 's dead/ Since love is seldom true" (*Poems and Drawings of Elizabeth Siddal*, ed. Roger C. Lewis and Mark S. Lasner [Wolfville, Nova Scotia: Wombat Press, 1978] 10) is a rather cynical meditation on the fickleness of love, and the hypocrisy of eternal pledges of devotion. It resembles the traditional complaint of the courtly lover, with the interesting twist that the narrative voice is implicitly feminised; and Rossetti's response may have alerted Dante Gabriel to the possibility that this poem (and others by Siddal) would no doubt be read as biographical reflections on their relationship.

<sup>118</sup>RP 74.

Once Rossetti considered her poems ready for publication, this meant moving into a zone that we have already seen to be particularly loaded in terms of power and authority. In this particular case, she was especially vulnerable: for health reasons, she was temporarily stranded in Hastings, and to speed up proceedings, she asked her brother to send her manuscripts on to Macmillan for her. However, far from facilitating the process, Dante Gabriel was unable to let the poems go, suggesting an interminable list of revisions to Christina, who was growing increasingly impatient: "Please make your emendations, and I can call [sic] them over the coals in the proofs: only don't make vast changes as 'I am I'... Meanwhile, is not Vol. 2 at last ripe for transmission to Mac? I feel a pardonable impatience. Of course I am setting to work chewing the cud you serve to me; but we won't keep back Vol. 2 for the unapproached result."<sup>119</sup>

In the same letter, she went on to probe the real issues underlying the struggle for control (one of the rare occasions she did so) although she was careful to coat the sting of truth with sycophantic flattery: "Do you know, I do seriously question whether I possess the working-power with which you credit me; and whether all the painstaking at my command would result in work better than -- in fact half so good as -- what I have actually done on the other system. It is vain comparing my powers (!) with yours (a remark I have never been called upon to make to anyone but yourself)...." However, Rossetti is being evasively coy here;

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<sup>119</sup>UBC, March 1865; RP 88-9.

both she and Dante Gabriel must have been acutely aware that their work had been compared in the public sphere (where his lack of publication meant that she had the distinct advantage), and that she was invariably judged the better and certainly the more prolific poet. It is worth noting, however, that it is Dante Gabriel himself who forces this comparison, and thus the confrontation. This letter then acts as a demonstration of how, by insisting on his superiority, she attempted to defuse any sense of overt competition between them, a method she was to use on more than one occasion. Several years later, writing to F.S. Ellis (her brother's publisher) after the success of Dante Gabriel's 1870 volume, she was to announce "We are not all D.G.R.s.";<sup>120</sup> a claim which underlines that she in no sense wished to *duplicate* his particular career or brand of success.

Meanwhile, "chewing the cud" for the **Prince's Progress** volume had eventually come to an end, and the completed poems were at last submitted to Macmillan, who was then able to prepare the proofs. These were then sent on to Dante Gabriel, at his insistence, and once again their journey came to a halt. It can be surmised that after a month or two, Macmillan began pressurising him to return them, prompted by Christina's anxiety to complete her own proofreading before a projected family trip to Italy in May, 1865. Now the battle for who retained final responsibility for submitting the poems entered a new phase. First, Dante Gabriel wrote to Macmillan, "I will send on the M.S.S. [proofs] to you in a day

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<sup>120</sup>RML 90.

or two at furthest."<sup>121</sup> Next followed the delaying tactics partially quoted above; eventually, in response to what was no doubt an urgent petition by Macmillan, Dante Gabriel explained that the reason for the hold-up was that he was waiting for Christina's response to some changes he had suggested: "...You will get the MSS almost immediately, but I am awaiting a reply from my sister to one or two points proposed to her."<sup>122</sup> These "one or two" points involved major changes to six poems. Rossetti's reply begins surprisingly dramatically: "After six well-defined and several paroxysms of stamping, foaming, hairuprooting ... it seems time to assume a treacherous calm: and in this (comparatively) lucid interval I regain speech." She goes on to debate the changes to each poem in turn, concluding: "After all which, I shall hope the MS. WILL go to Mr. Macmillan; but if that enterprizing [sic] publisher has been prodding you, it is di proprio moto, not instigated in word by me...; of course, IF the proofs could be got through before our start in May, it would be charming."<sup>123</sup> This letter is an extraordinary combination of rage and anxious cajolery. Rossetti makes it clear that there is a "paroxysm" of fury for every poem tampered with; yet she also evades blame for any pressure coming from Macmillan. The twin impulses of anger at her brother's interference, and real fear of angering or alienating him, sit uneasily together; she writes both the

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<sup>121</sup>RML 46.

<sup>122</sup>RML 48.

<sup>123</sup>UBC, 31 March 1865; RP 93-4. William Michael solved the problem of this letter by insisting on reading it as "jocular".

imperative and the qualifying words "will" and "if" in capitals, each underlined twice, graphically presenting the conflict between her strongly felt desire to control her own work, and her more conventional impulses to avoid open confrontation, and to flatter and coax her brother into cooperation. It is perhaps inevitable that the letter which opened with a bang, should end with a whimper: "... it would be charming."

However, it was not simply the text of his sister's poems that Dante Gabriel wished to govern: he would insist enthusiastically on illustrating his sister's works, but then miss deadline after deadline, somehow unable to complete the drawings he had promised to execute. The *Prince's Progress* was to be no exception. Months after Christina had finally been able to check the proofs for publication, Dante Gabriel wrote to Macmillan on the 26 April, "I am very sorry to be the cause of any delay with the book now, but fear it will be impossible for me to do the 2 blocks [woodcuts for illustrations] before some time towards the end of May...."<sup>124</sup> Not one, but ten months were to pass before the first woodcuts were ready, during which time he undertook some rather half-hearted research. William Bell Scott tells the tale of how Dante Gabriel visited the maze at Hampton Court in order to do sketches for the background of his portrait of the waiting Princess, but refused to risk entering the maze, and simply took the map he had been given and reproduced it in his drawing of the Princess gazing

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<sup>124</sup>RML 49.

from her tower.<sup>125</sup> (This explains the curiously two-dimensional quality of the maze framed in her window.) Meanwhile, Macmillan's patience was finally drawing to an end; he went ahead and printed the volume as soon as he received the first two designs from Dante Gabriel, without waiting for the promised third one.

Rossetti at times suspected her brother of urging her to write material that fitted artistic projects he had in mind, in other words, reversing the illustration process: at the end of the letter quoted above in which she refuses point-blank to include a tourney-scene as part of the Prince's adventures, she queries, "have you a design of a tournament by you?!"<sup>126</sup>

Also worth mentioning is the habit Dante Gabriel had of deviating from the text in his illustrations; after seeing his drawings for *The Prince's Progress*, Christina wrote to him: "Do you think that two small points in the frontispiece might advisably be conformed to the text? -- to wit, the Prince's 'curly black beard' and the Bride's 'veiled' face...."<sup>127</sup> However, Dante Gabriel did not make these specific changes; instead, he redrew the Prince covering his face with his hand, and filled in so much shadowing around the form of the Princess that she became

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<sup>125</sup>TR 146.

<sup>126</sup>UBC, 10 Feb 1865; RP 78.

<sup>127</sup>RP 83.

effectively invisible, as well as surrounding her with six mourning women who feature nowhere in the poem.<sup>128</sup> Christina responded rather sarcastically to what she no doubt saw as yet another delaying tactic: "Never mind the Prince's beard, if you please, though I won't record his waste of time in shaving...."<sup>129</sup> As it would presumably have been easier to add a beard than to redraw a hand, one wonders why the illustrator did not give way to the author, unless he was determined to impose his artistic hallmark on the poem. There are possibly more personal reasons; several readers, including members of the Rossetti family, picked up the parallels between the tragic tale of the Princess who died while waiting for her dilatory Prince to come, and Dante Gabriel's relationship with the deceased Siddal. He himself had written to his mother on the occasion of his marriage, "Like all the important things I ever meant to do -- to fulfil duty or secure happiness -- this one has been deferred almost beyond possibility. I have hardly deserved that Lizzie should still consent ... but ... I trust I may still have time to prove my thankfulness to her. The constantly failing state of her health is a terrible anxiety...."<sup>130</sup> Himself the possessor of a 'dark curly beard', he

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<sup>128</sup>Several modern critics have remarked on these tactics with approval: Ainsworth writes, "Through not only his counsel and his editing but also his drawings for the poem, [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti made it partly his own....The amplification of the psychological moment by the addition of six mourning attendants leading to the princess's bed is [his] own dramatic invention. Again the poem and the pictorial image complement each other...." ("The Prince's Progress": Works from 1863 to 1871" in Ainsworth, **Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Double Work of Art** 75.)

<sup>129</sup>TR 142.

<sup>130</sup>Letters of DGR I 363.

perhaps shrank from identifying himself visually as the Prince. That Christina was aware that personal identities could be read into the drawings is made clear in the letter where she points out that the stern woman restraining and rebuking the Prince, who has arrived to find his prospective bride on a bier, has her own face: "Surely the severe female who arrests the Prince somewhat resembles my phiz."<sup>131</sup> The possible symbolic readings here are even more dramatic; in spite of the dogged blindness that Rossetti adopted towards Dante Gabriel's personal life, and her determination to extend uncritical filial affection, he may well have felt that the rectitude of her life was a reproach to him. An interesting footnote is added by William Michael's anxious gloss on Christina's letter: he insists that there is little resemblance between his sister and the stern woman who is shown physically pushing the Prince away in the illustration (the similarity is actually striking), thereby both denying the possibility of any graphically presented conflict, while revealing his alarm at its disclosure.<sup>132</sup>

Dante Gabriel's almost obsessive need to control all aspects of the publication of this particular volume is manifested even in trivial details: one letter to Macmillan begins, "I enclose a sketch for the binding of *P's P.*, & shall be glad to choose the colour. I rather incline to white, only in such case the cloth must be

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<sup>131</sup>UBC, Mar 1865; RP 83.

<sup>132</sup>RP 83.

strained on whitened boards."<sup>133</sup> Later, he was to insist, "I've got to get the binder to make some slight changes in the cover. That is, all the lines must be made half their present thickness ... and the gold balls turned into rings."<sup>134</sup>

Finally, his concern extended to business and financial details: with what seems to be, for once, a genuine impulse to help, Dante Gabriel wrote to Macmillan, "I asked her [Christina] the other day what business arrangement she had made with you as to this new volume, & found that nothing had been said on that point. I therefore got her leave to say a word. Now couldn't you be a good fairy & give her something down for this edition,-- say £100? You know she is a good poet, & some day people will know it. That's so true that it comes in rhyme of itself! She's going to Italy and would find a little moneybag useful..."<sup>135</sup>

Although the claim that people would know Christina's worth in the future is a little peculiar, considering the ongoing success of the **Goblin Market** poems, it is possible that his motives were less questionable than usual. Nevertheless, he managed to cause the usual misunderstandings and aggravation. One cannot help doubting the veracity of Dante Gabriel's claim that he had "got his sister's leave" to speak: Christina, financially scrupulous to a fault, would never have sanctioned her brother's customary method of doing business, which was to beg a large

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<sup>133</sup>RML 50.

<sup>134</sup>RML 54.

<sup>135</sup>RML 51.

advance for projected work. In an earlier letter in which she anticipates that he will undertake business matters for her, she states clearly that "...my wish [is] for the same terms as Goblin Market."<sup>136</sup> Her response to the ensuing confusion, although full of her customary polite thanks, is crisper than usual: "I am truly sorry for annoyance brought on you by your brotherliness in helping me as to business matters. Mr. Macmillan writes under a complete misapprehension as to my Italian-tour-fund .... However, now I will write direct to him and set matters as straight as words can set them: I am perfectly willing to let vol. 2 appear on the same terms as vol. I., and very likely these terms are both what suit him best, and what in the long run will do at least as well for me as any others. So please wash your hands of the vexatious business; I will settle it now myself with him." The use of the adjective "vexatious" clearly has a wider ambit, and she uses the appearance of ignorance to underline Dante Gabriel's tactless assumptions, as well as to make a pointed remark about procrastination: "What made him combine my Italian holiday with the proceeds of vol. 2. I know not: it may have been a guess founded on (apparent) probability, or he may have supposed that my motive in wishing to get through the proofs before setting off was to bag the money, -- of course it was merely not to delay the publication."<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup>These were the following: the publisher would bear the full costs, with no risk to the author, and any profits would be shared 50/50 between publisher and author. (UBC, 3 March 1865; RP 82; RML 45.)

<sup>137</sup>RML 51-2; TR 146-7.

Christina herself collaborated to a certain extent with what amounted to sabotage, both in the case of the **Prince's Progress** and other works, writing to Macmillan (although obviously under pressure which caused her considerable anxiety): "...Now that my vol. seems really on the eve of coming out, Gabriel urges me to ask for an Errata (needful, alas!) and for two Cancels. Let me join my request to his....";<sup>138</sup> "...But Gabriel writes me that I ought to beg a cancel of the titlepage:... I don't know how to ask this of you.... What shall we do? Cannot something be done to remedy these oversights and soothe my anxiety? Do please reassure Yours in trouble...."<sup>139</sup> Occasionally, there is a moment's relief: "Of course Sheet M has been printed off, so I will not trouble you on account of Gabriel's suggestion....",<sup>140</sup> but not for long: "Secondly for the old sore: you know the woodcuts cannot be ready by Xmas? I hardly know how to ask you now to keep back *P. P.* after your 'few days' advertisement; yet if you agree with me in thinking Gabriel's designs too desirable to forego, I will try to follow your example of patience under disappointment."<sup>141</sup> Even here, the equivocation of her last phrase reveals exasperation, even anger, as she attempts to endure what she plainly names as disappointment.

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<sup>138</sup>RML 55.

<sup>139</sup>RML 103-4.

<sup>140</sup>RML 39.

<sup>141</sup>RML 56.

Although Dante Gabriel did not interfere to this extreme extent with the writing and publishing of any of her other volumes,<sup>142</sup> the basic methods he employed remained consistent until his death, although during the periods of mental and physical ill-health that marked the last years of his life, he slackened his anxious grip on his sister's writing. Nevertheless, Christina found it necessary to placate him on one occasion when William Michael saw a collection in preparation before he did: "William saw the sonnets before you, merely because calling one day he downright asked to look at book, [sic] -- a nervous moment for me, though I braved it out."<sup>143</sup>

This letter refers to **The Pageant and other Poems**, a volume she did her best to present as a *fait accompli*, putting it together almost stealthily: the first we hear of it is when she admits, in the course of a letter to Dante Gabriel concerning a small legal infraction on the part of Macmillan, that she is "hugging hopes of getting together before long enough verse for a *small* fresh volume" and is therefore in "[no] mood to alienate the staunch Mac ...."<sup>144</sup> This time she left nothing to chance, and certainly did not risk allowing either of her brothers to sour her working relationship with Macmillan: she conducted the necessary negotiations with her publisher herself, announcing to her brothers with a degree

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<sup>142</sup>He certainly made little or no attempt to direct her religious writings, apart from grumbling about the amount of time and energy she devoted to these.

<sup>143</sup>FL 94.

<sup>144</sup>FL 83.

of pride that Macmillan had been flatteringly eager to publish her poems without even asking to see them. To Dante Gabriel she wrote, "I am quite pleased about Macmillan, because he said *yes* without asking to see the M.S. or making a single enquiry as to either bulk or subject"; and to William Michael, "At last I took the plunge and sent in some poems to Macmillan, who before he saw accepted them,...."<sup>145</sup> Other than this communication, the poems were almost surreptitiously prepared for printing; only after the publishing process was almost complete did she re-open the subject with Dante Gabriel, writing "I am glad you are feeling 'curious' about my volume, and I hope that now any day your curiosity may be gratified."<sup>146</sup>

Rossetti did her best to isolate her work from her brother during these years perhaps in part because Dante Gabriel's deteriorating health and mental trauma were making him not only increasingly erratic and unreliable, but especially over-sensitive to writing that could even remotely be taken as a reflection of his personal circumstances. For example, he grew near-hysterical when Robert Browning sent him an affectionately inscribed copy of *Fifine at the Fair* as a gift. Dante Gabriel read into it an obscure personal attack on himself, and had to be restrained from enacting reprisals.<sup>147</sup> Given that there was a distinct tendency

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<sup>145</sup>FL 93.

<sup>146</sup>FL 94.

<sup>147</sup>Weintraub 186-7.

to read the works of both Rossettis, but especially Christina's, as personal and emotional records, and that several of her poems touch uncannily on the raw nerves exposed by Siddal's death, Rossetti perhaps felt that too much risk, or even cruelty, might be entailed in sending probing works to a tormented man of extremely uncertain mental health.

Nevertheless, in spite of their protracted battles over her poems, Dante Gabriel seldom seemed to actively discourage his sister from writing; if anything, he nudged her into action when he considered her output too small, or to be too much concentrated on religious works. Rather than attempting to suppress her work, he did his best to supervise and control the poems she produced, editing, censoring, and renaming them; and once (although no doubt inadvertently) even leading her to destroy her work -- the fate of **Folio Q**, a prose tale that was lamented by William Michael as one of her best works.<sup>148</sup> He managed to leave his imprint even on her most frivolous or trivial works; some of the *bout-rimés* sonnets she scribbled down in pencil have revisions in ink, in his handwriting.<sup>149</sup> As we know, he also insisted on illustrating her works (or supervising and

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<sup>148</sup>He pointed out that it could possibly be read as blasphemous; after that, it was inevitable that Rossetti would destroy it. (Weintraub, **Four Rossettis** 116.)

<sup>149</sup>Crump, "Eighteen Moments' Monuments," photographs facing 210-11.

criticising the illustrator)<sup>150</sup> and consistently subjected them to his own interpretations.

Illustration was of course a form of interpretation in itself, and Dante Gabriel's drawings for *Goblin Market*, which have garnered praise from modern as well as Victorian critics, provide useful pointers to his reading of the title poem. In spite of the insistence by Gail Goldberg that his drawings provide valuable critical insight into his sister's poem,<sup>151</sup> it must be noted that his drawings of the goblins themselves -- which portray them as animals -- are very different to the sketches his sister submitted as guidelines, which show the goblins as recognisably human notwithstanding their bestial qualities. In his notes to the poem, William Michael points out that "[t]he authoress did not appear to represent her goblins as having the actual configuration of brute animals. It was Dante Rossetti who did that in his illustration to the poem.... Christina ... draws several of the goblins, -- all very slim agile figures in a close fitting garb of blue; their faces, hands and feet are sometimes human, sometimes brute-like, but of a scarcely

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<sup>150</sup>After Christina had taken the manuscript of *Sing-Song* from F.S. Ellis to Routledge, who published it, she wrote to the latter: "I hope the early period at which you think S.S. may be ready will not entail too great a pressure on Mr [Arthur] Hughes [the Pre-Raphaelite painter who had previously illustrated some of her works.] My brother, writing about the present proof, seems to think some of the illustrations may have suffered from speedy execution: but those at p.p. 93, 94 I particularly like." (TR 157.)

<sup>151</sup>She writes, "His illustrations to *Goblin Market* and *Prince's Progress* suggest that Rossetti's revision of those works may indeed have been more than a textual one. A close examination of these designs reveals that they succeed as richly developed interpretive illustrations of Christina's poems ...." (145-6.)

definable type."<sup>152</sup> In the poem, the goblins are presented as shrunken, alien and animalised little *men*, scaled down to the level of small animals -- garden pests and creepy crawlies -- and thus robbed of stature and strength, while imbued with sly and repulsive qualities. By drawing them as grotesquely enlarged vermin, rats and toads blown up to human size, Dante Gabriel both renders the goblins neuter in gender, and reverses the fantasy process whereby the male goblins shrink to dwarf-like proportions. It is also worth noting that the virtuous sister who flees temptation has dark hair (like his sister), even though the text describes them both as golden-haired. Likewise, his picture of the sleeping sisters (modelled perhaps rather inappropriately on Fanny Cornforth, but at least now both blonde) prettifies the intense and redemptive quality of their physical connection conveyed by the text into sentimental soft-focus porn; one of the sisters is drawn with a lacy shoulder-strap slipping from her voluptuous curves; an erotic marker that suggests a masculinist revision of Rossetti's presentation of potent female sexuality.

Dante Gabriel repeatedly attempted to guide her choice of subjects, usually suggesting that she limit her subject matter to certain acceptable and uncontroversial topics, such as nature: "...some [verses] which I remember vaguely, about 'dreaming of a life long ill' (etc. etc. *ad libitum*), smack rather of the old shop. I wish you would try any rendering either of narrative or sentiment

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<sup>152</sup>PW 460.

from real abundant Nature, which presents much more variety ... than all such 'dreamings'...."<sup>153</sup> Christina, however, while able to respond to nature both aesthetically and as a inspiration for poetry, nevertheless refused to appropriate the Romantic credo of idealising Nature;<sup>154</sup> in a letter she wrote to William at about the same date, she wittily rewrites the patriarchal convention of poetic response to Nature: "The other day I met a splendid frog. He was of a sort of sere yellow spotted with black, and very large. Were you in this lovely country, you could hardly fail to gush poetry; with me the case is altogether different. The trees, the deer, the scenery, and indeed everything here, seems to influence me but little, with two exceptions, the cold, and the frog. The cold can never fail to interest a well brought-up Englishwoman; and the frog possesses every claim on my sympathy. He appeared to be leading a calm and secluded life."<sup>155</sup> The eccentricity of selecting self-identification with a frog over the more imposing Romantic topics of deer, trees and scenery demonstrates Rossetti's rare talent for parody; further deflation is effected with her reduction of a natural scene (resonant with aesthetic potential, and identified as having the capacity to evoke

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<sup>153</sup>Letters of DGR I 162.

<sup>154</sup>This is hardly surprising, considering the difficulties that the female poet faced in presenting Nature, with which she was symbolically blurred. Mermin, summarising Homans, remarks that "nineteenth-century women writers fear and resist identification with nature: nature for women is not the maternal other, in relation to whom the Romantic poet defined his poetic identity, but -- as the mother -- also a possible self." ("The Damsel, the Knight" 70.)

<sup>155</sup>Princeton, 14 Jan 1850.

"gush[ing] poetry" from the male artist) to the element of weather -- to which her response is one of etiquette rather than aesthetics.

Dante Gabriel also apparently advised that she broaden the scope of her poems to include contemporary issues, as a remaining fragment of her reply suggests: "...It is impossible to go on singing out-loud to one's one-stringed lyre. It is not in me, and therefore it will never come out of me, to turn to politics or philanthropy with Mrs Browning: such many-sidedness I leave to a greater than I, and having said my say, may well sit silent."<sup>156</sup> Considering that Dante Gabriel objected strenuously to any reference to social issues in his sister's poetry, the imputation that he suggested such topics is rather odd; William Michael obviously thought so too, as he explains in his annotations that his brother had "conveyed to his sister a suggestion, made by Mr Stillman, that she should write some more poems, partaking ... of 'politics or philanthropy.' Such would not have been [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti's own recommendation: as he was more than commonly opposed to the use of such matter as a subject for poetry."<sup>157</sup> Yet Christina

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<sup>156</sup>FL 31. It is interesting to try to establish what works of Rossetti's, if any, prompted Stillman's suggestion; it is possible that this was in response to her caustic jingle *Counterblast on Penny Trumpet* (which remained unpublished until after her death, but which was very likely known among her circle) on Gladstone's Parliamentary manoeuvres, which suggested that all parties concerned might benefit from using a little "common-sense." (Crump CP III 338-9, 505.)

<sup>157</sup>This reflects an implicitly gendered stance; what William Michael does not need to explain is that such topics were considered unsuitable as subject matter for poetry by *women* writers. Both Rossetti brothers themselves wrote extremely partisan sonnets on the political upheavals in Europe.

followed her refutation with the words, "All this is for you, not for Mr Stillman, ....," implying that it was her brother's advice she was resisting. (In an amusing twist of contrariness, it was almost immediately after this repudiation that she wrote two passionately partisan poems under the heading *The German-French Campaign 1870-1871*, although she was careful to note that "[t]hese two pieces, written during the suspense of a great nation's agony, aim at expressing human sympathy, not political bias" -- a flagrantly disingenuous disclaimer given their blatantly pro-French slant.)<sup>158</sup>

Another method Dante Gabriel used as a means of controlling his sister's writings, especially after his difficulties with Macmillan in trying to stage-manage the publication of the *Prince's Progress*, was to recommend that she change publishers; he insisted that she should not only leave the "staunch Mac," but sign a contract with his own publisher, F.S. Ellis. After what seems to have been a great deal of pressure, Christina did so, a move all her biographers, including the more conservative ones, identify as disastrous. Packer and Battiscombe both acknowledge that Dante Gabriel could not have given worse advice if he had tried.<sup>159</sup> Apparently his motives were to "concentrate our forces" by collecting together "a little knot of congenial writers,"<sup>160</sup> under his leadership and

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<sup>158</sup>Crump CP I 214.

<sup>159</sup>Battiscombe 136; Packer, *Christina Rossetti* 277.

<sup>160</sup>RML 72.

guidance. Once again, as with the Brotherhood and the "Jovial Campaign" at Oxford, a vision of camaraderie was to be a means of establishing his own pre-eminence.

Rossetti meanwhile presented Ellis with two projected works, both of which earned her brother's approval, not only because of their uncontroversial status, but because they represented genres considered to be particularly suited to the prescribed notions of feminine endeavour. One was a book of verses for children, the other a collection of prose works, and Dante Gabriel reported with satisfaction to Swinburne: "My sister is now going to [Ellis] ... with a book of 101 Nursery Rhymes (illustrated by herself!) ... -- admirable things, alternating between the merest babyism and a sort of Blakish wisdom and tenderness. I believe no one could have written anything so absolutely right for babies but herself. She will also have a volume of prose tales ready soon. The principal one (modern, of the most matter of fact simplicity) I have not yet seen, but hear at home that it is remarkable."<sup>161</sup> This demonstrates that he was happy to praise her work, even to admit to its "Blakish wisdom and tenderness" -- once it was written for an audience of children. It seemed that he also felt comfortable with the idea of her writing prose, another form of artistic expression, along with children's literature, that was both more appropriately "womanly" and more mundane than poetry. The success of female authors in novel-writing had opened

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<sup>161</sup>Letters of DGR II 797.

up this area of creativity as one permissible and respectable for women, while the status of prose work was simultaneously lowered, precisely because it was associated with female authorship. (That Rossetti was herself aware of lower ranking of prose in the creative hierarchy, is revealed in a letter she wrote some years later, which begins, "Sad to say, my little book **Seek and Find** is exclusive prose: yet I flatter myself some of it is that prose which our Italian half inclines us to indite....")<sup>162</sup> When Christina had previously had a short story (**Hero: A Metamorphosis**) published (it was later included in **Commonplaces**), Dante Gabriel had written to her, "Your **Hero** is splendid .... You ought to write more such things."<sup>163</sup> He was also to write two successive letters to the artist Alice Boyd, describing the title-piece of her prose volume: "Christina ... has sent me a prose tale.... It seems by a mere first glance very good, I think. It is called **Commonplace**, and is the most everyday affair possible...."; "I yesterday read .... **Commonplace**, rather in the Miss Austen vein I judge, and quite worthy of its title, but very good and far from uninteresting."<sup>164</sup>

Nevertheless, although he was content for Christina to write "worthy" if unexciting prose, his sense of poetic aesthetics caused him some moments of conflict, as is shown in a letter where he compliments her on the genteel aspects

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<sup>162</sup>FL 80.

<sup>163</sup>Letters of DGR II 586.

<sup>164</sup>Letters of DGR II 818.

of **Commonplace**, but nevertheless inserts a postscript in which he admits that her real gift is for poetry. It is also interesting, especially in light of the ongoing editorial battles surrounding her poems, that he makes very few changes to the text: "I have read **Commonplace** ... and like it very much. It certainly is not dangerously exciting to the nervous system, but it is far from being dull for all that, and I should think it likely to take.... I noted one or two trifles on the opposite blank pages for your consideration -- mere trifles.... P.S. -- Of course I think your proper business is to write poetry, and not **Commonplaces**."<sup>165</sup>

Ellis published both **Commonplaces** and Dante Gabriel's first volume of collected poems more or less simultaneously; the former was to be Christina's only critical failure, whereas the latter was received with rapturous reviews and sold like hot cakes. (It must be said, however, that the reviews were orchestrated with military precision months in advance; Dante Gabriel's paranoia about criticism meant that his friends undertook to write as many of the reviews as possible. Likewise, public fascination with the mysterious "bad boy" of the Pre-Raphaelites, who refused to exhibit his paintings, as well as rumours about the exhumation of the grave, were probably partly responsible for the rush to buy his poems.) Meanwhile, **Commonplaces** was so financially unproductive that Rossetti, who had prudently anticipated such an eventuality, was able to extract both herself and her volume of children's verses, **Sing-Song**, from Ellis. After a tactful

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<sup>165</sup>Letters of DGR II 826-27.

interval, she returned to Macmillan. However, even given that her only failure coincided with her brother's triumph, the problem with their now both being published and successful poets, was that comparisons could be made.

It was apparently Ruskin who put what must have crossed everyone's minds into words. According to Ford Madox Ford [Hueffler's] memoirs of the period, "Mr. Ruskin pooh-poohed and discouraged Christina Rossetti's efforts at poetry.... to the end of his days [he] considered that Christina damaged her brother. It was not good for Gabriel's fame or market, he considered, that there should be another Rossetti in the field." Ford gallantly goes on to describe his indignation, "...when I consider these utterances and this attitude I am filled with as hot and as uncontrollable an anger as I am when faced by some more than imbecile argument against the cause of women's franchise."<sup>166</sup> Troxell has also noted that Ruskin's "attitude towards Christina was so odd that it seems to require some explanation,"<sup>167</sup> and reiterates Ford's charge. Certainly Ruskin's stance on women artists made the Rossetti brothers look emancipated; his patronising vision of women as queens of the domestic sphere, but subservient to the point of servility outside of it, was familiar to Victorians, as were the details of his own disastrous marriage, which his wife eventually had annulled on grounds of non-consummation. Less well-known are the details of his interference with Elizabeth

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<sup>166</sup>Memories and Impressions 61.

<sup>167</sup>TR 30.

Siddal's life<sup>168</sup> and his patronising advice to Georgiana, the talented wife of Edward Burne-Jones, that she "keep [her] rooms tidy, and baby happy" before considering any artistic work, and then only if it were copies of her husband's material.<sup>169</sup>

Ironically enough, when Christina was first struggling for recognition, Ruskin's dismissal of her work angered and disappointed Dante Gabriel. Ruskin's evaluation of Christina's poetry was one of his more glaring blunders; he considered it unpublishable because of what he perceived to be its metrical "faults", writing, "[The poems] are full of beauty and power. But no publisher ... would take them, so full are they of quaintnesses and offenses. Irregular measure (introduced to my great regret, in its chief wilfulness by Coleridge) is the chief calamity of modern poetry.... Your sister should exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public like. Then if she puts in

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<sup>168</sup>Although Ruskin's patronage was generally regarded as a matter for congratulation, not commiseration, the combination of Ruskin and Dante Gabriel was a pernicious one, not only for Rossetti, but for Siddal. In a visit to their studio in her absence, Ruskin made Dante Gabriel an offer for her entire portfolio; the latter, whose first painting had sold ten years previously for eighty guineas, enthusiastically suggested twenty-five pounds. The deal was struck at thirty pounds, in spite of the fact that Siddal herself was not consulted, and that among the paintings sold was one which she had promised to William Allingham. (Marsh, **PreRaphaelite Sisterhood** 72-3.) Against her will, and after much prompting from Dante Gabriel, she agreed to a yearly allowance (which, of course, her fiancé would share) from Ruskin in exchange for everything she painted. This had all the disadvantages that she foresaw; Ruskin dictated her movements to her, and at times insisted that she *stop* painting for the sake of her health. A typical set of instructions read: "...you must try to make yourself as simple a milkmaid as you can, and only draw when you can't help it .... What you do you are to send to me." (Quoted in **PreRaphaelite Sisterhood** 76.)

<sup>169</sup>Quoted in Marsh, **PreRaphaelite Sisterhood** 207.

her observation and passion all will become precious. But she must have the form first."<sup>170</sup> This criticism is particularly inept in view of Rossetti's technical virtuosity; it is possible that Ruskin did not appreciate her complex and innovative use of metre and rhyme, but hard to understand how or why he judged it to be flawed.

Dante Gabriel, whose fraternal and family feelings led him to initially deplore his sister's devaluation as a poet, even while her successes aroused his sense of competition, apparently responded hotly, and then complained to William Michael, "[i]t is with very great regret and disgust that I enclose a note from Ruskin about Christina's poems -- most senseless, I think. I have told him something of the sort in my answer." He added resourcefully, "I have some idea (with Christina's approval) of sending the *Goblins* to Mrs Gaskell, who is good-natured and appreciative, and might get it into the *Cornhill* or elsewhere. Would she like this done? Or perhaps Allingham might help."<sup>171</sup> Dante Gabriel's concern is doubtlessly genuine; what is interesting that he discusses the matter with William Michael rather than with Christina herself, somewhat infantilising his sister in the process.

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<sup>170</sup>Letters of DGR II 391.

<sup>171</sup>Letters of DGR II 391.

Certainly before she became not only successful, but famous and well-respected as a poet, he encouraged her to write and publish with what seems to be unquestionable earnestness: in another letter written before the **Goblin Market** volume was to make her a household name, he writes:

I saw Macmillan last night, who has been congratulated by some of his contributors on having got a poet at last in your person, and read aloud your lively little Song of the Tomb [*Uphill*] with great satisfaction. He is anxious to see something else of yours ... so I think you might do at least as well with him as with Moxon [another publisher]. I told him of the poem Ruskin has, and he would like to see it if it does not go into *Cornhill*.... He asked whether you had much ready in MS., and I told him there was a good deal of poetry. I wish you would make a collected copy in printing-form of all the most available, and allow me to give an opinion beforehand as to which should be included.... I would come down one evening for the purpose; or rather, if you would send me the books ... I would read them through, and consult with you afterwards. It seems to me that the only plan -- so large a section of your poems being devotional -- would be to divide the volume into two distinct sections. What do you think?<sup>172</sup>

It is easy to see why so many biographers and critics have praised Dante Gabriel for his "tireless promotion" of his sister's works; however, it must be noted that Dante Gabriel's methods of control are well-established, even at this early stage. *He* undertakes to present her work to the public, read it aloud, choose the publisher and publications, select, organise and categorise the poems. After she had established herself as a respected poet, he was less quick to leap to her

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<sup>172</sup>Letters of DGR II 389-390.

defense, as he did when Ruskin dismissed her talent, although even more eager to direct her progress; her rare mid-career failures invited instructions rather than sympathy, and he was especially impatient with her attention to religious writings. (A response from Christina on this topic is typically both diplomatic and dogged: "... thanks ... for your care for my fame. I don't think harm will accrue from my S.P.C.K. books, even to my standing: if it did, I should still be glad to throw my grain of my dust in the religious scale.")<sup>173</sup>

It is interesting to note how his letters to his sister change in tone as she became successful; the early ones are full of enthusiasm for her projects, even if they are sometimes patronising; the ones written in the years succeeding the publication of *Goblin Market* are a blend of pride at her accomplishments and competitive apprehension: writing to his mother, he says, "The other day I sent Christina this month's *Fraser*, which contains a review of her in conjunction with Miss Ingelow, Mrs Browning and Miss Proctor. The palm among living poetesses is given to Christina on the whole.... The article is affected in style but intelligent in criticism, though the author rather lames his own praise of good poetry by winding up the article with an atrociously bad poem of his own...."<sup>174</sup> Dante Gabriel knew that Christina was considered by many to be the best living

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<sup>173</sup>FL 92. One notes that some of his objections were apparently couched in terms of protecting her fame and career; it seems that the messages she received from him were extremely mixed.

<sup>174</sup>Letters of DGR II 518-9.

"poetess"; he also knew that she did not consider herself contained by this gender-bound category within the larger group of poets, which meant that she might well one day be compared with male poets, himself included, by someone whose judgement could not be "lamed" with ridicule.

It was in fact partially Rossetti's insistence, as we have seen, on segregating herself artistically from the "lady poets," and establishing herself as a poet rather than a poetess, that made her brother so uncomfortable with her success. As a poetess, she would have belonged to a different literary realm, separate from his, and lower in status; he could have continued to both encourage and patronise her, without being forced to acknowledge her as a literary peer. After he had established himself as a successful poet, nearly a decade after Christina had done so, he became more, not less belligerent about her writing; criticism often took the place of encouragement, and some of his letters have a quality of aggression that suggests the near-panic of their writer, the most notable of these being his attack on *The Lowest Room*, discussed below.

In spite of the combination of discouraging influence and competitive circumstance, and while continuing to appear biddable, Rossetti was at times surprisingly assertive in defence of her poetry. The whole family participated in commenting on and criticising her works, but Dante Gabriel's were almost always the most strongly and intemperately voiced objections, and also the only ones to

which she responded with defence and debate. He consistently criticised what he considered "masculine" in her poetry, whether it be the "metric jolts" of the sometimes rugged rhyme scheme in the title poem of *The Prince's Progress*, or the longing for heroic opportunity expressed by the rebellious sister in *The Lowest Room*. The letter he wrote his sister dealing with the latter and including other criticisms is often cited, but seldom investigated, and it seems necessary to examine it closely. He writes:

... the first of the two poems [on the Franco-Prussian war] seems to me just a little echo-ish of the Barrett-Browning style, fine as the verses and genuine as the motive must be plainly discovered to be. Here, however, it is only in cadence that I notice something of the kind. A real taint <of false>, to some extent, of modern vicious style derived from the same source<sup>175</sup> -- what might be called a falsetto muscularity -- always seemed to me much too prominent in the long piece called "The Lowest Room." This I think is now included for the first time and I am sorry for it. I should also have omitted "No thank you John" (& perhaps the preceding piece [*The Queen of Hearts*] also.) The "John" one has the same genesis more or less, and everything in which this tone appears is utterly foreign to your primary impulses. The Royal Princess has a good deal of it unluckily, but then, that poem is too good to omit. <The "Iniquity" poem is tinged somewhat with it in reality [illegible].> If I were you, I would rigidly keep on guard on this matter, if you write in the future, and ultimately exclude from your writing everything (or

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<sup>175</sup>Both William Michael and Dante Gabriel claim that Barrett Browning is the polluting source; however, Christina seems to assume that the evil influence Dante Gabriel deplored had to be Jean Ingelow; in her reply, she points out that she had written *The Lowest Room* before Ingelow's work (of which Dante Gabriel did not approve) became widely published, thus denying any influence.

almost everything) so tainted. I am sure you will pardon my speaking so frankly.<sup>176</sup>

Here one is struck by the viciousness (to use his own word) of Dante Gabriel's attack: he implies that the assuming of a masculine style by a woman poet is both depraved ("taint") and ludicrous ("falsetto"). He also assumes, insultingly, that Christina did not write in this fashion of her own cognition, but was somehow swayed or influenced against her "primary impulses" by the pernicious influence of another woman poet (of course) who had dared to venture on to masculine turf. Thus he relegates his sister to the status of a child, easily misled, who must needs be warned to "rigidly keep on guard" against straying from the straight and narrow. He assumes too, that he knows (better than Christina herself) what exactly her primary impulses are,<sup>177</sup> and, most audacious of all, he says to a

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<sup>176</sup>UBC, 3 Nov 1875; **Letters of DGR** III 1380. William Michael includes an abbreviated and somewhat toned-down version of this letter in his notes to Rossetti's **Poetical Works**, adding his own penny's worth: "Christina, on receiving this letter did not acquiesce in its purport, but later on seemed a little more inclined to do so. However, she always retained *The Lowest Room* in succeeding editions. To me it hardly seems that my brother's view can be pronounced correct. The real gist of *The Lowest Room*, i.e. the final acceptance, by the supposed speaker, of a subordinate and bedimmed position -- is clearly the very reverse of 'falsetto muscularity'; if anything of that kind shows in the earlier part of the poem, it shows only to be waved aside." (460-1) His own comments act as a different kind of silencing; his method of dealing with the poem is to "wave aside" its subversive and gender-transgressive features, and to frame them in a far more didactic reading than the poem (originally called *A Fight over the Body of Homer*) itself suggests.

<sup>177</sup>This corresponds with Russ's observation of the tendency by patriarchal writers and scholars to regard women writers as somehow unconscious or acquiescent vehicles through which the creative voice bursts forth, rather than active, deliberate and rational crafters of their art. (21-22.) Instead, they are servants of the Muse, frail vehicles through which she speaks. It is clear that Dante Gabriel subscribed to this view regarding his sister; like many of his contemporaries, as well as later critics, he saw her as a medium, rather than a creator, of poetry. William Michael began this trend in Rossetti criticism by describing his sister's means

published, prolific and successful poet, "*If you write in the future....*" Whether or not this was the subconscious voicing of a hope that she would *not* again take up her pen, we cannot tell; but it certainly implies doubt about the constancy of his sister's vocation.

In spite of the virulence of this attack (or perhaps because of it), Christina clung to the poem, responding to these and other criticisms with a mixture of deference, submission, stubbornness, self-deprecation and determination. What is especially interesting is that she had already tried to include *The Lowest Room* in the *Prince's Progress* anthology, but it had been ousted by Dante Gabriel. This time, she was firmer: the following letter, a typical catalogue of defence and placation, states: "I am truly sorry if I have judged amiss in including The Lowest Room; which, however, I remind you, had already seen light in Mac's Mag. To my thinking it is by no means one of the most morbid or personal of the group: but I am no good judge in my own cause."<sup>178</sup> The battle over *The Lowest Room* was not the only issue at stake; there were Dante Gabriel's further complaints about

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of composition as "artless" and casual, as we shall see below. One of several more recent critics to make the same misjudgment is Stuart Curran: he berates Rossetti's poetry for its lack of "mental prowess" and "shallow[ness]", and for "fall[ing] back on pretty language, the bane of so many women poets", but nevertheless acknowledges that she is at least a "spontaneous" poet, who "never labours the magic out of her lyrics." ("The Lyric Voice of Christina Rossetti," *Victorian Poetry* 9.3 [Autumn 1971]: 292, 299.) Both Harrison and Rosenblum have subsequently demonstrated the deliberate "labour" with which Rossetti composed her poems, and Crump's variorum edition of the poems has finally put her craftsmanship beyond doubt.

<sup>178</sup>FL 55.

the inappropriate tone or impropriety of the other poems he listed. Presumably because they were written in the first person, he feared they might express, or be read as expressing Christina's own personal thoughts or experiences, rather than those of a fictionalised narrator (a remarkable double standard for a poet who, as we know, made use of a first-person narrator to describe an evening with a prostitute in his poem *Jenny*.) Rossetti continued the defense of her poems with calm determination: "As to 'John,' as no such person existed or exists, I hope my indiscretion can be counted the less: and Flora (if that is the "next" you allude to) surely cannot give deep umbrage. The latter I hardly think as open to comment as My Secret: but this last is such a favourite with me that please don't retort "nor do I." Further remarks, if any, when we meet..." In her next letter, however, she recants (significantly, *after* the offending poem has been printed, and the damage done): "After impervious density, I begin to see light (I think) on your objection to The Lowest Room; and I already regret having inserted it, you having scale-dipping weight with me. Bulk was a seductive element. However, as to date, it was written before my first volume appeared: so certainly before Miss J[ean] I[ngelow] misled me any-whither. I still don't dislike it myself, but can lay no claim to impartiality."<sup>179</sup>

We have some idea of Dante Gabriel's uncensored response to his sister's publishing a poem against his wishes: in a letter to Watts-Dunton, he

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<sup>179</sup>FL 55.

expostulates: "That vile trashy poem 'The Lowest Room' I told her was only fit for one room viz. the bog; but after all having got it out of my ken she has printed it, though I made her leave it out of the *P's Progress* vol. So now the world will know that she *can* write a bad poem."<sup>180</sup> Although this critical response is probably his most blatantly hostile -- it is certainly the only occasion on which Dante Gabriel condemns a poem of his sister's as (literally) excrement - - other factors are also involved: Dante Gabriel's boast that he had been able to censor the *Prince's Progress* volume, and his possessive anxiety for his sister's reputation, a projection perhaps of his own paranoia about the potential hostility of the critical "world" out there, both demonstrate the extent of his need to control and orchestrate her work.

It is worth noting that this pattern of fraternal criticism and defense was entirely one-sided; Christina discussed Dante Gabriel's poems with him only to congratulate and praise. Her role was consistently supportive, and at times, she resembled a research assistant: she proofread his work, looked up sources,<sup>181</sup> investigated material which was sometimes abstruse and challenging (the UBC collection has her transcriptions and translations, from the Greek, of accounts of

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<sup>180</sup>Letters of DGR III 1390.

<sup>181</sup>She was actively helpful in hunting down props for painting as well; in one letter to their mother, Dante Gabriel asks, "... have you or Christina any recollection of an eligible and accessible brick wall? ... I suppose Christina's pictorial eye will by this time have some insight into the beauties of brick walls -- the preferability of purplish prevailing tint to yellowish, etc." (Letters of DGR I 155-156.)

Socrates dancing, which Dante Gabriel had apparently requested) and suggested a rare grammatical correction.<sup>182</sup> Once or twice she professed not to understand some of his poems (probably a tactful way of circumventing their erotic or agnostic qualities), but there was never any attempt to criticise or edit.

This is particularly significant in light of the eager and detailed letters, requesting close feedback, which accompanied the poems Dante Gabriel sent to William Michael and others; he was far more anxious to show his poetry to his peers and enlist their advice than Rossetti ever was. In spite of the traditional insistence on her indebtedness to his editorial help, and her own acknowledgements of his input, there is no letter of hers that compares with, for example, this one sent by Dante Gabriel to William Michael:

I suppose ere this you got the new proofs [of the forthcoming 1870 volume] .... You will see that much is due to your labours in them. However I have been at work on them still further now .... In the additional verses to *Nocturn* I have made the following change .... I think you will agree with me that this is preferable ....

However I have been worrying about what you said of the obscurity of the opening of this poem and have now put it thus .... Surely this makes all plain, does it not?

Now there is another question.... I want your opinion as to whether it would not be better to cut this stanza out? .... What is your view? ....

About *Nuptial Sleep*. I enclose the proof before the last to ask you about the MS. alteration at the bottom, which is now in

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<sup>182</sup>Dante Gabriel's responses were casual: "Thanks about 'ye' [Christina had pointed out it that it was incorrectly used in the objective case] but I don't think it matters much." (*Letters of DGR II* 394.)

print. Above ... I have written a further variation *underlined*. Do you think this or the present printed one best? .... Then as to 'chirped at each other'.... is it clear ...? Would it be better 'kissed at each other' or more likely 'moaned to each other'? Or does any other phrase occur to you? Or do you like it as it stands?

*Venus* sonnet has ... 'apple' ... placed awkwardly between two vowels .... Does any change suggest itself? In the new sonnet *Parted Love* the last line is declared by Scott to be too violent. Do you think so? It occurs to me to say 'And thy feet stir not, and thy body endures.' Do you like this better? ....<sup>183</sup>

This greatly abbreviated letter, one of many similar ones that Dante Gabriel enthusiastically dashed off, sometimes on an almost daily basis, demonstrates that he had no qualms whatsoever about asking for advice from a male sibling (in spite of the fact that he had no poetic skills), or from other male friends, such as William Bell Scott -- who was himself not exactly known for poetic genius. Yet he wrote no comparable letter to Christina that we know of, and in fact discussed very little concerning his poetic career with her; the information he passed on was no more than one would usually write in the course of a duty letter to a spinster sister. This becomes peculiarly revealing when one considers that the above letter, and many others like it, were written *after* the successful publication of Rossetti's first two volumes of poetry. Practically the only close associate that Dante Gabriel did not consult in the course of preparing his works for publication, was the one eminent and published poet in the family.

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<sup>183</sup>Letters of DGR II 738-740.

Another factor which has misled critics has been Rossetti's apparent appreciation of her brother's advice; nevertheless, in their battles by correspondence, Rossetti's repeated insistence that her resistance to Dante Gabriel's stream of instructions in no way mitigates her gratitude for his concern and efforts on her behalf, often smacks of the lady protesting too much. What was more, she mollified her brother with particularly extravagant or affectionate gratitude ("A thousand thanks ... for your care for my fame"; "You are a kind old thing")<sup>184</sup> when responding to advice she had no intention of taking. A similar doubleness shows itself in her response to Dante Gabriel's final objections and suggestions for change to the *Prince's Progress* volume, which combines gracious thanks with both an adversarial note and the echo once more of the authority of the "Poet": "You confer favours as if you were receiving them, and I am proportionally thankful: but what says the Poet? -- Feelings there are, etc. -- So I need not aim at self-expression. I hope the peccant "word or two" may yet be tackled between us...."<sup>185</sup> Even when Rossetti is apparently sincere, a trace of ambiguity is discernible: she annotated a copy of *Goblin Market* with the words, "My brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti substituted the greatly improved title as it now stands. And here I like to acknowledge the general indebtedness of my 1st and 2nd vols to his suggestive wit and revising hand."<sup>186</sup> Here, it is the sense of physical

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<sup>184</sup>FL 92; TR 142.

<sup>185</sup>UBC, 6 March 1865; RP 83.

<sup>186</sup>Crump, CP I 234.

intervention -- the "revising *hand*" -- that hints at Rossetti's mixed feelings. However, it is perhaps significant that this was written in December 1893, when he had been long dead and she knew herself to be dying. A space of over ten years, together with the recognition of near-imminent death possibly softened the memories of her tenacious struggles to preserve her poems from being taken over.

Time brought subtle changes; during the last decade of his life, Dante Gabriel grew by degrees mentally and physically debilitated, and increasingly deeply addicted to choral hydrate. Meanwhile, with her reputation firmly established, (and in spite of the traumatic hiatus of the disfiguring illness with which she was struck in 1870), Rossetti grew more certain in asserting the worth of her poems as she grew older. Although she never attempted to disrupt the mentor relation which Dante Gabriel had established, continuing throughout his life to report to him, she slowly withdrew from his direct influence. She presented her work less promptly, and demonstrated more confidence in the quality of individual poems, increasingly resisting editorial changes:

Please remark that I have adopted your omission of 'sun of' and your rearrangement: and wink at my mouse and mole from whom I cannot wean myself.... Now my little piece satisfies myself, and I shall be very glad if it goes under your auspices to the **Athenaeum**, though I would have spared you further trouble by acting for myself now that I am old enough and tough enough.... As to my mole and his fur, perhaps you have not noticed the fact of his skin having no right or wrong way of the grain (as, for instance, a cat's has): it grows like the biasless nap of velvet, and as a naturalistic fact this is explained as adapting him to his career of grubbing to

and fro. I hope this specialty is well enough known for my couplet to convey its drift; at any rate I will run the risk and enlarge the public mind....

I overlooked 'Benignantly hot.' -- Do you know, I like it, -- and do not want to be exclusively 'dreamily sweet,' -- nor fancy at all that the rest is so.<sup>187</sup>

Nevertheless, while the struggle may have become muted, that it still was a competitive battle is made clear by her defensive choice of imagery: "You shall see one or two pieces more; but the one I sent you is a favourite of my own, and I doubt if you will unearth one to eclipse it: moreover, if I remember the mood in which I wrote it, it is something of a genuine 'lyric cry,' and such I will back against all skilled labour. I will either hand you my infinitesimal budget of pieces to-morrow, or I will send it you afterwards: but please respect my thin skin and do not start the subject in public ...";<sup>188</sup> "I have thickened my skin and am ready for some fraternal stone-throwing...."<sup>189</sup> This last phrase is particularly significant not only for its suggestion of violence, but for its subtle allusion to the idiom "people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." This seems to suggest not only a covert recognition of the aggressive quality of Dante Gabriel's advice (as well as the continuing, if masked, competitiveness from which it originated), but also that his own work might not necessarily stand up to equally close scrutiny.

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<sup>187</sup>FL 66.

<sup>188</sup>FL 65.

<sup>189</sup>British Museum, 6 March 1877. William Michael deleted this particular sentence from the published version of the letter.

Nevertheless, in teasing out the history of Dante Gabriel's efforts to regulate his sister's career and canon, it seems important to clarify that I by no means wish to suggest that his revisions to Rossetti's poems were necessarily deleterious, or deliberately used as a wicked ploy to lessen their worth. When I read parts of this chapter to a gathering at the University of Fairbanks, the several poets in the audience pointed out that circulating poems, making comments and suggesting changes and revisions, were common poetic habits. I certainly do not wish to conjure up a picture of Dante Gabriel fiendishly poring over his sister's poems, inserting banal and conventional words and rhymes, toning down striking imagery, and the like. Some of his microscopic editorial changes may well have been useful to Rossetti, as she herself suggests in a letter to an anonymous clergyman who questioned her about her methods of writing: "In poetics, my elder brother was my acute and most helpful critic."<sup>190</sup> Even if we suspect this claim to be loaded, given the double edge to the word "acute," it is not the only one of its kind, and Rossetti probably found at least some of her brother's editorial suggestions useful.

What is far more problematic is that, firstly, this process (as we have seen) was not reciprocal. This discrepancy clearly reveals itself as gendered, given that she established herself as a recognised poet before he did, and that the age difference was minimal; he was only two years older than her. His decision not to consider

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<sup>190</sup>Princeton, 1888; quoted in Thompson 157, 278.

her as a potential source of input becomes even more marked when we consider his eager solicitation of poetic advice from his brother and other Pre-Raphaelites. Secondly, and possibly more serious, Dante Gabriel's more sweeping methods of control -- rejecting poems wholesale, prescribing topics or trying to get his sister to write to order, attacking works he disliked -- may well have had a devitalising impact on the aesthetic qualities of her works. Certainly this seems to be true of the title poem of the **Prince's Progress**. Thirdly, and most significant of all, it seems that if his influence was experienced as a constraining effect on her creativity, this would be a critical factor in leading her to write defensively and even cryptically. In her case, the textual dissonance and subversion that seem characteristic of nineteenth-century women writers, become especially complicated by specific fraternal coercion, as well as the usual larger social and gender constraints; thus the role of her brother as a competitive editor becomes a significant factor in decoding the "doubleness" of her texts.

Finally, the very specific strategies which Rossetti developed and articulated for defending both her texts and her own authority as a poet, call for scrutiny. As we have seen, Rossetti made frequent use of the mythology and mystique associated with the "lyric voice," poetry as spontaneous utterance, in order to protect and defend her poems. This has a certain irony, considering that her poems were in fact so often the result of "skilled labour." It was nevertheless a

powerful and respectable defense; it also invoked the authority of the "Poet mind" once more.

A more assertive strategy she used more than once in either forestalling fraternal editing or defending her poems from criticism, was her habit of reverting to the phrase "I am I";<sup>191</sup> an unanswerable claim to and reminder of her poetic autonomy and authority, and the integrity of her own creative voice. Rossetti's "I am I" creed has all the more impact when the historical struggle that women writers have experienced with laying claim to the lyric "I" is considered. Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of Rossetti's works stresses the "extraordinary difficulty of conceiving and sustaining living poetry in a woman's body," and attributes this largely to the problem of subjectivity; "... the lyric poem acts as if it is an effusion (in the nineteenth-century sense) from a strong and assertive 'I,' a central self that is forcefully defined, whether real or imaginary.... the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself as a *subject* ...."<sup>192</sup> In the light of the disqualification of the feminine from the subject position, Rossetti's profession of *double* subjectivity is all the more startling and impressive, especially when it is considered that she is foremost a lyric poet. This most placatory and supposedly modest woman becomes almost god-like in her claim to status as a Bard, a member of the secular priesthood of poets, both entitled and compelled to

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<sup>191</sup>For examples, see the discussion of the writing of the *Prince's Progress*, 186 and 196 above.

<sup>192</sup>*Madwoman in the Attic* 549.

perform her art. Her magisterial claim suggests both the authority and implacable mystery of Jehovah's self-revelation in the Old Testament: "I am that I am." The story that Virginia Woolf tells of Rossetti's attendance at a tea-party, where she "paced forward into the centre of the room" and "announced solemnly, 'I am Christina Rossetti!'"<sup>193</sup> before retiring once more, is generally believed to be apocryphal; the reason given being that such a display would have been entirely uncharacteristic behaviour on her part. Whether or not the incident really took place cannot be established; but it becomes more credible as a parable of Rossetti's insistence on her own subjectivity, with its reiteration of the phrase "I am" followed by self-identification, uttered by a woman who had rejected for good the pseudonym assigned her in youth.

In fact, it could be argued that Rossetti's double subjectivity was an evolved form of her understanding of the "Poet mind." We know that the words "I am" would have hallowed or iconic resonance for someone who read the Bible as assiduously as Rossetti,<sup>194</sup> and we have also established that she understood the "Poet mind" to have the capacity for an infinite and gender-transcendent imaginativeness (and thus creativity), especially equipped for the discernment of

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<sup>193</sup>"I am Christina Rossetti" in *Collected Essays* 56.

<sup>194</sup>In *Face of the Deep*, she was to write: "Concerning Himself God Almighty proclaimed of old: 'I AM THAT I AM,' and man's inherent feeling of personality seems in some sort to attest and correspond to this revelation: I who am myself cannot but be myself...." (Quoted by Linda Marshall, "What the Dead Are Doing Underground: Hades and Heaven in the Writings of Christina Rossetti," *Victorian Newsletter* 72 [Fall 1987]: 59.)

moral truths. Given that as a very young woman, she was so overtly identified as a potential creator of godliness, in fact the Mother of God herself, it is likely that her "conception" of the "Poet mind" permitted a unique inversion of the humble and virginal role in which she was enshrined: by stating "I am I," she could partake of God's authority, and in possessing the "Poet mind" she could share in the *creative* mind of God.<sup>195</sup> Such an understanding, even if never articulated, would have concentrated a literally awesome nucleus of artistic integrity and power within the persona of the apparently quiet and unremarkable Christina Rossetti.

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<sup>195</sup>I am indebted to Uli Knoepflmacher for his thoughts on this point.

### Brother the second: William Michael

Although not guilty to the same degree as Dante Gabriel, and possessed by a somewhat more straightforward desire to be of help to his sister, William Michael also contributed a distorting lens to the presentation of Rossetti's life and works, which has impacted subsequent scholarship. His chief role was exercised only after her death; during her life, he made no strong objections to her poems, and, if anything, was somewhat silent on the subject of her career. Although he was quick to lend aid in business matters pertaining to her work,<sup>196</sup> he chose to concentrate more closely on managing his brother's career, as well as introducing the works of Walt Whitman to the English reading public, and re-editing collections of poetry by Shelley and Blake. However, once she had died, he found himself the "curator" of the lives and works of both his more talented siblings, with sole responsibility for deciding what material to publish, and how to present it. This was to some extent a defensive undertaking; rumours had been flying for some time about the more scandalous aspects of Dante Gabriel's life which had been concealed from general scrutiny, and although the public was somewhat less avidly curious about Christina Rossetti, there was a similar sense that secrets lurked about her life. It was against this backdrop of gossip and speculation that

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<sup>196</sup>For example, he undertook to investigate what seemed to be a business irregularity on the part of Macmillan, who was selling a reprint of *Goblin Market* to offset the costs of a less successful edition of the *Prince's Progress*. (RML 119.)

William Michael undertook to present his own corrective and sometimes censored versions of their lives and letters.

The growing demand for information about the Rossettis and their circle meant that William Michael had a ready market for collections of the correspondence he had accumulated or inherited. Exercising the degree of latitude permitted Victorian editors that has already been noted, he selected many of Rossetti's letters for publication in various collections, notably **The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti and Rossetti Papers**. Some of these were carefully whitewashed, causing an early reader, Virginia Woolf, to remark suspiciously of **Family Letters**, "Unless Mr Rossetti has taken care to omit such passages, there are no disputes, no reflections, no discussion of her own character, or of the characters of other people."<sup>197</sup> An examination of these collections shows that he replaced a certain amount of material with modest ellipses. Some sections were removed on seemingly arbitrary grounds, although there was some kind of rationale for most omissions. He wrote in his own defense, "In the volume named **Rossetti, Ruskin, Pre-Raphaelitism**, I explained that the passages omitted are very generally such as would be of little or no interest to the reader; although occasionally it happens that something which may be of interest is excluded on other grounds.... with respect to the present volume, [**Rossetti Papers**] I recur to

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<sup>197</sup>"Letters of Christina Rossetti," **The Essays of Virginia Woolf** 225.

my original statement, which once again holds good."<sup>198</sup> Where his sister was concerned, "other grounds" often applied. William Michael, no doubt with the best of intentions, makes his project explicit in his introduction to **Family Letters**: "I am certain that I here set before readers a beautiful and lovable character...."<sup>199</sup> The typed drafts that he prepared for an eventually unpublished collection of Rossetti's early letters present a clear example of his methods, as his habit was to type out the manuscripts in their entirety, and then neatly draw lines through the parts he intended leaving out.<sup>200</sup> While he omitted trivial details, especially those that would not be immediately comprehensible to a stranger, he also deleted several remarks that might reflect adversely either on his sister, or anyone else alive or dead, although the kind of statement he took out was relatively innocuous: "Our resident party has been increased, expressly for the picnic, by the arrival yesterday of a Captain Jacob, <a young man with lightish hair, a very florid complexion, and no particular reputation for talent.>" [Deletions within brackets].<sup>201</sup> Several similar lively remarks or strongly expressed opinions also fall by the wayside. William also took care to eliminate any mention of Christina's relationship with Collinson, which was at this stage faltering to a close; in a letter she wrote him discussing

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<sup>198</sup>RP vii-viii.

<sup>199</sup>FL viii.

<sup>200</sup>Both drafts and the original letters are at Princeton.

<sup>201</sup>Princeton, 30 July 1852.

her contributions to **The Germ**, he amended her words accordingly: "Mr Woolner is welcome to any of my things which you may have energy to copy. Only <I must beg that you will not fix on any which the most imaginative person could construe into love personals -- > you will feel how <more than ever> intolerable it would <now> be to have my verses regarded as outpourings of a wounded spirit...."<sup>202</sup>

Moreover, a comparison of original manuscripts with their printed versions in **Family Letters** and **Rossetti Papers** reveal a certain pattern of exclusions. Some stemmed from either delicacy or squeamishness; most references to sickness, whether her own or the illnesses of other family members (including those of Lucy, William's wife) are carefully tidied up, with symptoms and details of treatment often omitted.<sup>203</sup> To be fair, Rossetti's letters in later life could sometimes be mistaken for those of a nurse in charge of a geriatric ward;<sup>204</sup> by cutting or omitting them, however, William Michael conceals the degree to which Rossetti had to devote her time and energy in later life to nursing elderly relatives. He also modestly pruned most references to himself, including all

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<sup>202</sup>Princeton, 28 April 1849.

<sup>203</sup>In a curious instance of history repeating itself, William deleted from one of Christina's letters (written to announce the birth of one of his children) her description of the suffering undergone by his wife during labour. (UBC, 1875.)

<sup>204</sup>There are at least a dozen examples, including unpublished letters, in the UBC collection.

mention of the marital troubles (and related financial awkwardnesses) he experienced.

The irreverent and pert personal reflections of Rossetti's early letters faded away as she grew older, her own degree of self-censorship making William's largely unnecessary. Nevertheless, he still weeded out any stray remarks that sat at odds with his sister's reputation for piety, or could be read as less than complimentary; for example, an affectionate reference to Swinburne as "eccentric" (which would hardly have given him offence) was eliminated.<sup>205</sup>

The overall results are a fascinating example of Victorian patriarchal censorship, but the letters themselves lose some of their literary and biographical merit, especially for the feminist critic. They are also occasionally rendered flat, tedious and predictable, and at times create a false impression of the woman who wrote the originals that is manifestly unfair.

However, perhaps more insidious than William Michael's censorship were the myths he set in motion when he began both constructing the first biographical memoirs of his sister after her death, and restricting similar efforts by others. Potential biographers were carefully vetted; Mackenzie Bell, permitted by William Michael to write the official biography, assured his sources of

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<sup>205</sup>"I thank you for ... telling me of Mr Swinburne's <eccentric (I perceive my spelling is appropriately eccentric!) but> gratifying exhibition of enthusiasm." (UBC, Sept 1881.)

information that "While I am naturally anxious to make my book as full as possible of original matter I am most desirous to observe all due reticence as to topics on which others do not wish me to speak.... Dignified reticence about things which would merely gratify vulgar curiosity should characterise a volume about Christina Rossetti."<sup>206</sup> It is hardly surprising that between Bell's anxiously reverent bouquet, and her brother's own *Memoir* of her life, Christina should emerge first of all as a near-saint, then as a spontaneous and artless poet, a recluse who shrank from "public display," someone far too modest to consider membership of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and who was mentally and emotionally a little delicate. The Rossetti who wrote to William Michael with a flourish that she was sending him new *bout-rimés* rhymes chosen "for your especial torment ... from one of my own sonnets ... [i]n the certainty that you cannot possibly equal that work of art"<sup>207</sup>, had been whitewashed out of existence. Some of William Michael's claims are clearly at odds with what we know of Rossetti: one passage insists, "[u]pon her reputation as a poetess she never presumed, nor did she ever volunteer an allusion to any of her performances: in a roomful of mediocrities she consented to seem the most mediocre as the most modest of all."<sup>208</sup> As we have seen, Rossetti's withdrawal from the community of poetesses was prompted by complex reasons which had

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<sup>206</sup>Bodleian Library, 13 Nov 1895.

<sup>207</sup>Princeton, 24 Sept 1849.

<sup>208</sup>*Memoir* lvi.

little to do with humility. William Michael's insistence that his sister sedulously retained the "lowest place" that she so often wrote about, hardly corresponds with what we know of the writer who insisted on her right to poetic genius, who fantasised about fame and fortune, who dropped clues for readers with "minds such as mine," and who wrote with utter seriousness to her mother that she would cope with both a death in the family and running the Somerset school with "that strength of mind which characterises me."<sup>209</sup>

Of course, as with the **Family Letters**, William Michael was explicitly concerned with eulogising his sister: his **Memoir** concludes with a restatement of the myth it attempted to write: "...I terminate my summary account of a soul as pure, duteous, concentrated, loving, and devoted, as ever uttered itself in either prose or verse."<sup>210</sup> Nevertheless, at times, William Michael's attempts to portray his sister as a saint become strained: he certainly seems to be protesting too much when he writes, "She never -- not even in thought, so far as thought was under her control -- imputed a bad motive to anyone; and to hear her talking scandal, or indulging in ill-natured gossip, would have been equally as impossible as to see her putting on knickerbockers, or ... smashing the furniture. None the less she had a large fund of discernment, and speedily fathomed defects in her

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<sup>209</sup>FL 23.

<sup>210</sup>**Memoir** lxxi.

acquaintance which she never announced."<sup>211</sup> This is obviously disingenuous, and invites the response, how then *did* Rossetti convey this critical acuteness, and by what means was her brother aware of it?

William Michael also launched into a series of awkward cover-ups and genuine speculations on her private life, especially the details of her romances. In his **Memoir**, writing with a strained attempt at tactfulness that has the opposite effect, he states, "Readers of her poems had not failed to see, and to say, that some such affair or affairs [of the heart] must have given rise to several of the compositions," and goes on to speculate rather gauchely about what he knew of her liaisons with Collinson and Cayley; he claimed that Collinson especially "struck a staggering blow at Christina Rossetti's peace of mind on the very threshold of womanly life, and a blow from which she did not fully recover for years."<sup>212</sup> His theories were unfortunately treated as hard facts by later scholars, and his first efforts to provide biographical motivation for the creation of poems set a precedent which has demonstrably hindered Rossetti scholarship undertaken since.

Meanwhile, he retained a suffocating grasp on all information or primary material which might expand or alter the image he had fashioned for public

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<sup>211</sup>**Memoir** lxvii.

<sup>212</sup>**Memoir** li-liv, lii.

consumption. At the same time, he was sensitive to the accusations of critics who accused him of controlling and supervising biographical presentations; he devoted two pages of his preface to Rossetti's **Poetical Works** to minutely rebutting the critics who charged him with manipulating Mackenzie Bell's biography of Christina.<sup>213</sup> Nevertheless, his anxious concern for the proper presentation of his sister's life is demonstrated in a letter addressed to both Watts-Dunton and Swinburne, and written only hours after her death: "You ... will be sorry (and yet, after such lingering stages of illness, one ought not to be sorry) that my dear good Christina died this morning -- most peacefully at the last."<sup>214</sup> I fancy you may contemplate writing something about her in the **Athenaeum**. If so, may I remind you of her names, Chr. Georgina, and the date of her birth 5 December 1830. Her illness was functional malady of the heart, with dropsy in left arm and hand: There was another matter, painful to dwell upon, wh. I leave in the background. If you do not mean to write, and wd kindly tell me so, I wd myself send a few details to the **Athenaeum**: of course anything in the nature of critical opinion wd come far better from you. [abbreviations in original.]"<sup>215</sup> This letter demonstrates the degree of investment William had in creating his sister's public

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<sup>213</sup>PW ix-xi.

<sup>214</sup>Although Rossetti's nurse kept the information from William Michael, Christina probably died in as much agony as Dante Gabriel: she was in such pain that she had to be tied down on her bed the night before her death (Thompson 372.) Prior to this, an appalled neighbour had reported the "distressing screams" emanating from Rossetti's rooms during the last months of her life, imploring William Michael to see that his sister was not left unattended. (Packer, **Christina Rossetti** 399.)

<sup>215</sup>British Museum, 29 Dec 1894.

image; even in bereavement he is concerned with the most effective form of eulogy, and enlisting the contributions of prestigious associates. It also serves as yet another demonstration of his prim rectitude; he is reluctant to more than hint at the disease which had actually killed her -- breast cancer.

Yet it must be acknowledged that William Michael controlled and generated information about his sister in good faith. While he speculated freely, and had no qualms about omitting material or censoring it (which earned him a satiric rebuke from William Bell Scott, who accused him of "emasculating" all information about Dante Gabriel before it could reach the public, thus rendering "his brother an infinitely less interesting man than he really was"),<sup>216</sup> he would not countenance a written falsehood. Although there are no specific examples that apply to his transmission of Rossetti's life, his insistence that records should have some measure of accuracy can be seen in his amusingly punctilious corrections to a floridly romantic account of Dante Gabriel's relationship with Siddal by Frances Deverell, who was slightly connected by marriage to the early Pre-Raphaelite circle. When she announced that "[f]inancial difficulties prevented the marriage from taking place for many years," the scrupulous William Michael added, "Not to speak of other obstacles;" he also deleted the line, "Rossetti's devotion never wavered."<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup>Quoted in Thompson 348.

<sup>217</sup>Quoted by Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* 56.

Nevertheless, aspects of Rossetti's life remained beyond the reach of William Michael's explication or comprehension. An example of the fact that while he loved his sister, he was sometimes at a loss to understand her, can be seen in his extremely generous offer to support both her and Cayley, if financial difficulties were the reason she had refused the latter's proposals of matrimony. This act of filial kindness was combined with the bewilderment of a man who could conceive of no other possible reason for his sister's continuing celibacy. In the letter in which she refuses the offer, Rossetti is clearly emotionally overwhelmed, but not tempted: "... I can't tell you what I feel at your most more than brotherly letter.... I gain much in knowing how much I am loved beyond my deserts. As to money, I might be selfish enough to wish that were the only bar, but you see from my point it is not. Now I am at least unselfish enough to deprecate seeing C.B.C. continually (with nothing but feeling to offer) to his hamper and discomfort: but, if he likes to see me, God knows I like to see him...."<sup>218</sup> There is no attempt at any explanation of her rejection of both men's offers; it is unlikely that the conventional William would have understood that his sister considered herself already wholly committed to the service of more abstract, but no less jealous gods.

William Michael's most lengthy project, the presentation of his sister's poems, involved re-arranging and reshaping the order in which they were originally

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<sup>218</sup>FL 29.

published, and most well-known of all, organising them into categories of his own choice. Critics have remarked with increasing asperity on this rather dogmatic imposition during the last decade; even before Crump's first volume of the **Collected Poems** was available, Diane D'Amico charged that William Michael's version of the **Poetical Works** "reveals more of his intentions for the interpretation of her life and work than it does of her own.... Certain [poems] are left out entirely, others are changed, often without any indication that changes have been made, and the collection as a whole is arranged according to his own system of divisions, which is not chronological as would seem most reasonable."<sup>219</sup> Thompson concurs, pointing out that it is hard to distinguish between her "religious" and "general" poems, as "most of her 'general' poems are as saturated with religion as her religious poems are saturated with thoughts of human love."<sup>220</sup> Since the completed publication of Crump's work, many more scholars have been able to relocate poems more appropriately; it has also been noticed that William Michael dealt with troublesome or obscure poems by assigning them to categories which might explain them safely and satisfactorily; as D'Amico points out, poems featuring a mysterious male figure who bears the narrator away, or interacts intimately with the speaker, are classified as "devotional", thereby suggesting that any heterosexual exchanges in the poems are religious allegories for the relationship between the soul and Christ (who thus

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<sup>219</sup>"To Another Land" 54.

<sup>220</sup>Thompson 281-282.

fits the figure of the anonymous male.)<sup>221</sup> The result was that on occasion, secular, even erotic poems, could be buried between more explicitly religious works. Other categories which might mitigate the contents of certain poems were "Juvenilia" and "Poems for Children, and Minor Verse."

This categorisation is followed by still closer organisation and arrangement of the poems along thematic lines, and it is worth scrutinising exactly how William Michael set about this task:

The poems of Christina Rossetti are marked by certain key-notes of *feeling* which, although they could not be allowed to govern the arrangement of the compositions in this edition, deserve to be borne in mind by her readers; and among the readers there may be some who would like to be furnished with a clue for following out, as the inclination prompts them at the moment, one or other of these trains of *sentiment*. It may perhaps be said that the two ideas most prevalent of all are the strenuous and onerous effort to attain to the salvation of the soul in heaven, and the ardent absorbing devotion to the work and the very person of the Saviour Jesus Christ. These ideas are diffused over the whole area of the authoress's Devotional Poems, and are to be traced in other compositions as well. It would, I think, be superfluous to call attention to particular poems embodying these paramount ideas, and I therefore limit myself to other ideas, subordinate, yet still marked and dominant, -- some of them of much importance in themselves, others not thus important but highly characteristic of Christina Rossetti. I will define them thus: (1) *Personal Experiences and Emotions*; (2) *Death*; (3) *The Aspiration for Rest* (and her ideal of bliss appears to have consisted in ultimate rest, only less absolutely than in the promised fruition of heaven); (4) *Vanity of Vanities*; (5) *A Love of Animals*, and more especially such animals as are frequently regarded as odd or uncouth, rather than obviously attractive; (6) *Winter* -- almost

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<sup>221</sup>"To Another Land" 55-62.

invariably contemplated as dismal and repugnant; (7) The loveliness of the Rose. In the Appendix (C) I give a reference to the principal instances (not by any means all instances) in which these themes are prominently brought forward. [my italics]<sup>222</sup>

This is useful for what it reveals of William Michael's efforts to not only categorise his sister's works according to theme and sub-theme (his grouping of her Devotional Poems has a number of subheadings, with each section carefully marked off), but rank them in order of hierarchical significance. The reader is provided with a closely detailed and directive map through the maze of texts, presented ostensibly as a means to easier browsing, "as the inclination prompts." The apparent freedom of the reader's choice is channelled into a guided textual tour, with poems at times ludicrously lumped together according to a ranked and numbered code. The emphasis is on control, order and thematic containment; any dissidence or dissonance in the texts can be attenuated by the structured breakdown according to thematic content, and then further dissipated by means of dislocation within the Appendix. Although on the one hand, the agnostic William Michael makes a valiant effort to be fair to the religious compulsions reflected in Rossetti's texts, there seems to be no acknowledgement, for example, that the last three categories on his list, refer to metaphors or tropes in her works, rather than empirical observations or literal meditations on these topics.

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<sup>222</sup>PW viii-ix.

A reading of the Appendix itself underscores the watering-down by categorical definition of certain Rossetti texts: *Goblin Market* is the first entry under "A Love of Animals" and *The Lowest Room* is for some mysterious reason, the first listed under "Vanity of Vanities" -- a categorisation which emasculates the poem far more sweepingly and effectively than any of Dante Gabriel's fulminations. The ranked placing of these categories also underlines the Rossetti brothers' insistence that their sister was primarily a confessional poet; the first heading solemnly reads "Personal Experiences and Emotions" in explicit contradiction of Rossetti's own creed of creativity and her self-identification as a deliberate artist.

William Michael did not stop here, either; almost every poem is provided with a gloss, which often suggests both source and interpretation. These notes form a significant part of his strategy to contain and control his sister's texts: in the preface, he explains, "In my Notes ... many details will be found bearing upon the occasions which gave rise to particular poems, the significance of the poems, etc."<sup>223</sup> We have already witnessed his efforts to ameliorate both the disruptive tone of *The Lowest Room* and Dante Gabriel's acrimonious response to it; what has also been picked up by critics is his determination to account for the derivation of each poem.

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<sup>223</sup>PW ix.

For example, he is alarmed and puzzled by her crocodile poem (*My Dream*) because although it is fantastically violent, even bizarre, he cannot relegate it to the "freakish" world of the unconscious: "It looks like the narration of a true dream; and nothing seems as if it could account for so eccentric a train of notions, except that she in fact dreamed them. And yet she did not; for, in a copy of her collected edition of 1875, I find that she has marked the piece, 'not a real dream.' As it was not a real dream, and she chose nevertheless to give it verbal form, one seeks a meaning in it, and I for one cannot find any that bears development."<sup>224</sup> He is even more disconcerted by *Look on This Picture and This*, a dramatic monologue in which the speaker chooses his lover over his wife, but first radically abbreviates the poem, and then assures the reader with relief that in this case, it derives from a novel, and not Christina's own imagination: "In my sister's MS. this poem is a rather long one, forty-six triplets; I have reduced it to twenty-three -- omitting those passages which appear to me to be either in themselves inferior, or adapted rather for spinning out the theme than intensifying it .... Were it not for the name 'Eva,' I should be embarrassed to guess what could have directed my sister's pen to so singular a subject and treatment; but that name satisfies me that she was here recurring to a favourite romanticist of her girlhood, Maturin."<sup>225</sup> Another poem the tone and topic of which (illegitimacy) had provoked Dante Gabriel, *The Iniquity of the Fathers*

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<sup>224</sup>PW 479.

<sup>225</sup>PW 480.

*Upon the Children*, has a speculative ancestry suggested, in spite of Rossetti's anxious reiteration that this work, although likely to echo real-life situations, was the product of her imagination: "I find a note by Christina as follows: 'This was all fancy, but Mrs Scott afterwards told me of a somewhat similar fact.' It seems to me that the 'fancy' may have been partly guided by a leading incident in Dickens's *Bleak House*."<sup>226</sup>

Even poems he freely enjoyed were carefully ascribed to the influence of other works: "I have always regarded [*From House to Home*] as one of my sister's most manifest masterpieces; though it is true that the opening of it would perhaps not have taken its present form had it not been for the precedent of Tennyson's *Palace of Art*."<sup>227</sup> Attribution was one means of explaining the origin of a poem: "The reader will readily perceive that this poem [*Repining*] is to some extent modelled upon Parnell's *Hermit*."<sup>228</sup> This suggests consistent anxiety about the sources of Rossetti's poems, which in turn stems from a strongly gendered assumption that female creativity operates in different ways to that of male artists. Work by women was necessarily derivative; it was invariably triggered by either external or personal circumstances. In order to create, the woman writer drew on the work of others, or documented private emotions and

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<sup>226</sup>PW 462.

<sup>227</sup>PW 461.

<sup>228</sup>PW 460.

events in her own history. She could not, by virtue of her sex, manufacture or generate original material by means of creative processes which were in any way detached from her immediate surroundings and sensations.

This of course, presented William Michael with certain dilemmas in presenting the poetry of his sister: while insisting that her work was primarily confessional, he was then particularly perturbed by the possibility that poems narrated in the first person might be read as transparently self-referential, and possibly misinterpreted by readers. Gilbert and Gubar point out how ominous the female poet's subjectivity might seem to her male peers: "Even if the Poet's "I" ... is a "supposed person," the intensity of her dangerous impersonation of this creature may cause her to take her own metaphors literally, enact her themes herself."<sup>229</sup> Given this hazard, it is not surprising that when Rossetti's poems with a first-person narrator expressed any kind of anger, criticism or satire, William Michael sometimes made adjustments, quite often to the title, which widened the distance between narrator and author. For example, the poem *Shut Out*, which could be read as a testament of authentic bitterness (rather than constructed melancholy), was originally titled by Rossetti, *What Happened to Me*. The latter title, considering his assumption that most, if not all of her poems were to some degree autobiographical, had perhaps an uncomfortably accusing ring to William

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<sup>229</sup>Madwoman in the Attic 549.

Michael, who found it "too significant"<sup>230</sup> and substituted it with the present one.<sup>231</sup>

Not only did disturbing poems have to be accounted for; expressions of joy had to be justified, or an explanation found: writing of the poem *A Birthday*, he puzzles, "I have more than once been asked whether I could account for the outburst of exuberant joy evidenced in this celebrated lyric; I am unable to do so .... It is, of course, possible to infer that *The Birthday* is a mere piece of poetical composition, not testifying to any corresponding emotion of its author at the time; but I am hardly prepared to think that. [my italics]"<sup>232</sup> Here we have William Michael faced with the possibility that his sister might be composing with the "Poet mind;" this effort, in her case, is immediately reduced to the production of a "mere piece" or exercise in "composition." However, even this degraded version of Rossetti's creative manifesto, he rejects upon consideration -- or rather, as a result of an unwillingness or inability to consider: "I am hardly prepared to think that." Christina's poems, according to William Michael, could only have existence as either personal records, or exercises in imitation of other poets. The only exceptions were her creative ventures into safe (and once again implicitly gender-bound) territory: "*Maiden-song* -- This simple light-hearted poem -- a

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<sup>230</sup>PW 481.

<sup>231</sup>Crump, CP I 252.

<sup>232</sup>PW 481.

kind of a cross between the tone of a fairy-tale and that of a nursery-song, each of them sweetened into poetry -- was deservedly something of a favourite with its authoress."<sup>233</sup> These remarks, ironic with hindsight, given D'Amico's discussions of the complexity and power of this text's responses to both the Romantic tradition and the injunction of feminine submission,<sup>234</sup> demonstrate that not only Dante Gabriel, but William Michael felt most comfortable when his sister's works confined themselves to the "safe," permissible and feminised world of "fairy-tale" and "nursery-song." This is perhaps surprising, considering the lesson *Goblin Market* might have already taught them: that these genres had a surprising propensity for disruption and subversion.<sup>235</sup> In his notes to this poem, William Michael displays a familiar blend of dilution and defensiveness: "I have more than once heard Christina say that she did not mean anything profound by this fairy-tale -- it is not a moral apologue consistently carried out in detail. Still, the incidents are such as to be at any rate suggestive, and different minds may be likely to read different messages into them."<sup>236</sup> These remarks

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<sup>233</sup>PW 461-2.

<sup>234</sup>See "Fair Margaret of 'Maiden-Song': Rossetti's Response to the Romantic Nightingale," *Victorian Newsletter* 80 (Fall 91): 8-13; and "Christina Rossetti's 'Maiden-Song': The Regal Power of Humility and Patience," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 6.1 (1985): 24-33.

<sup>235</sup>See Uli Knoeflmacher's "Avenging Alice: Christina Rossetti and Lewis Carroll," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 41.3 (Dec 1986): 299-328, for a discussion of the "adult" and unsettling qualities of Victorian children's literature.

<sup>236</sup>PW 459. The extent to which William Michael's remarks still frame the poem is demonstrated in the Houghton and Stange anthology, which prints *Goblin Market* with a footnote reiterating his claim that it did not "mean anything profound." (*Victorian Poetry and Poetics* 602.)

are both ironic and prophetic in view of the discussion *Goblin Market* has generated ever since its publication. One is also curious to know in what context Christina's alleged demurrals took place; was the poem the subject of family discussion, or even an argument, with her siblings insisting that she explain the meaning of the poem?

As can thus be seen, what is striking about nearly all William Michael's interpretative remarks, is his assumption (like Dante Gabriel's) that Christina's writing had to derive from either an external source or, more likely, personal experience; that it was comprehensively self-referential. As he survived her, and her poems have been mediated to us through his editorship for nearly a century, this has tended to almost completely erase Rossetti's efforts (noted earlier) to establish her art as the privileged product of the imagination -- her "fancy." The disparity between Rossetti's deliberate presentation of herself as a poet who possessed the gifts and faculties of an artist and crafter, and William Michael's insistence on the confessional impulse of her works can be seen in his explicit and categorical contradiction of her introduction to the *Monna Innominata* sonnet sequence: "To anyone to whom it was granted to be behind the scenes of Christina Rossetti's life -- and to how few was this granted -- it is not merely probable but certain that this 'sonnet of sonnets' was a personal utterance -- an intensely personal one. The introductory prose-note, about 'many a lady sharing her lover's poetic aptitude,' etc., is a blind -- not an untruthful blind, for it

alleges nothing that is not reasonable, and on the surface correct, but still a blind interposed to draw off attention from the writer in her proper person."<sup>237</sup>

William Michael's anxiety about Rossetti's poetry resulted in an uncomfortable double bind; his concern about the potential for (mis)reading the texts as confessional, while he simultaneously insisted that they could only be confessional in origin, meant that speculations and suggestions had to be provided to control and direct the process of reading the texts as journals. Some remarks are coyly open-ended: *The Heart Knoweth its Own Bitterness* (in which the narrator demands intense engagement in the provocative lines, "I long for one to stir my deep .../ You scratch my surface with your pin;/ You stroke me smooth with hushing breath;--/ Nay pierce, nay probe, nay dig within,/ Probe my quick core and sound my depth"<sup>238</sup>) is graced with the apparently mysterious, but highly directive remark, "Few things written by Christina contain more of her innermost self than this."<sup>239</sup> However, many glosses strained at specificity: "*My Friend* -- one can scarcely doubt that this refers to the death of some person known to and beloved by the writer. Perhaps at one time I knew who it was, but do not now."<sup>240</sup> Sometimes attempts to precisely peg down the historical

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<sup>237</sup>PW 462.

<sup>238</sup>Crump, CP III 266.

<sup>239</sup>PW 472.

<sup>240</sup>PW 481.

antecedents of a poem are combined in a particularly heavy-handed fashion with enigmatic hints : "*Lord, what have I to offer?* etc -- The reference to 'a heartbreaking loss' seems to indicate that these lines refer to some particular event in my sister's life. They appear in *Time Flies*, under the date 24 April. I do not identify any such event with that day, but can easily conceive a relation in the poem to some different day."<sup>241</sup> Rossetti, who had found it intolerable that her work might ever be considered the "outpourings of a wounded spirit," would doubtlessly have been appalled.

This insistence on interpreting Rossetti's works as personal utterances is related to William Michael's perception of his sister as an artist, and specifically (as we have seen) a *female* artist. In his *Memoir*, he reiterates how Christina produced poetry:

I have said elsewhere, but may as well repeat it here, that her habits of composition were entirely of the casual and spontaneous kind, from her earliest to her latest years. If something came into her head which she found suggestive of verse, she put it into verse. It came to her (I take it) very easily, without her meditating a possible subject, and without her making any great difference from the latest form of the verses which embodied it; but *some* difference with a view to the fine and right detail of execution, she did of course make when needful. If the thing did not present itself before her, as something craving a vesture of verse at her hands, she did not write it at all. What she wrote was pretty well known in the family as soon as her impeccably neat manuscript of it appeared in one of her little notebooks; but she did not show it about as an

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<sup>241</sup>PW 469.

achievement and still less had she, in the course of her work, invited any hint, counsel, or co-operation. [original italics]<sup>242</sup>

Here we have a textbook demonstration of what Russ has called denial of agency; in other words, the serious insistence, no matter how ludicrous, that a work of art "wrote itself."<sup>243</sup> Rossetti is presented here not even as a casual "scribbler," but a passive recording device for seemingly independent and autonomous works, with a life and agency of their own. In this particularly extreme manifestation of the patriarchal tendency, already discussed, to deal with female creativity by insisting that women writers were merely instruments for the transmission of poetic impulses, William Michael assures Rossetti's readers that her poems are "things" or entities entirely separate from the [female] poet, which voluntarily "came" to the artist, and presented themselves to be transcribed: "If *something came into her head* ... she put it into verse. *It came to her* ... without her meditating a possible subject .... *If the thing did not present itself before her* ... she did not write it at all. [italics mine]" Agency is thus entirely displaced from Rossetti as a women writer and potential subject to the texts themselves.

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<sup>242</sup>Memoir lxxviii-lxix.

<sup>243</sup>Russ argues that this is the first line of defence taken by traditional patriarchal critics when presented with an unmistakably valuable work of art written by member of a marginalised or disenfranchised group. (20-24.)

Harrison has already pointed out how misleading William Michael's portrait of his sister's "habits of composition" is in view of what we now know of her careful, deliberate and sometimes radical revisions of her texts. It is possible that William Michael was unaware of how closely she revised her poems; perhaps, like Austen, Rossetti regarded the physical business of writing as private, something to be undertaken almost furtively. The impression that both her younger brother and Ford Madox Ford [Hueffler] received,<sup>244</sup> that her poems were casually and hastily scribbled down on scraps of paper in snatched moments, may have more to do with Rossetti's reluctance to be publicly seen to be seriously applying herself to the task of poetry, than any habit of authorial casualness or spontaneity. (Thompson remarks wryly that William Michael may not have wanted "the world to think that he had a monster" -- a woman who deliberately crafted poetry -- "for a sister.")<sup>245</sup> Harrison also takes issue with the statement "she never invited comment or criticism," arguing that Rossetti actively sought her brother's collaboration.<sup>246</sup> This is possibly the only part of Rossetti's creative modus operandi that William Michael manages to describe accurately; as has been shown, Dante Gabriel himself insisted on acting as his sister's editor (leaving her little choice in the matter) and her apparent compliance becomes extremely complicated on closer scrutiny. Yet it is interesting that William

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<sup>244</sup>Ford claimed that she scribbled down her poems on "the backs of envelopes upon the corner of her bedroom wash-handstand." (Quoted in Thompson 158.)

<sup>245</sup>Thompson 157.

<sup>246</sup>Christina Rossetti in Context 3.

Michael nonetheless registered the *autonomy* of Rossetti's creative processes, even as he remained unaware of its significance. He was not the first to note her creative independence: on the cover of one of her first poetry notebooks, begun when she was eleven, Mrs Rossetti wrote, "These verses are truly and literally by my little daughter, who scrupulously rejected all assistance in her rhyming efforts, under the impression that in that case they would not be her own."<sup>247</sup> (This information underlines all the more starkly the intense determination with which Christina later struggled to *own* her poems in the face of Dante Gabriel's attempts to colonise them.)

What throws William Michael's version of his sister's creative process into even sharper focus, is his parallel account of Dante Gabriel's writing habits. Whereas many of the strategies of censorship and containment that he developed as the surviving sibling and used in presenting material, held for both Christina and Dante Gabriel, there is a radical disjuncture in their treatment at this point: "Dante Rossetti was a very fastidious writer .... He wrote out of a large fund or reserve of thought and consideration, which would culminate in a clear impulse or (as we say) an inspiration. In the execution he was always heedful and reflective from the first, and he spared no after-pains in clarifying and perfecting. He abhorred anything straggling, slipshod, profuse, or uncondensed. He often

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<sup>247</sup>PW 462.

recurred to his old poems, and was reluctant to leave them merely as they were."<sup>248</sup> Outlined here is the method of procedure of the authentic poet and craftsman; Dante Gabriel is the one whose thoughtful and deliberate musings finally result in inspiration; it is he who polishes and revises his works according to stringent internal standards and with minute attention to detail.

Also of interest is the divergence between the notes William Michael prepared for the collected works of each sibling; the two versions differ dramatically in length, profuseness, and purpose. To begin with, the notes to Dante Gabriel's poems are far less thorough, in fact almost scanty; they occupy only thirteen pages<sup>249</sup> in two volumes (the notes to **Poetical Works** run to nearly forty double-columned pages of minute print.) Comments are appended to very few of Dante Gabriel's works, and those that are given resemble scholarly footnotes, rather than attempts at interpretation or analysis: William Michael provides translations of Latin terms, the occasional bibliographic (as opposed to biographical) suggestion as to source material, and comments on poetic technicalities, dating, and the drafting and publishing history of individual works. More detailed remarks on the provenance of poems have the exact opposite rationale to those provided for Christina's poems; William Michael seems determined to detach the personal history of his brother from the content of his poems, and to identify the latter as

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<sup>248</sup>Preface, **Collected Works of DGR** xxxiv.

<sup>249</sup>**Collected Works of DGR** 515-528.

autonomous works of art. For example, commenting on *The Portrait*, he writes, "In printed notices of my brother's poems, I have often seen the supposition advanced that this poem was written after the death of his wife, in relation to some portrait he had painted of her in his lifetime. The supposition is very natural -- yet not correct. The poem was in fact, an extremely early one and *purely imaginary* .... [my italics]"<sup>250</sup>

The above material forms the most overt demonstration available to us of William Michael's own gendered projection onto his siblings, and this begs the question -- to what extent he was invested in preserving and perpetuating the myth of the creative ranking within his family? He was obviously proud of his sister's abilities; yet he felt it necessary to emphasise that Dante Gabriel was the "real" poet in the Rossetti family. Perhaps there is an element of gender identification, especially given that William Michael was himself a failed poet. No spleen on his part ever shows itself; nevertheless, whereas it may have been bearable, if difficult, to be outclassed by his older brother, to be beaten into third place by his younger sister might well have caused him a different kind of dismay. Her poetic success could perhaps be both enjoyed with fraternal pride, and simultaneously rendered non-threatening if it was established to belong to a separate category to that of serious creative endeavour by men. It must also be considered that William Michael devoted a large part of his life to managing his

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<sup>250</sup>Collected Works of DGR 519.

brother's career, and according to Weintraub, vicariously experiencing the creative life by this means, in which case, preserving his brother's reputation at the expense of his sister's might have been considered necessary.<sup>251</sup> But still more likely, William Michael inherited the unspoken familial anxieties about hierarchy and competition, and continued to articulate them in his own inimitable style. Rivalry by no means ends with the grave.

Rossetti's experiences of being excluded, enclosed, embattled, of constantly negotiating a position for herself, lend clarity to the paradoxes of her poetry. The history of her struggle for agency as a female artist within powerful male-dominated cultural enclaves is not dissimilar to those of other nineteenth-century women writers; what is unusual is the degree to which she had to negotiate the primal and intimate impulses of sibling rivalry and anxiety as part of the very world of patriarchal letters and art in which she sought a place. Her poetry was subjected to two separate processes of fraternal intervention or even distortion, both during her life and after it. Attempts to re-read her texts, therefore, benefit from an awareness of their singular history of adaptation for survival, while striving for autonomy.

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<sup>251</sup>"His Brother's Keeper: William Michael and Dante Gabriel Rossetti." In Kiell 227-275.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Rossetti's Textual Strategies**

When we read and re-read Rossetti's corpus, we are confronted with an almost formidable amount of material, a monument of words, speech and subjectivity that refuses to be denied, a substantial product of cultural relations that unsettles us by its sheer volume.<sup>1</sup> Yet "meaning" in these texts seems to remain just beyond reach, constantly invoking explication, and generating an ongoing variety of readings. The work done in recent years by critics, in particular the contributions by Rosenblum, Harrison, and Mayberry, presents much of the significant contextual material which enables a variety of methodological approaches to be usefully applied to the texts. Harrison and Mayberry's works are geared towards enabling further "new critical" or formalist readings, and Rosenblum's arguments act as a springboard for a complex amalgam of feminist and post-structuralist responses to the texts. There is simply not room in this

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<sup>1</sup>Rossetti wrote over 1100 poems (about 800 of which were published in her lifetime), including a dozen long works, a poetic drama, and a variety of both prose and poetry for children; six books of devotional prose (**Annus Dominus: A Prayer for Each Day of the Year, founded on a Text of Holy Scripture, Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies on the Benedicite, Called to be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied, Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments, Time Flies: A Reading Diary, The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse**); a book of prose stories (**Commonplaces**); and a novella (**Maude**).

project, however, which has so far focused on re-reading Rossetti's life, for even a selective, much less a comprehensive hermeneutical treatment of Rossetti's canon; such an attempt would be rendered still less feasible by the very evasiveness of the texts. This has been amply demonstrated in recent critical pieces; close readings of single poems become major undertakings, and invariably remain open-ended: for example, *Goblin Market*, as we have seen, is still puzzling and stimulating its readers, while remaining resistant to any single principle of organisation or analysis. Rather, I hope to extrapolate from Rossetti's history of "writing under siege" several keys which might open up the texts to further reading and exploration, and identify certain patterns of continuity between them.<sup>2</sup> In the light of the struggle for agency in Rossetti's artistic processes, certain suggestions for further and closer investigation need to be presented in at least outline form.

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<sup>2</sup>It will be noted that I hardly touch on the explicitly devotional poems; this is partly because of the huge scope of such an undertaking, and partly because I do not believe that I can improve on Rosenblum's readings of these texts, in which she argues for their continuity with the rest of Rossetti's output, and convincingly identifies the link between their transfiguring of the prescriptions and consolations of religious doctrine and devotion into alternative universes, and the continual inscribing of "otherness" in the secular texts. (*Poetry of Endurance*, chapter 2, in particular, and "Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry" are particularly helpful.) Further discussion of the religious and doctrinal issues in Rossetti's works, and their significance, is provided by, among others, Harrison ("Christina Rossetti and Sage Discourse"); Catherine Musello Cantalupo ("Christina Rossetti: The Devotional Poet and the Rejection of Romantic Nature" in Kent 274-300) Jerome McGann ("The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti," *Critical Inquiry* 10.1 [Sept 1983]: 127-144) and Linda Schofield ("Being and Understanding: Devotional Poetry of Christina Rossetti and the Tractarians" in Kent 301-321.)

The *opaque* quality of Rossetti's poems, the construction of which will be further discussed below, is more clearly understood in the light of the fraternal insistence on interpretation. *Goblin Market's* evasion of any single hermeneutic key is a feature typical of many of the texts, which often present a "simple surface" of apparent meaning, beneath which lie a variety of potential exegetical interpretations. (Rossetti herself refers obliquely to the multivalence of her poems, writing that the more obscure clues they contained were there for "minds such as mine.")<sup>3</sup> It is entirely possible that this particular quality was at least partly a result of the author's consciousness of fraternal scrutiny, and that this in turn further elicited her brothers' determination to frame and clarify her works, by means of editing, commentary, attribution, illustrations aimed at further explication, and so forth. (This might also provide a further clue to Dante Gabriel's determination to control the *Prince's Progress* volume; by revising and re-reading, he could attempt to fix, to clasp hold of the *meanings* of the poems it contained.) This context of gendered sibling rivalry lends an understanding to, and informs the textual qualities of both apparent simplicity and multiple meaning, which continue to baffle and intrigue readers.

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<sup>3</sup>See 190 above.

### Speaking Silence<sup>4</sup>

Some clues to Rossetti's characteristic artistic and aesthetic tactics are provided by a glance at the terrain of critical treatments: an overview of the work of the past fifteen years demonstrates that there exists a critical awareness, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, of the evasiveness of Rossetti's texts. Her work is evaluated first of all, in terms of paradox, even oxymoron; she is a poet "at once transparent and opaque";<sup>5</sup> her art is characterised as both simple and strangely subtle; innocent and erotic; cool and fevered; sincere and dissembling, even misleading. The "other/s" that Rossetti's works create and explore generate continuing critical interaction and probing; they invite infinitely multiple readings, often contradictory. These features are to some degree typical of the writing of many nineteenth-century women writers; yet Rossetti seized on the qualities of "doubleness" in a particularly compelling way; the various masks, roles and screens deployed in the texts are used as much to tempt as to shield; the reader finds herself quite strenuously seduced. Rossetti's strategy of

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<sup>4</sup>I am particularly indebted to Linda Shires for her detailed advice and suggestions on this section of my chapter.

<sup>5</sup>Rosenblum, "The Inward Pose" 82.

retreating in order to be found out forms an intriguing response to her specific cultural positioning.

Her writing negotiates out of a position that Catherine and Andrew Belsey have identified as "the double displacement, the double uncertainty of a woman's hold on subjectivity in a world where women were barely subjects, only tentatively the agents of their own actions, the authors of their own words."<sup>6</sup> This location is pithily described in Rossetti's *From the Antique* as the "doubl[e] blank" of a "woman's lot." Yet Rossetti does not allow this tenuousness to become disabling; she manufactures a language and discourse of her own from within the vestigial and marginal spaces permitted her in the infrastructure of patriarchal relations (familial, social, artistic, creative and religious) that framed and formed her life. As we already know, Rossetti's life and her works concur at the point that both seem to have been dislodged with unusually dramatic clarity into "otherness," the secondary, subordinate and object ranks of the symbolic order; and this displacement within the symbolic order can be represented as both her lived and her linguistic relation to her brother.

Yet Rossetti's poems do not suggest more than apparent acquiescence to the subaltern roles assigned her. She inhabits them, but denatures them, copies them, yet disintegrates their logical organisation, impersonates their scripts while

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<sup>6</sup>"Christina Rossetti: sister to the Brotherhood" 31.

evading reading. Within technically controlled and self-conscious poems, she collapses structures of meaning and hierarchical organisation: her poems self-deconstruct. Thus her texts can be understood as "feminine" in the broad sense of the French theorists; constantly relegated to the "other," she creates out of the array of object positions either prescribed for her or denied her a discourse which continually disrupts and re-negotiates these positions. Rossetti thus makes a corpus and a creed, a creative and political announcement out of retirement, renunciation, valediction, withdrawal, self-denial, night, the grave, shadows and the moon.

Poems such as *Remember*<sup>7</sup> and *Song*<sup>8</sup> ("She sat and sang away") initially suggest the qualities of elegiac *memento mori* and romantic lyric respectively, only to collapse their traditional formulas upon closer reading. *Remember*, a sonnet which begins by subscribing to the notion of love surviving the grave, and proceeds to set up a plaintive plea for romantic remembrance in the octave ("Remember me when I am gone away,/ ... When you can no longer hold me by the hand,/ ... Remember me when no more day by day/ You tell me of our future that you planned:/ Only remember me ...."), suddenly switches to cheery common-sense in the face of the pragmatic recognition that memory is fickle: "Yet if you should forget me for a while/ And afterwards remember, do not

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<sup>7</sup>Crump, CP I 37.

<sup>8</sup>Crump, CP I 58.

**grieve:/ ... Better by far you should forget and smile/ Than that you should remember and be sad." The performance of remembrance by the mourning lover is revealed for what it is: indulgence in the emotion of grief for aesthetic purposes. A smile seems far more sensible; it also acts to disrupt the elegiac agenda.**

**Convention is likewise elegantly collapsed in the simple little lyric *Song*, which sets up a scenario in which two maidens pour out their contrasting songs in an environment apparently neatly framed and ordered along binary lines:**

**She sat and sang alway  
By the green margin of a stream,  
Watching the fishes leap and play  
Beneath the glad sunbeam.**

**I sat and wept alway  
Beneath the moon's most shadowy beam,  
Watching the blossoms of the May  
Weep leaves into the stream.**

**I wept for memory;  
She sang for hope that is so fair:  
My tears were swallowed by the sea;  
Her songs died on the air.**

**The tidy world of carefully balanced binary opposites ("she" and "I," "sang" and "wept," "sunbeam" and "moon," "play" and "weep," "memory" and hope," "sea" and "air"), in which both characters seek reflection and confirmation in the various manifestations of Nature around them ("fishes leap and play" for the**

hopeful singer, whereas "blossoms .../ Weep leaves into the stream" for the melancholy one), is dissolved without warning in the last couplet. All difference between the balanced and opposing elements melt into the oblivion of boundless and non-concrete forms of nature: "tears" are "swallowed by the sea" and "songs" similarly "die[] on the air." Nature, far from being a source of nurture or inspiration, is now revealed as an impervious entity which is hugely indifferent to the cultural and emotional expressions of the speakers, and which ultimately obliterates their "songs."

The ability to change shape, to employ the means of metamorphosis, was an essential skill for the woman writer bent on successfully surviving or resisting the male tradition. Nina Auerbach has convincingly demonstrated the plasticity, the transmutable "slipperiness" of woman as sign in Victorian literature;<sup>9</sup> Rossetti's flair for inversion adds a new twist to this metamorphic quality; she *mimics* the object-position assigned to woman as signifier.<sup>10</sup> Chameleon-like, she enters into and replicates the binary object positions assigned to her, making them her own; she both camouflages the power of the poet behind them and assembles tableaux

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<sup>9</sup>In **Women and the Demon**, a study of the complex Victorian mythology of the feminine, Auerbach provides a compelling argument for a "myth of transformations," demonstrating that "[t]he very rigidity of the categories of victim and queen, domestic angel and demonic outcast, old maid and fallen woman, concentrates itself into a myth of transfiguration that glorified the women it seemed to suppress." (15, 9.)

<sup>10</sup>For a fuller discussion of what Luce Irigaray terms "mimetism", and how this can be used to read both Rossetti's works and those of other nineteenth-century woman poets, see Rosenblum, **Poetry of Endurance** 5-8, 225-226.

from them that simultaneously masquerade, or impersonate, and subvert. By means of the parodic earnestness with which she strikes the poses allocated to her, a suggestion of uneasiness with the object position is communicated. A particularly dramatic demonstration of the jeopardy of this position can be found in the sonnet *In Progress*.<sup>11</sup> Here a paragon of feminine endurance is extolled not only for her patience, but for the grim persistence with which she has already remodelled herself along subordinate lines ("Ten years ago it seemed impossible/ That she should ever grow so calm as this;/ ... Gravely monotonous like a passing bell./ ... Patient at pastime, patient at her work,/ Wearied perhaps but strenuous certainly ....) The last three lines, however, propose an apocalyptic transfiguration as spectacular as it is startling: "Sometimes I fancy we may one day see/ Her head shoot forth seven stars from where they lurk,/ And her eyes lightnings, her shoulders wings."

The deliberately posed quality found in so many of Rossetti's texts, however, articulates more than simply discomfort with the location of the feminine sign or cipher in the literary tradition; there is a bravura quality to this mimicry as well. Hélène Cixious and Catherine Clément debate whether demonstration by the woman writer or intellectual of *mastery* of the "masculine" poetic form or literary discourse constitutes an appropriation of that domain by the "feminine";<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>UBC, April 1865?

<sup>12</sup>"The Newly Born Woman" in Eagleton 110-120.

certainly this translates well to an examination of the technical polish of Rossetti's texts: her skilful execution of prescribed imagery, the panache with which she assimilates the assigned metaphors (and tropes them), the impeccable presentation of hall-mark Pre-Raphaelite characteristics, her performative demonstration of expertise in rhythm and metre. Graduate students who participated in a seminar on *Goblin Market* were struck by what they described as the self-conscious and deliberate nature of Rossetti's stylistic proficiency, the sense of exultation in her command of a masculine aesthetic syllabus.

So contrary to their initial appearance of immobility, Rossetti's texts mediate continually between the polar opposites to which they are ostensibly confined; they are constantly stepping out from the frame, escaping from the niches assigned to the female object into fluidity, often by means of mimetic or parodic tropes.<sup>13</sup> This ability to escape and elide categorisation, to dissolve the rigidity of the symbolic order, seems to stem from the creative strategies referred to above: Rossetti's texts interpenetrate and transmute the female object positions assigned to the female figure, and renegotiate their relation to their opposite and

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<sup>13</sup>Once again, a glance through the MLA catalogue of critical writings on Rossetti undertaken in the last decade illustrates the resistance of her work to organisation along aesthetic or thematic lines; her work constantly generates debate and critique by evading categorisation and dissection, by eluding the primary discourses of phallogocentricism. Over and over, her work is described in terms of stances or actions of negation (rather than negative terms) -- she is the poet of endurance, renunciation, reticence, withdrawal, ambiguity, austerity, self-denial, valediction; her meanings are "hidden" or "latent," her poems "whisper," they "question," they explore areas of "fantasy," "projection" and the "divided self."

dominant pole.<sup>14</sup> They enter into silence and make it sing, particularly in the lyrics "from the grave" such as *Song*<sup>15</sup> ("Sing no sad songs for me, my dearest"), *Echo*,<sup>16</sup> *Rest*<sup>17</sup> or *Sleeping at Last*<sup>18</sup>; they insist that the "lowest place" should be gladly embraced as a means of ultimately experiencing glorious apocalyptic transformation, a feature of many of the religious poems, of which *The Lowest Place*<sup>19</sup> (discussed below) is an excellent example; fixity perpetually dissolves into fluidity, and thus the trope of what Rosenblum calls the "stone woman"<sup>20</sup> mediates a state of flux; the presentation of death is used to renegotiate the relations of life (a vital characteristic for differentiating her poetic strategies, literally her "corpus" from her brother's, which will be demonstrated more fully below.) This is reiterated by a brief glance at the titles of the texts themselves; as Stephen Connor suggests, these at times experiment with reordering and reinventing the hierarchy of binary opposites, both blurring

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<sup>14</sup>Casey provides a convincing reading of *Goblin Market* in these terms, in "The Potential of Sisterhood."

<sup>15</sup>Crump, CP I 58.

<sup>16</sup>Crump, CP I 46.

<sup>17</sup>Crump, CP I 60.

<sup>18</sup>British Museum, late 1893/ early 1894?

<sup>19</sup>Crump, CP I 187.

<sup>20</sup>Rosenblum provides a detailed investigation of this figure-type in Rossetti's texts in chapter 5 of *Poetry of Endurance*.

dualities and differentiating unities.<sup>21</sup> For example, the title of the poem *Sun Set and Star Rise* suggests two sets of antonyms (sun and star, set and rise) that create an interval of space, a universe bounded by opposites, out of what is no time at all, but in fact two concurrent moments.

It must not be forgotten, however, that what might be referred to as the "doubleness" or "evasiveness" of Rossetti's texts is related to the larger problems of the women writer and her struggle for agency and subjectivity, especially for those who wrote in the nineteenth century. Isobel Armstrong, who notes that "Christina Rossetti's distilled exactitude analyses into an equally precise ambiguity," argues that this "doubleness" is even characteristic of Victorian poetry itself: "In an age of 'movable type' and mechanical reproduction in which signification moves beyond the immediate control of the writer, it is as if the writer can only resort to an openness in advance of the reader, testing out the possibilities of systematic misprision.... this was a systematic and organised ambiguity. The doubleness of language is not local but structural.... It is not the disorganised expression of subjectivity but a way of exploring and interrogating the grounds of its representation. What the Victorian poet achieved was often quite literally two concurrent poems in the same words."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>"'Speaking Likenesses': Language and Repetition in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*" *Victorian Poetry* 22.4 (Winter 1984): 439.

<sup>22</sup>"Re-reading Victorian Poetry" in *Dickens and other Victorians: Essays in Honour of Philip Collins*, ed. Joanne Shattock (London: Macmillan, 1988) 129-130.

What must also be considered is the interpellation of women's texts into patriarchal culture; Gilbert and Gubar, writing about nineteenth-century women authors, state: "Certainly when we consider the 'oddity' of women's writing in relation to its submerged content, it begins to seem that when women did not turn into male mimics or accept the 'parsley wreath' they may have attempted to transcend their anxiety of authorship by *revising* male genres, using them to record their own dreams and their own stories *in disguise*.... women [writers] produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards."<sup>23</sup>

One aspect of cultural modelling Rossetti would have had to negotiate was this very "anxiety of authorship" identified by Gilbert and Gubar: the difficulty women poets experienced in confronting a tradition (already briefly outlined in previous chapters) in which subject and object, poet and poem are implicitly understood to be respectively constructed as "masculine" and "feminine." In an essay discussing another creative brother-sister pairing, that of Dorothy and William Wordsworth, Susan Wolfson describes the Romantic "masculine" poetic tradition from which the Victorian patriarchal discourse of letters derives, and

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<sup>23</sup>Madwoman in the Attic 73.

with which both male and female writer would have to engage: "This tradition is typically characterised as deriving from the performative Logos of a paternal deity and is discerned in poetic subjectivity that simultaneously advances a male center and writes the female as the 'other' -- necessarily represented without her own subjectivity or power of self-representation, and inscribed in political and epistemic hierarchies alike as the object of appropriation, instruction, or mastery."<sup>24</sup> Homans puts it more bluntly: "The literary images available to women all demonstrate to women their unfitness for poetry."<sup>25</sup>

We are by now familiar with the difficulties experienced by women writers bent on articulating themselves, inscribing subjectivity, rather than yielding to the object position, and remaining content to act as the "source" of an "inspiration" that is implicitly understood as masculine. The question is, how did Rossetti herself deal with this awareness of self, and how specifically did she negotiate the problems of creating an identifiably female lyric voice? Like many of her contemporaries, her textual strategies display many of the characteristics of hybrid subjectivity seeking agency, such as appropriation and resistance, collusion and challenge.<sup>26</sup> The texts themselves demonstrate evidence of a number of

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<sup>24</sup>"Individual in Community" 139-140.

<sup>25</sup>**Women Writers** 29.

<sup>26</sup>Grant Farred provides a useful synthesis of Homi Bhaba and Donna Haraway's complementary notions of the hybrid subject in "Not Like Women at all: Black Female Subjectivity in Laretta Ngcobo's **And They Didn't Die**," forthcoming in **Genders**, 1993.

individual and distinctive "coping mechanisms" and strategical procedures, which reveal not only hybridity, but a capacity for multiple subjectivity. What is of interest to us is their unique inscription of this subjectivity. How did Rossetti's extraordinary claim, "I am I," invoked in defense of her individual artistic license and power, follow through into her texts? Above all, how would have Rossetti's poems spoken to Dante Gabriel's?

Rossetti was not "unfit" for poetry. She proceeded to define images and tropes which enabled her to express both female individuality and a multiplicity of selves. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore Rossetti's strategies for subverting the masculine poetic tradition by constructing a hybrid and multiple subjectivity, and her practice of a critical-poetic response to Dante Gabriel's art, both poems and paintings.

To begin with, if one looks at the way the poem *Echo* operates, a paradigm for beginning to read much of the rest of Rossetti's work can be established. The title itself suggests imitation, resonance or reflection of a previous articulation. Yet from this title onwards, the poem unravels, deconstructs itself, creates an alternative tradition out of the process of impersonating and inverting a tradition; it "speak[s] silence" out of a "dream," conjures up a relationship and intimacy out of death (we discover that the first-person voice belongs to a speaker who describes herself as long since dead): the silence which breaks itself also disrupts

the historical finality of death by establishing itself as occurring in the present continuous tense -- "speaking." Here are assembled the prescribed components of a love-poem, while their meaning is simultaneously cancelled; there is "breath" in death; "tears" mimic but do not evoke a sense of grief; the sensuality of "soft rounded cheeks" and eyes "as bright/ As sunlight on a stream" are at odds with the "cold" lifelessness of the corpse; years that are "lost" and "finished" are recalled to the present with living, breathing immediacy. Rossetti thus impersonates elements of both the elegy, and the love-lyric, in particular the voluptuously nostalgic Victorian rendition of the romance of long-lost love, while simultaneously rewriting them according to a different agenda.

Likewise, *Song* ("Sing no sad songs for me, my dearest") apparently replicates the simplest of grave-side ballads; yet the first-person speaker, who is also the potential corpse, takes up the lyre to sing her own elegy, and effortlessly manages to be both mourner and the mourned, to write her own epitaph in effect: a "doubleness" that forms a favoured pattern of articulation in Rossetti's writings. (Even the lilting simplicity of the literally "sing-song" first line is obliquely equivocal: is the speaker instructing her beloved to sing no songs for her, or no *sad* songs?) So in texts that have been admired for decades for their "sincerity" and "simplicity," we discover simultaneous appropriation and disintegration of the repertoire of the masculine poetic tradition, and a doubled narrative vantage point that provides an ingenious solution to the woman writer's problem of being

both object and subject, poet and poem within the same text; a hazard which, according to Mermin, Barrett Browning was possibly less successful in obviating.<sup>27</sup> Rossetti's flair, insouciance, even, makes it look deceptively easy in the final stanza of *Song*:

I shall not see the shadows,  
I shall not feel the rain;  
I shall not hear the nightingale  
Sing on, as if in pain:  
And dreaming through the twilight  
That doth not rise or set,  
Haply I may remember  
And haply may forget.<sup>28</sup>

The accoutrements of an aesthetic of mourning are cancelled out by the imperative and repeated refusal "I shall not." This demonstrates not only the imperviousness of the speaker to the process of eulogy and elegy, but her categorical refusal to "play the game," to remain fixed as the object and addressee of the songs sung by male poets. Even the nightingale, one of Rossetti's

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<sup>27</sup>"The Damsel, the Knight" 64-80. Mermin concludes that neither Barrett Browning nor Rossetti "fully solved within their lyric poetry the problem of the damsel and the knight," (80) but I would argue that although Rossetti may not have escaped the problem, she developed a sophisticated response to it.

<sup>28</sup>Mermin goes on to say of this poem: "We miss the full resonance of this lyric unless we recognize it not just as self-pity or self-abnegation, but as a response to the long tradition of songs in celebration of women who are dead and silent. Rossetti in tacit reciprocity writes about the indifference of corpses, the grievances of ghosts, and women whose sleep of death will end in a happy resurrection beyond all earthly loves." ("The Damsel, the Knight" 74.)

characteristically inverted appropriations from Romantic poetic typology,<sup>29</sup> is, like the female poet, a mimic who sings "as if" in pain -- a hired mourner, or the deliberate impersonator of a specific code of emotion or art.

Another example of how Rossetti's texts operate is demonstrated by a brief reading of *Winter: My Secret*,<sup>30</sup> initially (and significantly) titled *Nonsense*.<sup>31</sup>

Here a textual artifact is created out of a secret, a withholding of speech and a refusal to disclose which is paraded for fifty lines. The presentation of this "doubl[e] blank" (which itself becomes a suggestive trope for reading both Rossetti's texts and textual strategies) operates at a number of levels; the "secret" may not even exist; it is withheld nonetheless, continually uncertain and at a remove, yet powerful in its ability to tantalise the audience/reader, to draw them on into the poem in order to collaborate with an assigned script. The chatty intimacy of the poem, a dramatic monologue which invokes a sense of dialogue, rather like listening to only one side of a telephone conversation (a common device in Rossetti's single-voice lyrics and narratives) is in direct contradiction to its contents:

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<sup>29</sup>For further discussion of Rossetti's response to the convention of the nightingale's song, see Diane D'Amico's "Fair Margaret of 'Maiden-Song': Rossetti's Response to the Romantic Nightingale," *Victorian Newsletter* 80 (Fall 1991): 8-13.

<sup>30</sup>Crump, CP I 47.

<sup>31</sup>PW 481.

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:  
Perhaps some day, who knows?  
But not today; it froze, and blows, and snows,  
And you're too curious: fie!  
You want to hear it? well:  
Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

The text *plays* with its reader, evoking the inexorable progress of time both linear and cyclical, of Summer following Winter, seasonal opposites balancing each other, the natural world underscoring a sense of order and continuity, even expectation. Yet this cycle is disrupted and distrusted (...yet I don't trust/ March with its peck of dust/ Nor April .../ Nor even May...) and the revelation constantly promised by the punctuating devices (which supposedly herald announcements -- the succession of semi-colons suggest throughout the poem that something is about to follow), is equally constantly denied. By translating the erotics of physical "teasing" into a textual tactic, Rossetti both resists and engages the masculine tradition; in a context in which women were not permitted sexual assertiveness, it is the poem which appropriates feminine coquetry, which refuses to divulge its mysteries. Flirtation or withholding become a performance of assertion, a demonstration of power. Ironically, the poem's *real* revelation -- speech act -- is created out of a refusal to divulge what may not even have being: "Or, after all, perhaps there's none:/ Suppose there is no secret after all,/ But only just my fun."

This scheme of teasing ("my fun" or "nonsense") was a deliberate and serious creative tactic in Rossetti's poems. Her texts also demonstrate continuing serious "play" with the word "No," creating positive statements of out rejection and refusal. We have already noted the eager and forcefully confident performance of *No, Thank You John*, in deconstructing the logical flaws of the discourse of masculine courtship by means of refusal. (According to Rossetti's plot, Man proposes, but Woman disposes.) Another poem in which the script of courtship is given a different revision, also by means of "playing" with both "yea" and "nay," is *Love from the North*.<sup>32</sup> Two separate kinds of relationship are charted almost entirely in terms of their use of negative and positive; the ineffectual bridegroom's speech simply shadows the speaker's: "My yes his yes, my nay his nay." The heroic interloper, however uses "nay" to disrupt the prescribed "yea" of marriage vows, offering the narrator-bride an inverted alternative: "'Put yea by for another time/ In which I will not say thee nay.'" The conventional absolutism of acceptance or rejection in advancing romantic relationships is overturned in favour of the compelling "nay" intruded into the patriarchal formula.

The word "no" is also functional beyond the rejection of certain discourses, romantic or otherwise, in Rossetti's lexicon; Steven Connor points out how the

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<sup>32</sup>Crump, CP I 29.

use of negatives in the texts also contribute to Rossetti's method of masking meaning, evading concretisation: speaking of *Cobwebs*, he writes "This shifting is displayed in the poem ... where the actual subject ... recedes into invisibility under the pressure of continuous negatives: .... [it] slips away behind the elaborate dance of denials."<sup>33</sup> Once again, these denials or refusals tantalise the reader; they signify not absence, but a presence (possible or potential) which is being withheld from the reader in order to engage or intrigue.

The reifying and revivifying of the object position to the point where it displaces the subject and assumes its own subjectivity is also a feature of Rossetti's texts. This has been briefly touched upon in the outline of her espousal of a "lowest place" (including when this necessitates feminine submission) that is explicitly unstable or potentially disruptive, and fervently promises the inversions of the apocalypse. The more humble the siting of a female narrator, the more overt her renunciation of subjectivity and power, the more spectacular the potential reversal. This notion suffuses Rossetti's religious poetry and prose:<sup>34</sup> in the brief poem-prayer *The Lowest Place*, in which the speaker apparently hardly dares beg for the lowest possible niche in an order which is only temporarily

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<sup>33</sup>"Speaking Likenesses" 440.

<sup>34</sup>Anthony Harrison brilliantly outlines the subordination of her religious writings in "Rossetti and Sage Discourse," arguing that "[i]n assaulting her dominant culture's primary social and material value systems through a critique based in the religious beliefs that traditionally complemented and served those systems, Rossetti deploys subversive strategies of extraordinary power and complexity." (95.)

fixed, we see that "shar[ing] ... glory" is only two lines away from the "lowest place," and the emotional fulfilment offered by transcendence is equally imminent:

Give me the lowest place: not that I dare  
Ask for that lowest place, but Thou hast died  
That I might live and share  
Thy glory by Thy side.

Give me the lowest place: or if for me  
That lowest place too high, make one more low  
Where I may sit and see  
My God and love Thee so.

It is not only Rossetti's religious poetry that promises the kingdom, the power and the glory as a reward for women who assume poses of humility at appropriate moments in the brief history of the temporal and entropic world: the secular poems often follow similar patterns. Diane D'Amico traces the omnipotence of the figure of Margaret in *Maiden-song* (whose majesty is capable of uniting and healing an entire community, both natural and social) to her whole-hearted and sincere espousal of the ideally feminine virtues of patience and modesty.<sup>35</sup> These qualities are inscribed once again in terms of their affective power, their ability to impact on their environment; they become a means of

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<sup>35</sup>"Christina Rossetti's 'Maiden-song': The Regal Power of Humility and Patience," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 6.1 (1985): 24-33.

**overcoming the inertia and isolation which conventionally circumscribe women subordinated within the dominant culture.**

**Thus, we can identify hallmark strategies within Rossetti's texts: a performative grasp and demonstration of technique, sublime patterns of mimicry, the appropriation of the tropes of her male literary peers, and a renegotiated and multiple subjectivity which dissolves the axis around which binary oppositions are organised.**

### Interrogating the Art of Dante Gabriel

Rossetti's poems spoke not only to a variety of patriarchal conventions, but at times specifically (and even aggressively) to her brother's creative projects and aesthetic strategies. However silent Rossetti may have remained in their personal relationship, her texts answer back. Clearly there is a strong case for a comprehensive intertextual and comparative reading of the works of both Rossettis.<sup>36</sup> If we combine Phyllis Rose's reading of the dialectics of intimate familial or romantic relationships themselves as texts, either deliberately or unconsciously created as scripted narratives,<sup>37</sup> with a hermeneutical approach derived from Auerbach<sup>38</sup> and Mermin's arguments for reading poems themselves as having a (gendered) "life" and a capacity for argument of their own, then we can profitably cross-reference the texts of the Rossettis as interrogative in their relation, while simultaneously testing the resulting dialectics against the lived metaphors of their personal histories.

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<sup>36</sup>Both Thompson and Florence Boos have pointed this out; so far, only Joan Rees has made comparative observations, and these take the form of asides in her work on Dante Gabriel, rather than close discussion of Rossetti's poetry. (**The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: modes of self-expression** [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], chapter 7 in particular.)

<sup>37</sup>**Parallel Lives** 7.

<sup>38</sup>"Robert Browning's Last Word" 162-163.

An exploration of the degree to which Rossetti's texts interrogate her brother's poems and paintings suggests that, creatively, she was able to enact a subtle and unusual revenge for the textual violence that she herself was subjected to.

Likewise, the construction and reconstruction of his texts as *defensive* responses to hers, reveals the confrontation that was displaced from their personal histories to their art. A few texts are obviously cross-referenced; for example, Rossetti writes *A Reply From Willowwood* as a response to Dante Gabriel's sonnet sequence by the same name, and several critics have noted that *The Blessed Damozel* by Dante Gabriel and his sister's *The Convent Threshold* seem to be deliberately paired.<sup>39</sup> Far more challenging are the unacknowledged "debates," possibly the most notable being the ongoing dialectic, or "argument" between *Goblin Market* and *Jenny*, discussed below.

Whereas any attempt at a full treatment of the intertextuality of Dante Gabriel and Christina's works is not within the scope of this thesis, we can at least trace the patterns within Rossetti's texts which subvert certain constructions within her brother's artistic productions. Perhaps the struggle for subjectivity within her texts is more than the complex struggle for creative articulation by the post-Romantic woman poet; her various and determined constructions of the female subject, her insistence on the agency of a host of female voices and figures, could

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<sup>39</sup>See, for example, Sharon Smulders, "A Form that Differences" 164-167; and Rees 169-174.

all be read as oblique alternatives and antidotes to the object positions assigned the feminine not only in the Pre-Raphaelite encoding of gendered aesthetics, but in Dante Gabriel's poems and paintings. What follows are guidelines which can be usefully applied in beginning such comparative and cross-gendered readings.

In order to begin investigating how her poems not only negotiate a position for herself as artist, but subvert, undermine and even supplant her brother's own works, we need to return first of all to Rossetti's trope of the dead woman, and to examine how it operates in relation to the figure of the woman killed into art. In Rossetti's exploration and transmutation of binary opposites discussed above, death becomes a means of transition or translocation whereby the female figure or sign can escape or explode the symbolic order, and assume power.

Subjectivity can be reclaimed in a number of ways; the female corpse can exercise license to gaze, to boldly comment, to both create emotional histories and to renegotiate those histories; to invert transactions of power; to explore freedom from the finite, to bend and twist time, to assume authority, to reproach not the dead, but the living. The use of death and the appropriation and inversion of genres and creative artifacts associated with it (urns, monuments, elegies, tombstones, commemorations, biers, effigies, eulogies, and so forth) is particularly significant in terms of revealing Rossetti's exploration of a realm of "otherness:" death is neither a form of closure for Rossetti, nor a subordinate binary opposition to life, but a vehicle of imaginative disruption, a means of

interrogating and challenging patriarchal and rational conventions, free from the demands of the finite world and linear time. The dead body is transformed into a powerful figure, both effective and affective: the grave/bier/deathbed becomes a vehicle for ushering in the "other world and time," the disruption of linear temporal and spatial time that Kristeva speaks of in "Women's Time."<sup>40</sup> Death also becomes a circumvention of the dilemma, created by Romantic poetic aesthetics, of how Woman, fixed as the object of speech, the spoken-about, can herself become the speaker, the one who generates speech. To paraphrase Janet Gray, the "death-in-life" trope from the Romantics onwards, serves (for most male writers) as a zone of anxiety about feminization of the poetic voice and (for women artists) as a kind of holding place, a gathering-point of potential and energy from which to claim subjectivity and agency: in other words, the event of "death" in art has the capacity to act as a trope of cataclysmic change in gendered essence.<sup>41</sup> Once having "passed" through the gateway of death, woman is free to construct herself, become the author of experience, and to assume an uncontested subjectivity, no longer the acted-upon object.

Thus, the "death of the maiden" becomes a means of critiquing the male artistic projections of both her brother and the Brotherhood, a powerfully disruptive trope used to criticise an increasingly constricting, even "lethal" patriarchal

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<sup>40</sup>The *Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 187-213.

<sup>41</sup>Personal communication, Dec 1992.

tradition. Elisabeth Bronfen, in a discussion of the Victorian transformation of the Romantic patriarchal discourse of the Muse, states: "It is no longer the poet, daring to disacknowledge the Muse, who is punished for his audacity, but instead the woman chosen to be Muse. What she gives is not her song but rather her body and her life."<sup>42</sup> Until fairly recently, Rossetti's succession of dead women were considered to constitute an earnest acquiescence to this poetic prescription of sacrifice; hence the charges that many of her poems were morbid and gloomy,<sup>43</sup> that they advocated an escapist submission by embracing death as a solution to all the "trouble and tumult" of life, especially a woman's life.<sup>44</sup> However, these claims have been increasingly regarded with misgivings in recent readings: Christopher Ricks feels his way towards an understanding of Rossetti's insistence on corporeality of death, and its integral connectedness to life, when he points out that "She was unremittingly conscious of bodies, hers and others'. She believed in the Incarnation and her words are acts of incarnation. Her devotees have regularly taken such life out of her, the more gallingly in that her art is an

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<sup>42</sup>"Dialogue with the Dead: the Deceased Beloved as Muse," **Sex and Death in Victorian Literature**, ed. Regina Barreca (London: Macmillan, 1990) 246.

<sup>43</sup>These, as we know, began in her own lifetime; she herself would refer self-mockingly to her poems as "groans" on occasion.

<sup>44</sup>See, for example, Stuart Curran's discussion of *Sleeping at Last* in these terms ("The Lyric Voice of Christina Rossetti" 298-299.) W.W. Robson is another who describes "the compensating yearning for death imagined as an anodyne, an eternal anaesthetic" as a major characteristic of Rossetti's poetry, which is sometimes, "if not mawkish, a little *mièvre*." ("Pre-Raphaelite Poetry," **The Pelican Guide to English Literature from Dickens to Hardy** [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960] 365, 367.)

acknowledgement of how life itself has a way of taking the life out of us all."<sup>45</sup> Angela Leighton also probes the complexity of Rossetti's supposed longing for death, pointing out that "[a]s a poet, Rossetti rehearsed her death for more than forty years .... But far from being an act of pious 'mortification,' the death dream of her poems is a dream of despair, rich in imaginative license." Leighton also stresses the correlation between the death poems and the "tormented hallucinations" of Rossetti's own dying moments; however, perhaps a wider distance needs to be set between the figure of the dead woman in Rossetti's texts and her own horrific death, at which crisis point the religion in which she had invested her life, failed to provide the necessary consolation. Leighton thus sees Rossetti's vision of death as one of "despair;" however, she goes on to point out that although "[a]pparently a figure of passivity and narcissism, the dead woman really harbours some ultimate knowledge...."<sup>46</sup> This line of thought needs to be pursued; for knowledge is power, and Rossetti's corpses wield an arcane and disruptive power. The difference between Rossetti's so-called "bogieism" and that of Siddal's points to an important and distinctive characteristic of Rossetti's works about death; the latter's female figures usually speak, act, or are spoken for *after* death, not before. Rossetti had read poems such as *A Year and a Day*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>"Christina Rossetti and Commonplace Books," *Grand Street* 1.3 (Spring 1990): 191-192.

<sup>46</sup>"'When I am dead, my dearest': The Secret of Christina Rossetti," *Modern Philology*. 87.4 (May 1990) 376.

<sup>47</sup>Lewis and Lasner 16-17.

and *At Last*<sup>48</sup> by her sister-in-law, in which the still-living female narrator longs passionately for the release of death as a means of escaping the miseries and heartbreak of life, and had rejected them as (literally) "hopeless."<sup>49</sup> She had no intention of falling into this trap; for her, death was the metaphoric arena in which female subjectivity could experience resurrection.

The process whereby the death or incarcerated life<sup>50</sup> of the woman is appropriated as inspiration by the male artist is reformulated in Rossetti's texts, where we find that there is a distinct (and disturbing) critical correlation between *Woman as Art* and *Woman as Corpse*. (Rosenblum has already touched upon the *aesthetic* significance of the dead woman in her discussion of the female

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<sup>48</sup>Lewis and Lasner 18-19.

<sup>49</sup>UBC, 10 Feb 1865; RP 78.

<sup>50</sup>Proceeding from Rossetti's agenda of using the "dead woman" trope as well as her project of inverting Dante Gabriel's representations of women in the visual arts, is her critique of the eroticising of the woman enclosed or entrapped, and the romanticising of enclosure. We have already seen that Rossetti disrupted her own conscription into the confines of paintings in various ways. The sobering unmasking of enclosure as claustrophobia demonstrated in *Shut Out* and *The Royal Princess* has a broader application; her presentation of women constantly passing boundaries, crossing lines, strategically choosing the "lowest place" in order to experience radical apocalyptic transfiguration, also act to deconstruct her brother's reiterated plot of the "embowered" woman. As has been discussed, the scenario of the woman enclosed, imprisoned and in bondage in Victorian art reflected the disquiet engendered by contemporaneous patriarchal discourses. This of course translates from representations in art to those in literature: in fact, as we have seen from a brief glance of Millais's painting inspired by Tennyson's *Mariana*, art and literature often cross-referenced each other. The spectacle of the dead woman was closely linked to that of the incarcerated woman experiencing a living death; it is no coincidence that Tennyson's Mariana repeats endlessly, "I am weary -- I wish I were dead."

spectacle in the works of Rossetti's and her contemporaries.)<sup>51</sup> Rossetti was not the only one who made the association between coffins and canvasses as a means of framing women's bodies, a link which in her case was undoubtedly rooted interactively in lived experience. Max Beerbohm, once again seemingly unwittingly, makes a similar connection in some of the cartoons in which he lampoons the Rossetti circle. In satirising Siddal's status as an art-object, he draws attention to the blurring between the live woman and dead artifact: in one sketch, Siddal stands in Dante Gabriel's studio surrounded by sketches and paintings of herself from which she is indistinguishable.<sup>52</sup> In another, Dante Gabriel introduces a large and overbearing Fanny Cornforth to a horrified Ruskin; Siddal looms over the scene in the shape of a large portrait, which at first glance, gives the impression that it is not her likeness, but her *body* hanging on the wall.<sup>53</sup> Obviously these cartoons play on the necrophilia which was suggested by the tales of the exhumation of Siddal's grave (one thinks of Dante Gabriel's pathetic and macabre justification that "Had it been possible to her, I should have found the book on my pillow the night she was buried; and could she have opened the grave no other hand would have been needed")<sup>54</sup> and the blurred publication dates of Rossetti's *House of Life* sonnets, which suggest that

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<sup>51</sup>*Poetry of Endurance* 125-131.

<sup>52</sup>Beerbohm, plate 7.

<sup>53</sup>Beerbohm, plate 2.

<sup>54</sup>*Letters of DGR* II 761.

the sexual references belonged to a marital relationship. (In the attack on these poems mounted in "The Fleshly School of Poetry," one of the critic Buchanan's objections to the sonnets was that they supposedly recalled nuptial embraces with a woman who had been in the grave for eight years; a distasteful memoir to the dear departed.)

Bram Dijkstra notes not only Dante Gabriel's creative obsession with his dead wife, but points out that his poem "My Sister's Sleep" (written as a young man at a stage when both he and his sister were vying to launch themselves into the literary world) suggests a fantasy of wanting Christina dead, at least artistically,<sup>55</sup> and goes on to misread her "death" poems as a form of metaphorical acquiescence to her brother's suggested script that she would die or at least fall silent. (It is worth noting that once her reputation had been established, Rossetti suggested to Dante Gabriel on several occasions that she seemed to have lost her poetic "spark," an odd claim coming from such a prolific writer.) I would argue for a far more radical reading of her texts which speak "from the grave": her female corpses are neither pallid nor pathetic, but triumphant, articulate, escaped; her dead women are not eroticised and objectified ghosts, as Siddal was to become, but authentic free presences. The

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<sup>55</sup>*Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 60-61. This reading, although temptingly persuasive, is a little too glib, relying as it does on an unproblematic identification of the poet with the narrator.

power with which they are invested is very possibly a response to Siddal's powerlessness to avoid violation both in life and death.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting Rossetti's writings about the repulsiveness of physical decay; an aspect of her "conscious[ness] of bodies" that she faced unflinchingly. She transposes the imagery of rotting flesh to a Medusa-figure to suggest *living* horror and deceit in the poem *The World*:<sup>56</sup>

By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair  
But all night as the moon so changeth she;  
Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy  
And subtle serpents gliding in her hair....

As this presentation of the archaic struggle between this world and the next suggests, the author was both fascinated and repelled by the macabre. In her early twenties, she had exhibited a rather unhealthy interest in viewing her grandmother's remains: a letter of condolence written to her mother from Somerset states, "And now for something personal. If I come to London, and am in time, I should like to see Grandmama again. Pray do not be afraid of the effects of such a sight on me; I really wish it, unless the lapse of so many days renders it inadvisable."<sup>57</sup> Towards the end of her life, in *Time Flies: A Reading*

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<sup>56</sup>Crump, CP I 76-77.

<sup>57</sup>FL 23.

**Diary, she finally exorcised in writing the childhood trauma of digging up the decomposing body of a mouse:**

**My first vivid experience of death (if so I may term it) occurred in early childhood in the grounds of a cottage ... in those grounds, perhaps in the orchard, I lighted upon a dead mouse. The dead mouse moved my sympathy: I took him up, buried him comfortably in a mossy bed, and bore the spot in mind.**

**It may have been a day or two afterwards that I returned, removed the moss coverlet, and looked ... [ellipsis Rossetti's own] a black insect emerged. I fled in horror, and for long years ensuing I never mentioned this ghastly adventure to anyone.<sup>58</sup>**

**Rossetti may have kept this "ghastliness" a secret, but as a visual nightmare, it was grotesquely and compellingly resumed in *Death*<sup>59</sup> (written in 1848) a piece which was to remain unpublished until its appearance in Crump:**

**"The grave-worm revels now"  
Upon the pure white brow,  
And on the eyes so dead and dim,  
And on each putrifying limb,  
And on the neck 'neath the long hair;  
Now from the rosy lips  
He damp corruption sips,  
Banqueting everywhere.  
Creeping up and down through the silken tresses  
That once were smoothed by her husband's caresses,  
In her mouth, and on her breast....**

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<sup>58</sup>**Time Flies**; quoted by Packer, **Christina Rossetti** 16.

<sup>59</sup>Crump, CP III 156.

Possibly the most extraordinary feature of this poem is the striking way it prefigures Elizabeth Siddal's fate, describing the inescapably gruesome physical facts of the grave-digging episode nearly twenty years before it took place. (On this occasion, Dante Gabriel wrote to William Michael of the stench clinging to the recovered book of poems, claiming hopefully that this was "partly no doubt the disinfectants";<sup>60</sup> he also confessed to Ford Madox Brown that there was "a great hole right through all the leaves of *Jenny*."<sup>61</sup> William Bell Scott confided to Alice Boyd that "It was so decayed through the *middle* part of the pages that he has had to *copy it himself*," adding with uncharacteristic understatement, "A queer sensation it must give him."<sup>62</sup>)

Rossetti's poem seems to explore with relish the physiological implications that Andrew Marvell only hinted at in *To His Coy Mistress* ("And worms shall try thy long-preserved virginity/ And all thy quaint honour turn to dust"), presenting a Gothic nightmare of total physical ravishment, both oral and phallic, by the "grave-worm" which displaces the "husband's caresses" in a repellent orgy of all-enveloping tactile penetration. It is not surprising that the poem was never published; if Dante Gabriel found *The Iniquities of the Fathers Upon the Children* coarse, it is not difficult to guess what his response to this poem might have been;

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<sup>60</sup>Quoted in Weintraub, *Four Rossettis* 170.

<sup>61</sup>*Letters of DGR* II 753.

<sup>62</sup>Quoted in Packer, *Christina Rossetti* 264.

and after Rossetti's death, the embarrassment of the exhumation of Siddal's grave would have made it impossible for William Michael to publish the poem in **Poetical Works**, even if he had considered it suitable for public consumption.

If language speaks us as much as we speak it, this is then an extreme case of literature writing life; or to borrow the famous epigram of the post-Pre-Raphaelite aesthete Oscar Wilde, "life imitating art." Certainly retrospectively, Rossetti's text undercuts the fatuous claims, first made by the notoriously seedy Charles Howell (who supervised the exhumation on Dante Gabriel's behalf) that Siddal's body was in perfect condition, a fallacy eagerly seized upon by Dante Gabriel in spite of the contradictory physical evidence presented by the worm-eaten manuscript, and less excusably, perpetuated by his early biographers such as Hall Caine. Much was made of the claim that the corpse's hair, supposedly as richly coloured as ever, had continued to grow in the coffin, a fantasy Dante Gabriel was to collude with in the sonnet "Life-in-Love", which concludes: "...where/ 'Mid change the changeless night environeth,/ Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death."<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Rossetti's violently disruptive poem of twenty years earlier, written when she was modelling on a regular basis, gives the lie to this myth-making: and the decaying female figure in *Death*, described in the next stanza as a classic model of Pre-Raphaelite beauty prior to her death ("She was even as a stately palm/ Beside still waters, where a dove/ Broodeth in perfect

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<sup>63</sup>Poetical Works of DGR 194.

calm./ Yea, she was as a gentle breeze....") is offered as a brutal disruption of the glamorisation of the female corpse enshrined in masculine poetry and painting.

As she developed this trope, however, Rossetti was to turn the actual corpse (presented in arrestingly visual terms) into the work of art itself, to be gazed upon and regretted, to act on the audience, to elicit responses it had been powerless to evoke in life. If we look at a number of texts which describe female corpses, we find that the instruction to the audience is the same as if the dead woman were a work of art. Both the reader and the audience located within the poem<sup>64</sup> have their attention drawn to the *picture* the dead woman makes. One of Rossetti's characteristic sketches of a holy woman who renounces the world "And/ Hated all for love of Jesus Christ," concludes with the woman on her death-bed, and is significantly titled *A Portrait*.<sup>65</sup> The "anguish" which the mourners cannot give expression to (they "could not weep") is both held in check and overshadowed by the commanding presence of the dying woman, who prepares for the emotional consummation she has longed for. Dramatically spotlighted and already suffused with stained-glass radiance ("...the sun's last ray/ Shone through upon her, warming into red/ the shady curtains"), she anticipates her spiritual marriage: "...In her heart she said/ 'Heaven opens; I leave these and go away;/ The Bridegroom calls, -- shall the Bride seek to stay?'" The moment

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<sup>64</sup>This feature of much Victorian poetry is analysed by Mermin in *The Audience in the Poem: Five Victorian Poets* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983.)

<sup>65</sup>Crump, CP I 122.

of death is signified by a gracefully choreographed gesture: "Then low upon her breast she bowed her head." Now a corpse, transformative power accrues to her, and she is immediately recast as an exemplary pattern of femininity, whose moral "loveliness" is described in visually evocative terms: "O lily flower, O gem of priceless worth,/ O dove with patient voice and patient eyes,/ O fruitful vine amid a land of dearth,/ O maid replete with loving purities...."

What seems at first to be a citation of traditional symbols signifying feminine virtue and beauty, in language that suggests the Biblical imagery of the Song of Songs, becomes increasingly arresting when closer scrutiny reveals this to be a replication of a typically Pre-Raphaelite catalogue of typological features associated with the feminine model.<sup>66</sup> Moral and intangible qualities of patience and love are relegated to adverbs and adjectives adjacent to visually compelling symbols, grammatically sited as nouns, which list morally neutral, but aesthetically appealing or persuasive physical entities: the "lily flower," "gem," "vine" and "dove." This becomes more than an effort by Rossetti to identify her poetry as Pre-Raphaelite; it begins to rework this aesthetic syllabus by transferring it to the body of a dead woman -- a trope which can be adapted as a critique. The same list of symbols -- maid, lily, vine and dove -- all appeared in Dante Gabriel's two paintings of his sister as the Virgin Mary. Thus this verbal

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<sup>66</sup>Rossetti's conflation of Pre-Raphaelite and Biblical imagery is likely to be related to the early Pre-Raphaelite manifestos of presenting religious scenes according to criteria both naturalist and symbolic.

"portrait," written at a time when the young Rossetti was modelling for her brother, becomes an early example of re-appropriation, both drawing on and displacing these paintings; a cross-referencing which, as we shall see, was to become a pivotal strategy in Rossetti's texts.

A somewhat different treatment is given to the dead princess in *The Prince's Progress*<sup>67</sup>, where the tardy prince, expecting to gaze on his intended's face ("Let them look on each other's face") is thwarted of this right, which he is obliged to forfeit to a higher Bridegroom: "This Bride not seen, to be seen no more/ Save of Bridegroom of Death?" Yet even though the corpse of the princess is marked by signs of suffering which require veiling ("she.../Must wear a veil to shroud her face/ And the want graven there") the ritual of death is an imposing display:

What is this that comes thro' the door,  
The face covered, the feet before?  
This that coming takes his breath;...

Veiled figures carrying her  
Sweep by yet make no stir;  
There is a smell of spice and myrrh,  
A bride-chant burdened with one name;  
The bride-song rises steadier  
Than the torches' flame:...

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<sup>67</sup>Crump, CP I 95-110.

This performative presentation of the corpse is commandingly affective; in motion, wreathed in incense and flowers, accompanied by chanting, and lit by torches, her bier carried past the prince is what robs *him* of breath. The anonymous, but clearly feminine voice which rebukes him for the next six stanzas demands that he respond to this visual display: "‘Is she fair now as she lies?’" Yet after castigating the utterly silenced prince, whose only (inarticulate) response after losing his breath seems to be tears, this sibylline voice reverts in the last stanza to a favoured Rossetti shrug -- the sheer indifference of the female corpse to any masculine response or performance of grief or remorse: "‘You should have wept her yesterday,/ Wasting on her bed:/ But wherefore should you weep today/ That she is dead?’"

At other times, the corpse itself exacts its own revenge, wielding its power with relish. In *After Death*,<sup>68</sup> the female corpse has been laid out, once again even staged, in a bedchamber in which "The curtains were half-drawn, the floor was swept/ And strewn with rushes, rosemary and may/ Lay thick upon the bed on which I lay." Thus framed and surrounded by the dramatic props of the ritual of death, presented as a spectacle, the dead woman savours the impact of her death on a man she was unable to exert any influence over while living:

He leaned above me, thinking that I slept

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<sup>68</sup>Crump, CP I 37-38.

And could not hear him; but I heard him say:  
"Poor child, poor child:" and as he turned away  
Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.  
He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold  
That hid my face, or take my hand in his,  
Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head:  
He did not love me living; but once dead  
He pitied me; and very sweet it is  
To know he still is warm tho' I am cold.

This presentation of the emotionally compelling, even hypnotic impact and power of the corpse can be set up as a contrasting cross-reference to a number of Dante Gabriel's portraits, which present *living* women as catatonic and acquiescent.

Casteras summarises these readings in her descriptions of the women who featured in Dante Gabriel's mature paintings: "[they] share a trance-like, heavy-lidded expression and seem to beckon with overt sexual allure from within their crowded niches or parapet-like windows .... Jane Morris ... gazes mesmerised at the beholder from a highly decorative backdrop of exotic props, materials and flowers .... Siddal's physically weak body is viewed in some languishing pose: she is continually shown ... transported in a moment of secret reverie or drugged lethargy."<sup>69</sup> Various art historians have noted these characteristics features which Dante Gabriel assigned the women in his paintings; the drugged pose, limp

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<sup>69</sup>"The Double Vision in Portraiture" 15, 14.

bodies, and glazed stares.<sup>70</sup> As Casteras goes on to point out, it is this very passivity which is inscribed as erotic.

The counterpoint provided by Rossetti's texts is subtle, yet radical; they closely impersonate, yet invert the hallmarks of Dante Gabriel's paintings of women. As we can see, there is a strong emphasis on the affective *sexual* power of Rossetti's corpses, which acts to reinscribe the presentation of feminine eroticism in her brother's drawings; likewise, the exotic and flattened backgrounds of his paintings translate into the stylised back-drops described in Rossetti's poems, which heighten and emphasise the visual and emotional impact of her dead women. Even the cataleptic stare which is a hallmark of Dante Gabriel's portraits of women is inverted by the ability of his sister's corpses to mesmerise and impress those who view them. The insistence on alternative images to the drained and vampirised women in Dante Gabriel's paintings recalls Rossetti's personal history of her brother's creative projection and construction of femininity. One can compare her dead women in poems with Dante Gabriel's "dead" women hanging on walls, and witness how the former reinscribe the latter.

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<sup>70</sup>Thus David Sonstroem's witty moment of deflation is all the more welcome: in a review of John Bryson's edition of Dante Gabriel's correspondence with Jane Morris, he writes, "now we know the leading thought behind that sad, silent, soulful, famous face -- ... 'My back is killing me.'" (*Victorian Studies* 21.1 [Autumn 1977]: 133.)

Rossetti's use of the trope of the dead woman to unsettle and subvert is not new; male contemporaries presented a variety of female bodies, dead or dying, which jostle disturbingly the very agenda of eroticised immobility or passivity their authors were attempting to inscribe as feminine. Janet Gray argues that the Victorian stake in the figure of the dead woman as aesthetic object is concerned with patriarchal anxieties about the historical and social dialectics involved with women "coming to life" in a number of arenas of the "real" world; the marketplace, politics, health and social reform, authorial voices proliferating in texts, and so forth.<sup>71</sup> Dijkstra agrees: "the sleep-death equation [became] charged with morbid erotic equations, presenting the male with at least a fantasy of conquest without battle, a life of power without constraints."<sup>72</sup>

For example, Robert Browning's poems in which a possessive or possessed narrator describes representations of women who have been quite literally killed into art, begin to explore the same conflation between woman as aesthetic artifact and woman as corpse that both Rossettis were caught up with; in *My Last*

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<sup>71</sup>Personal communication, 28 November 1992.

<sup>72</sup>Dijkstra 61. This sheds light, for example, on the numerous pictorial presentations of both Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* and his *Elaine of Astolat*; there were even more illustrations of the *Lady of Shalott* floating down a river dead or dying than there were of her in her tower, tangled in threads from her loom. These drawings and paintings usually feature a supine or prostrate female figure drifting helplessly downstream in a boat, being literally carried away; Millais's *Ophelia* also replicates this configuration, presenting the same ingredients, minus the boat: a prone and semi-conscious woman sinking passively into the river, dying of insanity brought on by forbidden or unrequited love. These and other paintings of dead, dying or fainting women, often operated not only as attempts to eroticise feminine passivity, but as indications of anxiety about female activism.

*Duchess*, the presentation of the painting which the narrator urges his audience to admire, makes it clear that what is a work of art, is also a particularly sinister funerary monument. These texts also experiment with the potential of the female corpse to "talk back." But whereas Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* and Browning's *Duchess* articulate the power of their reproach through their transitory physical beauty, momentarily frozen in the photographic still of death (Tennyson's Lancelot muses appreciatively, "She has a lovely face/ ... The Lady of Shalott," whereas Browning's Duke boasts anxiously that the "spot of joy on the cheek" in the painted version of the *Duchess* is an exact reproduction of the flush on her neck in life), Rossetti's dead woman bloom into apocalyptic visions of transfiguration that evoke awe, remorse, speechlessness. *They speak*, or female allies speak on their behalf, either striking the (male) audience dumb, or erasing the potential for articulation on the part of these onlookers into tears, whispers and murmurs.

Thus Rossetti's use of the trope of the dead woman speaks outside of her texts to specifically masculine projections in her brother's art. For example, the poem *A Pause*,<sup>73</sup> which has the triumphant female corpse's "hair/ Put on a glory" at the approach of her presumably stricken and remorseful lover, simultaneously mimics and cross-examines Dante Gabriel's *Beata Beatrix* -- his monumental painting of Siddal as Beatrice at the hour of her death, her face backlit by the

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<sup>73</sup>Crump, CP III 215-216.

halo of her famous golden-red hair. The narrator, whose communicative power has been released by her death, awaits the object of her affections in life not only eagerly but triumphantly:

Only my soul kept watch from day to day,  
My thirsty soul kept watch for one away:--  
Perhaps he loves, I thought, remembers, grieves.  
At length there came the step upon the stair,  
Upon the lock the old familiar hand:  
Then first my spirit seemed to scent the air  
Of Paradise: then first the tardy sand  
Of time ran golden; and I felt my hair  
Put on a glory, and my soul expand.

Here most of the components of *Beata Beatrix* are assembled. First of all, the hair of the female figure becomes a primary indicator of transfiguration in both the text and the painting. We are also presented with a male lover, grieving, faceless, hovering in the background; and the impact of death on the physical passing of time is noted (Dante Gabriel's painting has a sundial commemorating the significant hour, whereas Rossetti's poem suggests that the sands of time contained in an hourglass are galvanised into swifter motion, signifying the transformation of time together with that of the soul.) The word "golden" in the poem picks up both the predominant colour and the gilded quality of light in the painting; and possibly most compelling, the moment of post-death assumption

into Paradise is represented in terms of erotic ecstasy.<sup>74</sup> Yet these are also the points of difference; for the female figure presented by Dante Gabriel, time has contracted to one moment, the hour of passing forever preserved in the amber of his art, whereas in *A Pause*, the sands of time are transmuted into gold and *run* beyond temporal restrictions, burgeoning into glory along with the blossoming soul. The hair of the supposedly dead, but sensately live and acutely aware narrator clearly mimics that of the Beata Beatrix figure; but whereas the glowing nimbus of hair is used as a soft-focus frame for the face in the painting, the female corpse in *A Pause* feels her hair become radiant, even celestial, with a physical immediacy that borrows from the vivid frisson suggestive of "hair standing on end" (the speaker in the erotically charged *A Coast-Nightmare* also feels her "hair stand up" in the presence of her mysterious lover.)<sup>75</sup> The interrogation of Dante Gabriel's painting becomes even sharper in the inscribing of death as sexual: the figure of Beatrice/Siddal is supine and limply post-orgasmic, her hands slackly unfurled, and her face tilted back in the classic pose (heavy-lidded eyes shut, voluptuous lower lip drooping open) that artists deploying patriarchal aesthetics have used to signify female sexual pleasure ever since Bernini's St Theresa was ravished by the angel's lance. The female corpse

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<sup>74</sup>Marsh notes also that Dante Gabriel began work on *Beata Beatrix* at about the same time that Rossetti was working on *The Prince's Progress*, and points out that here, too, "The images of poem and painting resonate. Both ... contain an enchanted dove, the flame of love and life, the opium poppy of sleep and death, the slow hours of the sundial, and the bride between sleep and waking, life and death...." (*The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* 12.)

<sup>75</sup>Crump, CP III 269.

in Rossetti's poem, however, experiences a rapturous transfiguration of herself and corporeal time simultaneously -- a *jouissance* which physically announces the ultimate consummation: the entry into Paradise.

Rossetti's transformation of the object position of the "dead woman" emerges as part of a larger creative strategy she makes use of in deconstructing her brother's poems and paintings. As the above texts demonstrate, this was also a means by which she could enter into and attempt to reverse the dichotomy between visual and written art (a further oppositional polarity which she was concerned to remodel) in order to create works of art that not only mimicked, but rivalled and radically critiqued Dante Gabriel's paintings of women.

Once again we can turn to Rossetti's *In an Artist's Studio*<sup>76</sup> (which we already know is related both to her own experience as an artist's model, and her observation of Siddal's treatment) in order to confirm this pattern for reading her poems as subversions of her brother's works of art, both in painting and poetry. This text provides a particularly useful set of guidelines, not least because of the similarity between Rossetti and Siddal's experiences of being relegated to the feminine polarities of binary opposites. Jan Marsh writes of Siddal: "... Elizabeth Siddal has all the lineaments of femininity according to the cultural definitions of the age.... Her role was to be looked at and adored, the object of

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<sup>76</sup>Crump, CP III 264.

masculine admiration, and to be drawn and painted. The pictures are, indeed, a visual manifestation of her symbolic meaning within the Victorian ideology of separate spheres and gender difference; their subject is the complementary figure in a repeating sequence of dualities: male/female; artist/model; lover/beloved; husband/wife; health/sickness; strength/weakness; active/passive; living/dead. On all counts, she fulfils her allotted function of defining [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti's fame."<sup>77</sup>

We have already surmised that Rossetti is all too aware of the projected needs of the artist, whose portraits of Siddal (and later Jane Morris) acted to evacuate their personalities, and to mask their actual presence by means of poses and costumes ("One self-same figure sits or walks or leans;/ ... A queen in opal or in ruby dress,/ A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,/ A saint, an angel; -- every canvass means/ The same one meaning, neither more nor less.") What is even more interesting, is that surrounded by a plethora of visual images of Siddal, countless sketches of her almost casually stuffed into drawers,<sup>78</sup> the *Beata Beatrix* painting (which was described by William Michael as "an exact portrait

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<sup>77</sup>The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal 50.

<sup>78</sup>Ford Madox Brown was to remark of a visit to Dante Gabriel's studio, "He showed me a drawer full of 'Guggums,' God knows how many ... it is like a monomania with him." (*The Diary of Ford Madox Brown* 148.)

of ... Gabriel's own wife,")<sup>79</sup> being reworked or duplicated for over a decade in her brother's studio, Rossetti insisted that the presence and visual realisation of Siddal were to be acutely and authentically experienced, not in any of Dante Gabriel's paintings, but through the dead woman's *own* poems, *her* attempts at self-articulation. Writing to Dante Gabriel during the debate over whether or not to insert Siddal's works into the **Prince's Progress** volume, Rossetti testifies not only to the affective power of the poems, but to their ability to revivify Siddal: "How full of beauty they are, but how painful -- how they bring poor Lizzie herself before me, with her voice, face and manner."<sup>80</sup> Siddal's own writings, her own efforts towards agency, are what physically conjure "Lizzie herself before me" for Rossetti; a startling claim on the part of someone who must have repeatedly seen Siddal's likeness "before" her in the form of paintings and drawings. Here the "screens" and "canvasses" with which Dante Gabriel framed and masked Siddal are rejected in favour of her own texts, which bring to life her own "voice, face and manner."<sup>81</sup> Clearly, replication of a woman's face as the

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<sup>79</sup>Letter to Francis Burgess, 11 March 1898. **Register of the Rossetti Collection**, Special Collections, Ellen Clarke Bertrand Library, Bucknell University. Ed. Nancy Weyant and Susan Basalla.

<sup>80</sup>RP 76.

<sup>81</sup>Also worth noting is Rossetti's choice of Lizzie's likeness, when asked to select one as a memento after Dante Gabriel's death; out of the dozens of drawings which showed Siddal languishing, reclining or dreaming, she chose the only one which showed her sitting bolt upright in a chair, engrossed in a book. (**Rossetti's portraits of Elizabeth Siddal: a catalogue of the drawings and watercolours**, ed. Virginia Surtees [Aldershot: Scolar Press, in association with Ashmolean Museum, 1991], plate 48.)

object of a masculine creative project is not sufficient for Rossetti, precisely because the reification of the individual female "face" often became a means of silencing the individual "voice" and "manner."

The way in which the living women who were Rossetti's models were blanked out by the aesthetic agenda, the "same one meaning" enshrined in Pre-Raphaelite symbol, and entirely absorbed into the art which objectified them, is demonstrated in Henry James's extravagant response to meeting Jane Morris for the first time: "[she is] a figure cut out of a missal -- out of one of Rossetti's or Hunt's pictures -- to say this gives but a faint idea of her, because when such an image puts on flesh and blood, it is an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity. It's hard to say whether she's a grand synthesis of all the Pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made -- or they a 'keen analysis' of her -- whether she's *an original or a copy*. In either case she is a wonder. [my italics]"<sup>82</sup> James is exhilarated by the same sense of the living woman flattened into two dimensions ("a figure cut out of a missal") that Rossetti found so profoundly disturbing. In *In An Artists' Studio*, this uneasiness is suggested in the initially inoffensive, but increasingly unsettling image of the narrator and others rifling through paintings, in search of a picture disquietingly conflated with a person, and finding an image who is possibly also a woman, perhaps pressed and preserved like a dried flower:

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<sup>82</sup>Quoted by Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic* 371.

"We found *her* hidden just behind those screens."<sup>83</sup> It falls to James to announce the very fate that Rossetti contested with such determination; that one effect of the "sameness" of meaning for the female modelled into art, was that the original would eventually become indistinguishable from the copy; the process of depersonalising and artistically colonising the female muse would eventually result in total or near-total obliteration of any subjectivity on her part.

All this is of course at odds with Rossetti's partisan and effusive praise of her brother's paintings (mostly, if not exclusively of women.) The letters of congratulation and compliment<sup>84</sup> she wrote to him, as well as her admiring remarks to other family members and friends, became a public (and to a certain degree, she experienced her family as a public arena) form of masking which hid the critique she wrote into a private poem (none of her relatives or acquaintances reveal any knowledge of its existence during her life.)<sup>85</sup> *In an Artist's Studio* comes remarkable close to the attack on Dante Gabriel's paintings by a Victorian

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<sup>83</sup>The macabre connotations of the "flatten[ing] of the female anima" are hinted at by Uli Knoepfelmacher in his treatment of Browning's "woman killed into art" texts, *Porphyria's Lover* and *My Last Duchess*. ("Projection and the Female Other: Romanticism, Browning, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 22.2 [Summer 1984]: 143.)

<sup>84</sup>One letter, in which Rossetti makes arrangements to spend a day with Dante Gabriel, enthuses, "I hail the prospect of seeing again the *Prosperine*, and for the first time the *Veronica*: where in England and its studios is your peer?" (FL 47.) She was a fraction more restrained in a subsequent letter: "I hope we shall see the final "Vanna" someday: but indeed she was so beautiful at our last meeting that she fully sufficed me." (FL 88.)

<sup>85</sup>This is more unusual than it might seem, given the family's active involvement in reading and copying her poems.

critic, who noted the "same face, same stare, nearly the same attitude on every wall"<sup>86</sup> -- a judgement which echoes uncannily a verdict Rossetti had reached nearly a quarter-century before: "The same one meaning, neither more nor less."

Dante Gabriel's construction of the feminine in both literature and art reflects not only the romantic and sexual idealisation that had been a hall-mark of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, and which he shared with other artists such as Burne-Jones;<sup>87</sup> it is also likely that this idealising and idolising is related to his fear of female sexuality. This is clearly displayed in a letter he wrote to William Michael from Paris, in which he included a poem explicitly meant as a journal entry, urging his brother to hide it from the rest of the family:

A toothsome feast  
Of blackguardism and whore flesh and bald row,  
No doubt for such as love those same. For me,  
I confess, William, and avow to thee,  
(Soft in thine ear) that such sweet female whims  
As nasty backsides out and wriggled limbs  
Nor bitch-squeaks, nor the smell of heated q---s  
Are not a passion of mine naturally.

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<sup>86</sup>David Hannay, quoted in Marsh, **The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal** 18.

<sup>87</sup>Burne-Jones was to write that a work of art should be "a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be -- in a light better than any light that shone -- in a land no one can define or remember, only desire -- and the forms divinely beautiful." (Quoted by Hilary Morgan, **Burne-Jones, the Pre-Raphaelites and their Century** [exhibition catalogue Peter Nahum Ltd, 1989] 65.) The significance of this creed where gender is concerned becomes apparent when we consider that, like Dante Gabriel's, Burne-Jones' corpus consisted almost exclusively of paintings of women.

This poem, to which Dante Gabriel added the postscript "we have not seen six pretty faces since we have been at Paris .... the females, the whores, the bitches -- my God!!"<sup>88</sup> is a revealing study in revulsion and attraction. Dante Gabriel's objections to the whores of Pigalle doing the "frog-hop" are not those of outraged virtue, but dismay at an overt display of female sexuality staged by a far more pragmatic patriarchy than he himself could stomach. In all his later presentations of voluptuously eroticised feminine sexuality (catalogued by the rather prudently disgusted critic Buchanan as "[f]emales who bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam, and in a general way slaver over their lovers")<sup>89</sup> the "smell of heated quims" is nevertheless a secret that is completely obliterated. This early terror of female genitalia was to become entrenched in the later paintings, where fantasy presentations of women displace and diffuse eroticism to other body parts, hair, clothing and pose. Rossetti almost never drew a female nude, although naked female breasts creep into two of his paintings,<sup>90</sup> and his poem *Troy Town*<sup>91</sup> provides a rather juvenile and over-fulsome testimony to the beauty of Helen of Troy's breasts.

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<sup>88</sup>Letters of DGR I 72.

<sup>89</sup>"The Fleshly School of Poetry," Houghton and Stange 893.

<sup>90</sup>In a fascinating marker of Dante Gabriel's attitudes to race, gender and the exotic "Other," on one of the two instances in which a topless woman appears in his paintings, she is black.

<sup>91</sup>Poetical Works of DGR 305-307.

Dante Gabriel was in fact primarily aesthetically (and erotically) obsessed with women's hair. Elizabeth Gaskell was to note with a mixture of pique and amusement that "I had a good deal of talk with him, always excepting times when ladies with beautiful hair came in ... it did not signify what we were talking about or how agreeable I was; if a particular kind of reddish-brown, crepe wavy hair came in, he was in a moment struggling for an introduction to the owner of said head of hair. He is not as mad as a March hare, but hair-mad."<sup>92</sup> His later paintings dwell lovingly on the heavy masses of hair belonging to Fanny Cornforth, Jane Morris and Alexa Wilding, who are often pictured combing or dressing their hair, although this is not without a frisson of sexual danger, even suggestions of bondage. Rossetti's fixation with hair, and to a lesser extent, female breasts, suggested an awareness of the threat these sexually charged body parts represented; Troy burns, and Lilith strangles her victims with a single thread of her hair.<sup>93</sup>

Florence Boos confirms that Dante Gabriel's romantic and sexual history also suggests his difficulties and self-lack in dealing with women: "It would be wrong ... to sentimentalize [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti as a victim of "tragic loves." It seemed to serve some inner purpose for [him] to idealize women who were withdrawn, invalid and/or melancholic. Their genuine alienation (literal, in the

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<sup>92</sup>Quoted in Thompson 120.

<sup>93</sup>Dante Gabriel was to rework Goethe's myth of Lilith's fatal hair into a sonnet of his own. (*Body's Beauty, Poetical Works of DGR* 216.)

case of Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris, from their families ... and class origins) seems to have provided some counterpart for an inner sense of inadequacy and isolation in him.... he seemed to need serious emotional attachments with women which were poised on the edge of abrogation and withdrawal.... a sense of this equilibration heightened the effects both of his paintings and his poetry."<sup>94</sup>

Thus the act of constantly, almost anxiously rewriting women's bodies and identities, reducing them to the "same one meaning" seems to be linked to the inability of the artist to satisfactorily resolve his apprehensions about what the female body could potentially signify. The techniques so chillingly appraised in *In an Artist's Studio* became a means by which Dante Gabriel could repeatedly relegate the threateningly metamorphic feminine to the proper subordinate position from which (on closer scrutiny) it was always escaping in Rossetti's texts.

*In an Artist's Studio* becomes a counterpoise to two poems by Dante Gabriel, both entitled *The Portrait*. These articulate his aesthetic of using art (in particular, the visual arts) to glorify and idolise individual women into lasting icons, arguing that this is an act of veneration and adoration, and boldly laying claim to an analogy between his paintings of beautiful women and Shakespeare's sonnets which similarly preserve a beloved in art and thus in time. They read as aggressive responses to *In an Artist's Studio* to the extent that it is hard to believe that their

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<sup>94</sup>"Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Victorian Poets After 1850* 232.

author was unaware of his sister's poem; it is entirely possible, that while ignorant of her written critique, he was conscious of her discomfort with his project of "feeding" on the faces of the women around him.

This context informs his "portrait" poems, which also grapple with the questions of death and mortality, and their conjunction with art, although their agenda is very different from that of Rossetti's texts. One is part of the **House of Life** sonnet sequence, and must be read in conjunction with the bold statement with which the introductory sonnet<sup>95</sup> opens: "A Sonnet is a moment's monument, --/  
A Memorial from the Soul's eternity/ To one dead deathless hour." Not only is the work of art a means of seizing a past ("dead") moment and rendering it immortal, it is also a means of currency that can circulate in the marketplace, that has a particular worth and mobility:

A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals  
The soul, -- its converse, to what Power 'tis due: --  
Whether for tribute to the august appeals  
Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,  
It serve; or, ...  
In Charon's palm it pay the toll of Death.

The commercial imagery used (the idea of using art to pay "tribute," "dower" and "toll") threads its way through several other significant texts by Dante

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<sup>95</sup>Poetical Works of DGR 176.

Gabriel; what is noteworthy at this point is the suggestion that the sonnet becomes a means of entering into a form of transaction with death. The enshrining of (female) beauty can thus become a vehicle whereby the male artist can literally purchase a hold on life. This method of laying claim to immortality is made explicit with arrogant panache in the well-known concluding lines of the sonnet *The Portrait*:<sup>96</sup> "Let all men note/ That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!)/ They that would look on her must come to me." As Susan Casteras notes, Dante Gabriel is possessed by an "obsession with seizing the image -- to remember it, love it, and *own* it. [my italics]"<sup>97</sup> When the narrator claims, "Her face is made her shrine," it is clear that this painted face is as much a shrine for worshipping the artist's skill as the lady's beauty. What is more, the female object which testifies transhistorically ("in *all* years) to the skill of the painter/poet, is moulded as much by the poet's physical caresses as his brush: "my lady's picture glow[s]/ Under my hand" and her "mouth's mould testifies of voice and kiss." Painting the woman's portrait thus becomes a substitute for love-making, which in turn becomes a metaphor for *constructing* the female body.

In the longer poem titled *The Portrait*,<sup>98</sup> the act of painting a dead woman becomes a repository for the male poet's nostalgia, as well as a means of

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<sup>96</sup>Poetical Works of DGR 181.

<sup>97</sup>"Double Vision in Portraiture," Ainsworth 10.

<sup>98</sup>Poetical Works of DGR 240-243.

admiring the wonder of his own artistry. That his veneration is directed towards *his* own artifact (and his success in rendering a woman wholly object) is demonstrated in the opening lines: "This is her picture as she was:/ It seems a thing to wonder on/ As though mine image in the glass/ Should tarry when myself am gone." The feminine third-person pronouns "her" and "she" do not persist beyond the first line, before being displaced first by the impersonal "it" and "thing," and then by the insistent first-person indicators of possession and self-identification, "mine," "myself." This siting of the female figure as the object, properly in her place (the artist's canvas), strongly contrasts with the robust subjectivity of the female speakers in Rossetti's written "portraits." The poem corroborates what Susan Casteras has pointed out: "[Dante Gabriel's] portraits of women appear ultimately to reveal more about him than they do about the specific sitters, for they divulge [his] need to be enamoured not only of the living models he painted, but also of the reforged myths they helped him to create."<sup>99</sup>

These suggested models of comparing and cross-referencing poems by brother and sister become particularly useful when extended to the elliptical critique of *Jenny* (by Dante Gabriel), by *Goblin Market*. This became an ongoing dialogue: Dante Gabriel was the first to write his poem, a series of musings by a male speaker over the sleeping body of a golden-haired prostitute, "fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea." Although Dante Gabriel was at first chary of reading it to his

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<sup>99</sup>"The Double Vision of Portraiture," Ainsworth 18.

female relatives, the poem was well-known in the family, and in fact one of Mrs Rossetti's favourites. Much later, after Rossetti had written *Goblin Market*, which posited a radical transformation of the economics of sexual transaction, making it clear that it was women who "paid" for sexual transgression, and creating a universe in which women only could redeem each other from the consequences of this transgression, Dante Gabriel rewrote and lengthened his poem, one of those he most regretted consigning to Siddal's grave. Both poems provide dramatically different readings of the central debates around sexuality, commerce and their connection -- sex as transaction, and the significance of the "coin" in signifying purchasing power, or acting as a bargaining tool. Several critics, such as Elizabeth Helsinger<sup>100</sup> and Terrence Holt,<sup>101</sup> have read *Goblin Market* and *Jenny* as dialectical discussions of the implicit discourses of exchange and commercial transaction that surrounded women's bodies, as well as the economics of sexuality in the Victorian bourgeoisie, and have produced comparative examinations of both texts in the process. However no-one has yet suggested that the poems might function as a form of specific dialogue and contestation, or investigated the changes Dante Gabriel made to *Jenny* after the publication of *Goblin Market*. The title of the latter was itself suggested by Dante Gabriel; his sister's choice was "A Peep at the Goblins."<sup>102</sup> Here we have reason to be

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<sup>100</sup>"Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire" 919-929.

<sup>101</sup>"'Men sell not such in any town': Exchange in *Goblin Market*," *Victorian Poetry* 28.1 (Spring 1990): 51-67.

<sup>102</sup>Crump, CP I 234.

grateful for Dante Gabriel's intervention, although Rossetti's blander choice grows more interestingly ambiguous on reflection, with its suggestion of surreptitious female transgression -- *looking*, no matter how stealthily, into the alien and forbidden (male) community. Dante Gabriel's choice, however, indicates his immediate identification of the poem's concern with the marketplace of industrial capitalism, and the process of selling and buying women's bodies as a microcosm of patriarchal capital flow.

Dante Gabriel first worked on *Jenny* sometime during 1848-9 (long before *Goblin Market* was thought of), and Paull Baum provides a fair copy of this early version from the Bancroft manuscript collection.<sup>103</sup> Throughout the late 1850's Dante Gabriel and other Pre-Raphaelites, such as William Bell Scott and Holman Hunt, returned over and over again to the fascinating topic of the "fallen woman."<sup>104</sup> This was also the period of Dante Gabriel's preoccupation with the painting of *Found*,<sup>105</sup> a highly sentimental treatment of the accidental discovery of a dishevelled "fancy woman" by her suitably appalled rustic former sweetheart. It was during this period, while the Brothers were mulling over the figure of the

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<sup>103</sup>"The Bancroft Manuscripts of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Modern Philology* 39.1 (August 1941): 47-68.

<sup>104</sup>Prostitution was an issue that absorbed, unsettled and deeply troubled the Victorians. Lynda Nead's *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) provides a useful overview of the shifting construction of the prostitute as a Victorian figure-type.

<sup>105</sup>He was also to write a poem, by the same title, as a companion piece for the painting. (*Poetical Works of DGR* 363.)

prostitute in their paintings and poems, that Rossetti produced *Goblin Market*; her fair copy is dated April 1859, and D.M. Bentley argues that she may have begun work on it early in 1858,<sup>106</sup> the same year in which Dante Gabriel completed a longer version of *Jenny*, although he was to revise it further in 1869.<sup>107</sup> That brother and sister were working on their first major collections simultaneously, we know; we also suspect them of covert competition. Each was familiar with the other's poem; it was at this time that Dante Gabriel was circulating *Goblin Market* among his contacts in the literary world. It is highly likely that the additions to *Jenny* which directly challenge the unique sexual economy of *Goblin Market* were written at this stage, and some of the intertextual links are self-evident; the line "It makes a goblin of the sun" in *Jenny* is obviously a nod towards *Goblin Market*. (It is also significantly located: it is set off in the poem as a one-line commentary on the feminine dichotomy the narrator is both pondering and reinforcing; it appears after the words "Of the same lump .../ For honour and dishonour made,/ Two sister vessels. Here is one" and immediately before the line "So pure, -- so fall'n!") The extent of Dante Gabriel's degree of involvement in the task of reworking his poem is suggested by his guilty rationale for depositing his fair copy collection of poems in Siddal's coffin: "I have often been writing at those poems when Lizzie was ill and

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<sup>106</sup>"The Meretricious and the Meritorious in *Goblin Market*: A Conjecture and an Analysis," Kent 59-60.

<sup>107</sup>William Michael's Notes, *Collected Works of DGR* 649. The final version of the poem can be found in *Poetical Works of DGR* 83-94.

suffering, and I might have been attending to her, and now they shall go."<sup>108</sup>

Once he had repented of this extravagant gesture of immolation (after the publication of *Goblin Market*), he made it known that the poem he most regretted sacrificing, and was most eager to salvage, was *Jenny*.<sup>109</sup> Presumably he still had the fair copy of his youthful effort (it eventually landed up in Fanny Cornforth's possession); it seems that what he was most anxious about having lost were the lengthy additions of the late fifties. Once retrieved, the poem was once again reworked into the version with which we are familiar.

If we compare the 1848 manuscript with the finally published version of *Jenny*, we are able to test the extent to which the additions act as responses to *Goblin Market*. To begin with, the epigraph which heads *Jenny* undergoes a sea-change between the earlier and later versions. The first fair copy has more overtly brutal citations, with the dismissive words from Ecclesiasticus ("An harlot is accounted as spittle") standing against the ironic idealism of Shelley's version of Goethe: "What, still here! / In this enlightened age too, since you have been / Proved not to exist!"<sup>110</sup> In the later version, the quotation comes from Shakespeare, and centres on naming a woman a "whore;" although Dante Gabriel stopped short of writing this word in the epigraph, it becomes the

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<sup>108</sup>Quoted in Daly 93.

<sup>109</sup>Letters of DGR II 753.

<sup>110</sup>Baum, "Bancroft Manuscripts" 48.

unspeakable word of the poem, the name from which the narrator's musings repeatedly draw back, but which dominates the poem. Naming and bracketing the fallen woman was essential in order to split her from her pure sisters; this is perhaps the first inkling we receive that the mediation of identity and blurring of boundaries that takes place between the two sisters in *Goblin Market* is to be interrogated.

The original version of *Jenny* is very much a young man's fantasy; the female body is fetishised as a luxurious commodity, and the prostitute's profession is highly sentimentalised by a naive, if patronising narrator, who can never quite bring himself to acknowledge either the role he plays, or his economic power, as purchaser in the marketplace of women's bodies. This rather spoils the effect of his indignation at the "beastliness of man ... who having used thee, afterward/ Thrusts thee aside, as when I dine/ I serve the platter and the wine: ...."<sup>111</sup> As this demonstrates, the speaker is a gustatory consumer of female sexuality; nevertheless, the prostitute's body is presented as a straightforward catalogue of sexually enticing parts, hardly metaphorically described at all, except in terms of tactile evocation:

Thine arms are bare and thy shoulders shine,  
And through the kerchief and through the vest  
Strikes the white of each breathing breast,

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<sup>111</sup>Baum, "Bancroft Manuscripts" 49.

And the down is warm on thy velvet cheek,  
And the thigh from thy rich side slopes oblique,  
And thy lips are full, and thy brows are fair ....<sup>112</sup>

After the publication of *Goblin Market*, with its climactic scene in which one woman offers up her body for her sister's literal consumption, after which the latter is herself consumed by a cataclysmic but restorative paroxysm, Dante Gabriel contracted this rather unsubtle listing of Jenny's physical attributes (which suggests a Pre-Raphaelite version of a Playboy Pet) to a safely consumable set of images: "...your wealth of unloosened hair,/ Your silk ungirdled and unlac'd/ And warm sweets open to the waist." This offers a tamed and glossy alternative to the inviolable and mysterious bodies of the sisters in Rossetti's text.

Another significant extension to *Jenny* after the successful production of *Goblin Market* was the adding of the scene in which the narrator scatters coins in the hair of the sleeping woman. The need to connect male sexual and economic control is indicated by the equation of gold with semen (which Dante Gabriel himself makes clear in explicitly likening Jenny to the figure of Danaë, who according to legend, was impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold.) This could well be a response to acute anxiety engendered by *Goblin Market's* extraordinary transfiguration of masculine sexuality and sexual essence. The scene in which the goblins beset Lizzie, and try to force the forbidden fruit into

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<sup>112</sup>Baum, "Bancroft Manuscripts" 51.

her mouth (she "would not open lip from lip/ Lest they should cram a mouthful in") is often read as a rape configuration, and certainly the reader is led in this direction; yet sympathetic narratives of rape and sexual assault invariably present the female figure as at best a victim (and only recently even as a survivor.)<sup>113</sup>

Lizzie however, is presented throughout what is obviously a considerably unpleasant physical ordeal, as inevitably triumphant; although first "Like a lily in a flood," this seeming vulnerability is swiftly translated into more obdurate and vividly phallic images: she is "Like a rock of blue-veined stone/ Lashed by tides .../ Like a beacon left alone/ In a hoary roaring sea/ Sending up a golden fire,--/ ... Like a royal virgin town/ Topped with gilded dome and spire/ Close beleaguered by a fleet/ Mad to tug her standard down." The female appropriation of the phallus is used to signify invulnerability, and disavow what might otherwise be seen as a rape narrative, as the one fate which can never befall a phallus is rape. The goblins have to resort instead to useless sadism -- biting, pinching, kicking, and gouging. The text makes it clear that Lizzie's is a power besieged but victorious, whereas the actions of the goblins, no matter how revolting or vicious, are primarily ineffective, petty, and impotent. Feeling the juices of the powerful and forbidden fruits being splattered and rubbed against her body gives Lizzie no sense of violation, but instead a rush of exultant power: "But [she] laughed in

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<sup>113</sup>It is worth noting William Michael's rather uncomfortable paraphrase of *Goblin Market* at this point, provided for readers in his Notes to the **Poetical Works**: "So [Lizzie] goes to the goblins, refuses to eat their fruits, and *beguiles* them into forcing the fruits upon her with so much insistency [sic] that her that her face is all smeared and steeped with the juices. [my italics.]" If the poem contains a "rape" scene, then in William Michael's parlance, Lizzie was "asking for it."

heart to feel the drip/ Of juice that syruped all her face,/ And lodged in dimples  
of her chin,/ And streaked her neck which quaked like curd." Likewise, she  
returns to Laura in gleeful triumph, smeared and stained with the seminal matter  
of the fruits, but still in possession of her own coin, her own bargaining chip  
which she was willing to risk in the alien marketplace. This is a woman only  
apparently violated, who rejoices in having got the magic substance of maleness  
without having to submit to penetration, and who has got this elusive essence not  
only on her own terms, but for *free*; her "penny jingle[s]/ Bouncing in her purse"  
as she runs triumphantly back to her sister. The moment of authentic  
consummation then takes place between the two sisters; one mediates the "goblin  
pulp" to the other in a searing scene of physical ecstasy and agony, which acts to  
further dissolve the boundaries between them, and it is after this crisis that both  
women are able to become mothers.

I have provided what is obviously a physiological and arguably reductive reading  
of this part of the text, although the juices of the goblin-fruits here act as a  
variety of tropes which obviously lend themselves to the multiple readings that we  
know to be characteristic of Rossetti's texts. Whether or not their strange  
alchemy represents power, sexual experience, liberation or knowledge, I have  
read them here as semen (which can in turn be re-read in metaphorical terms), in  
order to highlight the significance of Dante Gabriel's elaborate trope of  
ejaculation in *Jenny*. Here, even though the narrator evades the sexual act for

the purpose of which he and Jenny have presumably retired to her rooms, he nevertheless lays claim to the non-negotiable right of the client to sex, and insists that some sexual transaction take place, even if this is a symbolic masturbation into the fetishised hair of the prostitute. This complex gesture marks the commercial quality of their sexualised exchange; what is more, by collapsing the currency of sex and money together into an allegory that overtly equates them, he is able to insist on the *necessity* of money changing hands even if the sexual act is escaped or avoided. This reiterates the stability of the market-forces, where money passes from a male purchaser (in whose hands or pockets rests the buying power or economic clout) to a woman who is simultaneously merchant and merchandise. Thus he is able to rewrite the economics of *Goblin Market's* emotional and physical exchanges, which reject the coinage of both a masculine and capitalist market-place, and site the significant physical transmission of "juices" between equal female partners instead of differently ranked and gendered consumers and consumed.

In *Goblin Market*, therefore, Rossetti not only resists, but reworks the Virgin/Whore opposition that was to be so strenuously emphasised in *Jenny*; she manages to blur its categories by collapsing her female protagonists into a dyad, a reading of the text that most of its commentators would readily cede. She does not even permit a moral hierarchy; in the words of Casey, "[*Goblin Market*] undercuts the traditional patriarchal binary concept that the redeemer is

somehow 'better' than the redeemed and the spiritual superior to the erotic."<sup>114</sup>

It is this equality in status between the two female protagonists in *Goblin Market*, that is dramatically undermined in the later version of *Jenny*. Although the original was fashioned around the splitting of the female figure into polarised symbols (the Virgin/Whore dialectic,) the workings of this opposition are far more aggressively and emphatically rewritten in the second version. We are now treated to the speaker's musings on the dislocation between Jenny and his pure cousin Nell, the former's "feminine" opposite. Not only is the character of Nell (who appears nowhere in the first draft) evoked at this point for purposes of contrast, she herself is representative of an entire community of "pure" women who must be protected from the contaminating knowledge of Jenny's very existence. Although the character of Jenny is described as a book which the narrator puzzles over in the first version, the second time round, this trope is extended further: the prostitute now becomes a book into which virtuous women may not look -- a reinscription worked in not only after the writing of *Goblin Market*, but also *after* Rossetti had begun social work with prostitutes, thus herself "reading" the forbidden "book."

Certain additions to the final version of *Jenny* suggest that Dante Gabriel was responding not just to *Goblin Market*, but possibly also to other poems in which

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<sup>114</sup>"The Potential of Sisterhood" 66.

Rossetti was similarly subversive: the inclusion of the image of the whore as a "rose" pressed in the shameful book of sexual experience, works as more than a signifier of fear of the female genitals and body polluted by menstrual bleeding ("the life-blood of this rose,/ Puddled with shameful knowledge, flows/ Through leaves no unchaste hand may uncloze.") It also suggests a response to Rossetti's work *The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children*, originally titled *Under the Rose*,<sup>115</sup> which had earned Dante Gabriel's vociferous disapproval when included in the 1865 *Prince's Progress* collection. This work, which opens with the lines "Oh the rose of keenest thorn!/ One hidden summer morn/ Under the rose I was born"), provided a drastic departure from the presentation of "fallen woman" by Victorian poets (including the Pre-Raphaelites and even Barrett Browning) as working class or of rural stock. Rossetti's unmarried mother is a high-born lady, and much stress is laid on her status, lands, title, wealth, the loyalty of her fiefdom, and so forth. Not only is she born noble, she evades (although precariously) the fate that Dante Gabriel and his contemporaries insisted on; even if potentially or actually middle-class, the fallen woman is by definition assigned to the gutter, forfeiting her social privileges; she is not only implicitly working-class, but becomes irredeemably so. In *Jenny*, the rose/whore who is "puddled with shameful knowledge" is forever set apart from the community of decent women, a legitimate target for the snickers of "learned London children." The cross-referencing of the rose as an image of illicit sexual

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<sup>115</sup>Crump, CP I 164-178; 292.

experience, possibly serves to undermine the status of "my Lady at the Hall" in Rossetti's poem, who, although she has given birth to an illegitimate child "under the rose", is still able to graciously acknowledge the "old-fashioned toasts" and "old-fashioned bows" of the "neighbouring gentry" and local community. Fragile as this social respect is (the Lady's embittered daughter points out that by simply "hint[ing] a tale," she could make "the decent world ... thrust/ Its finger out at her"), it nevertheless disrupts the rigorous separation of the fallen woman from "the decent" world, an isolation Dante Gabriel was keen to stress in *Jenny*.

Dante Gabriel was able to have the "last word" (to borrow Auerbach's phrase) on *Goblin Market*, as well as the other poems printed in that volume and the *Prince's Progress* collection, as he published his revised version of *Jenny* well after their respective publications. Certainly after the appearance of his tremendously successful collection of poetry (at which point Rossetti was stricken with Graves disease -- now believed by the medical profession to be triggered by extreme trauma or stress) she "dropped" this particular subject, seeming to turn to the didactic medium of religious instruction; ground where her brother could never follow. Yet in the final analysis, Rossetti's radical rewriting of the female body, and her inscription of female sexuality in *Goblin Market* subsume their counterpoints in *Jenny*.

However, evidence that Rossetti did not necessarily concede the poetic stage to Dante Gabriel after 1870<sup>116</sup> can be seen: although he may have had the final say on the issues raised by *Goblin Market*, she was to pick up a new (and in some respects, far more daunting) dialectic. Rossetti and Dante Gabriel worked on their famous love sonnet sequences more or less simultaneously: his *House of Life* sonnets were published first, her *Monna Innominata* ones a few years later. Once again, following the pattern of writing and response, he then made additions to his collection. In this case, however, her texts were, and are, unanswerable. Her sonnets would be extraordinary even if they were of no particular literary merit; she consciously inverts a masculine tradition of love poetry by giving the hitherto much praised and blamed, but invariably silent "beloved" a voice. While these are not the first love poems or sonnets written by a woman and given an

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<sup>116</sup>Did Rossetti acknowledge poetic defeat after 1870? It is impossible to know, and hard to do more than speculate on how Dante Gabriel's success really affected her. She wrote all the requisite letters of congratulation and praise, both to her brother and his publisher, and it is perhaps uncharitable to read into her hyperbolic accolades the ambiguity that characterises both her private correspondence and public poetry. Perhaps at this point, Dante Gabriel had "won" their long-standing competition, while his sister (who had been so terrified of her own "eagerness to win" as a young woman, that she gave up games that pitted her wits against others) retreated behind the screens of illness and religion once more. Yet if Dante Gabriel had established his supremacy over Christina, he did so at huge cost; the grave-robbing episode, which he so had pathetically justified as necessary for his art, was to plague him until death, and was very possibly responsible for the fullblown symptoms of hysteria (psychosomatic blindness, delusions, paranoia and so forth) he subsequently developed. Likewise, his worst obsessive fears about public criticism were to be realised, in Buchanan's anonymous and spiteful attack on the poems. All his biographers, beginning with William Michael cite this as a major factor in exacerbating Dante Gabriel's neuroses to the point of insanity. It must also be remembered that although Rossetti may have relinquished her standing as the foremost Pre-Raphaelite poet to Dante Gabriel after 1870, she was to become, as we have seen, increasingly sure of the value and integrity of her works when discussing them with him.

identifiably female first-person voice, they are the first to do so as a deliberate response to the patriarchal convention, and to be explicitly framed as such. Rossetti's prose introduction, in which she sets out her project of giving utterance to "a bevy of unnamed ladies 'donne innominate,' many of whom "shar[ed] her lover's poetic aptitude, while the barrier between them might be held sacred by both, yet not such as to render mutual love incompatible with mutual honour"<sup>117</sup> may seem coyly phrased, but its statement of intention is radical: "Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend." The sonnets become not only an answer to, and inversion of the Petrarchan convention of courtly love, but can also be read as a counterpoint to her brother's love sonnets, an alternative to the reworking and nostalgic idealisation of the courtly love aesthetic seized upon by the Pre-Raphaelites, and explicitly explored in Dante Gabriel's paintings and poems; possibly only Burne-Jones among his contemporaries was as avid a recreator of the medieval as a means of visualising a feminine ideal.

Finally, another version of Rossetti's carefully constructed alternative creative paradigms can be found in her "sister" poems, in which a retreat is made to a world of female community. Men are often absent, except as ciphers or pawns -- although they are often catalysts of contest. However, possibly the most

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<sup>117</sup>Crump, CP II 86.

interesting feature of the "sister" poems for purposes of cross-referencing, is their continued reworking of the Pre-Raphaelite appropriation of medievalism. Poems such as *Noble Sisters*,<sup>118</sup> *Cousin Kate*,<sup>119</sup> *Maude Clare*,<sup>120</sup> and *Maiden-Song*<sup>121</sup> mimic both the form and aesthetic characteristics of the ballad style recreated by nineteenth-century poets, but nevertheless startle the reader with a different brand of twists and disruptions. To begin with, as with the *Monna Innominata* sonnets, female voices constantly break a prescribed silence. Not only does this suggest the notion of "writing (with) the female body," given the multiple feminine voices, tongues and lips that speak in these poems, especially in the light of the physicality of the speech acts by women; this feminine heteroglossia also renders men's voices silent, literally dumb-struck. In *Maude Clare*, the flood of speech by the jilted maiden of the title wipes out her unfaithful lover's ability to respond: "he strove to match her scorn with scorn,/ He faltered in his place:/ 'Lady,' he said, -- 'Maude Clare,' he said, --/'Maude Clare:' -- and hid his face." Even what are strictly speaking, dramatic monologues by a female voice, reveal themselves as disguised dialogues on closer examination: a solo female voice speaks in poems such as *Cousin Kate* and *Sister Maude* while simultaneously vividly conjuring up a potential respondent who is specifically

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<sup>118</sup>Crump, CP I 33-34.

<sup>119</sup>Crump, CP I 31-32.

<sup>120</sup>Crump, CP I 44-46.

<sup>121</sup>Crump, CP I 110-116.

addressed; the very silence of the oppositional figure is eloquent, a silence exploited to lay bare the failure of the value system they represent. This can be related to the ruthless "games-playing" in the "competitive" poems such as *Maude Clare*; once again we see the strategy used in *No, Thank you, John*, and *Winter: My Secret*, where both the silent partner to whom the narrator addresses her part of the "dialogue," and the audience are constantly lured into playing their part -- speaking their lines off stage -- only to have these overturned by the speaker's inversions of her own script.

These texts also put forward a number of female subjects who share a degree of kinship with the narrator of *The Lowest Room*<sup>122</sup> (the poem Dante Gabriel found so offensive.) This sets up one of Rossetti's characteristic scenarios: one of the rebellious woman in conflict with the discourses (patriarchal, artistic, familial) which constrict and prescribe her experience, who articulates, projects and eventually disguises her discomfort and anger against the screen of an stereotypically "ideal" woman, often a sister or cousin, whose appearance and demeanour closely emulates those of women presented in Pre-Raphaelite paintings.<sup>123</sup> This "rebellious" speaker, who is usually the first-person narrator

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<sup>122</sup>Crump, CP I 200-207.

<sup>123</sup>"...my sister...stayed a white embroidering hand/ And raised a golden head:/ Her tresses showed a richer mass,/ Her eyes looked softer than my own,/ Her figure had a statelier height..." The reference to the rich tresses in particular reminds the reader of the women in her brother's paintings; we already know that flowing, sumptuous masses of hair are characteristic of his models.

of the "medieval" poems, consoles herself either with secret relish at having successfully flaunted a convention, (as in *Cousin Kate* or *Sister Maude*) or with apocalyptic visions of rewards in the next life.

*Cousin Kate* in particular disrupts the orthodoxy its speaker is presumably subject to; not only does the narrator demonstrate a woman's appropriation, even exploitation, of the rigid definition of female value or usefulness (the bearing of male children) in a primitively patriarchal world of primogeniture; she levels at her silent (and once again, visually and morally flawless) cousin a far graver charge than the speaker's own overturning of sexual mores; for all Cousin Kate's technical modesty and purity, she has violated a far more authentic code of sisterhood by accepting without questioning the sexual double standard of her husband; there is literally no answer to the speaker's stinging charge:

O cousin Kate, my love was true,  
Your love was writ in sand:  
If he had fooled not me but you,  
If you stood where I stand,  
He'd not have won me with his love  
Nor bought me with his land;  
I would have spit in his face  
And not have taken his hand.

The creation of female communities in the texts very likely draws on Rossetti's saturation experience of female communality, at the same time as presenting an alternative -- even an antidote -- to the male communities (brothers, the

Brotherhood, the publishing world, the political world) Rossetti so carefully picked her way through. If any "message" can be tentatively extrapolated from the "sister" poems, it is that the fruits or gifts of men may be poisonous, but either mediated or appropriated through women, they may also become redemptive.

The community of confrontational, subversive or supportive sisters in these texts can be expanded to include the figure of the solitary woman who either rebels or endures (or both) as in *The Iniquity of the Fathers Against the Children* and *The Royal Princess*, whose protagonist strips off her jewels and rank and offers both gold and her physical body -- to be murdered if necessary -- to the starving multitudes outside the palace walls. It then extends to encompass the female speakers who cry out for justice and comfort themselves with visions of the apocalypse and a new world order in the religious poems. These voices come full circle with the chorus of female voices first heard in the "dead women" poems, the nuns, ladies-in-waiting, servants, and sisters who often surround the corpse and cry out in both triumph and reproach. This alternative feminine community becomes Rossetti's final textual answer to the patriarchal worlds of the male artists around her.

## AFTERWORD

In Rossetti's texts, we have noted the chorus of women who watch, who endure, who keep vigil by the bedsides, the sisters who negotiate spaces for themselves, who compete with, attack one other, experiment with power relations with each other and who redeem each other. I wish to propose a movement back to the field of literary history, so endlessly fascinating to the gynocritic, and examine briefly the replication of these female relations and relationships in Rossetti's life and immediate context. This has been a project largely about dissonance, power struggles, rivalry, and love surviving in sibling relations between female and male. Before laying it down, I should like to briefly draw attention to the community and communities of women in which Rossetti lived and moved and had her being.

To begin with her family, there is her mother, who was to note acerbically that although she had wanted intelligence for her children, she wished they had also been granted a little common-sense.<sup>1</sup> The presentation of Frances Rossetti invariably splits into two stereotypes: the first is the Victorian exemplar of the perfect mother, endlessly loving and patient, the angel in the house who never

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<sup>1</sup>William Michael, *Memoir in Collected Works of DGR* 22.

faltered in her Christian duty to spouse and children;<sup>2</sup> the second is the trendy post-Freudian caricature popular since the sixties, of the repressive and disapproving mother, who stifled and policed her daughter, and did her best to dominate and control the sons who had escaped her clutches.<sup>3</sup> Both renditions simply serve to mask her figure further; and although we will never know how much of an impact or influence she exercised over her two most creative children, future biographers can trace far more accurately and sensitively her role in the family currents. She must have been a particularly powerful person, given the life-long, almost slavish devotion she inspired in her children, even after her death; William Michael's edition of his brother's collected poems, published after Dante Gabriel's death, was eerily dedicated first to the memory of Frances, then only to Dante Gabriel. William Michael also tells us that while neither of his more famous siblings were demonstratively affectionate, both retained a "fondling habit" with their mother throughout their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Frances Rossetti was a woman who though half-Italian, faultlessly assumed the protective colouring and duplicated the role of the English middle-class lady; yet she repeated her mother's own history by marrying an Italian, and a flamboyant

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<sup>2</sup>William Michael was once again the first to create this stereotype in his **Memoirs** of both Christina and Dante Gabriel.

<sup>3</sup>Weintraub, for example, tends to cast her in this mould.

<sup>4</sup>**Memoir** lv.

and eccentric one at that; a political dissident and wanted man in his own country, who held esoteric and unorthodox spiritual beliefs. She had four children in the first four years of her marriage; and then either left her husband's bed for good, or made use of an extremely effective form of contraception for the remaining duration of her marriage. We are told that she loved her husband, and never quarrelled with him; yet she attended church daily, while he embroiled himself in complex and bizarre heretical notions and esoteric forms of Freemasonry; and when he died, one of the first things she did on "recovering from the first grief" was to burn every copy of a book he had written which she considered blasphemous, an act William Michael recounts with obvious mortification, even uneasiness, and which, to the modern reader, smacks of extreme sublimated hostility.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps her children, especially her daughters, learnt their first lessons in how to negotiate opposites and live with contradictions from her.

Then there is the "missing" Rossetti: Christina's eldest sister, Maria. The entire family throws away in casual remarks that she was by far the most brilliant and studious of them all. Certainly she was as precocious as the young Barrett Browning, insisting on learning Greek as well as Latin, and progressing steadily through a reading list both dazzling and imposing.<sup>6</sup> She too, was a writer, but

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<sup>5</sup>William Michael, *Some Reminiscences* 117.

<sup>6</sup>Rosenblum, *Poetry of Endurance* 35; Weintraub 7.

specifically a scholarly one: in today's idiom, she was the academic of the family. One of my moments of revelation came when at a Princeton cocktail party, a professor from the Italian department asked what my field of study was. I replied that I was writing a thesis on Christina Rossetti, bracing myself for the usual response, "Wasn't she related to the Rossetti who was a Pre-Raphaelite painter-poet?" Instead, he lit up with a different kind of recognition: "Any connection to Maria Rossetti -- the Victorian Italian scholar who wrote on Dante's *Divine Comedy*?" Up until that moment, I had not really taken into account Maria's significance in the family pantheon. Subsequently I reflected on the little we know about her life, and what it reveals about the options (or lack of them) for the Victorian equivalent of the bluestocking. Maria's gifts lay entirely in her brain; she was markedly plain (as a child, Christina assigned her the rather cruel nickname of "Moony") and was plaintively jealous of her younger sister's looks and charisma in their youth. She did not model for a single Pre-Raphaelite painting or drawing, in spite of being as available and presumably as willing as Christina was. She is the only member of his family that Dante Gabriel never once sketched, or attempted a portrait of; and this in an environment which laid especial stress on the appearance of women as a source of inspiration for the male artist. We have already noted that for his paintings of the Virgin Mary, Dante Gabriel chose his younger sister over his far more pious older one. We also know that there was no objection from Maria to portraiture; she happily sat with the rest of the family while Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)

took photographs, and proudly posed for a commemorative photograph when she entered a convent. The only person who ever sketched Maria was another woman; the painter Lucy Madox Brown, newly affianced to William Michael at the time, and perhaps sensitive to the fact that she was displacing the authority of the eldest daughter, drew her in her nun's veil. The incomplete portrait is both sensitive and unglamorous.<sup>7</sup>

Maria is in many ways even more elusive than her sister; there are no attempts to fabricate admirers (although Christina believed that her sister and Ruskin were in love at one stage, writing "Maria with Ruskin" in the margins of a passage in *Time Flies* which dealt with love deferred to the next world);<sup>8</sup> and several art historians have noted her friendship with the artist Charles Collins, although one attempt to link her with his painting "Convent Thoughts" has been discredited.)<sup>9</sup> Perhaps more than anyone else, she was the sacrificial lamb of the family: she bore the brunt of governessing uncomplainingly, although presumably this interrupted her research on scholarly projects, while Dante Gabriel lounged about the British Museum, and Christina lay ill; her work on Dante and educational books on the Italian language came out unobtrusively while Christina was reading laudatory reviews of her poetry in public magazines, and while

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<sup>7</sup>Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* 313. A copy of the portrait is in Battiscombe, facing 154.

<sup>8</sup>Weintraub, *Four Rossettis* 85.

<sup>9</sup>Weintraub, *Four Rossettis* 85.

Dante Gabriel was selling paintings to impressed collectors.<sup>10</sup> Once the family was secure, and William Michael announced he was bringing home a bride to head the household, she effected yet another form of disappearance, and retired behind the walls of a convent; not necessarily a life of immuration, as these female communities were sites of power and autonomy for many women whose lives would have otherwise been intolerably restricted. A few years later, she died of cancer (most probably contracted before she joined the Sisterhood), at a younger age than any of her siblings.

Christina's relationship with both her mother and her sister are crucial to a re-reading of her history; Jones argues that they literally policed her, and Thompson certainly believes that they were the two most influential (and not necessarily beneficial) forces on her life. The various group photographs of the Rossetti women are highly suggestive of psychoanalytical readings; one shows Maria standing behind Christina, pressing a hand down on her shoulder, while Frances Rossetti, who sits beside and above her younger daughter, clasps her wrist tightly. Rossetti is thus "bound" on both sides.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, there is the well-known portrait by Charles Dodgson in which Christina sits at her mother's feet, leaning

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<sup>10</sup>Christina writes to Dante Gabriel during her preparation of the *Prince's Progress* manuscript, "Have you heard of Maria's astute plan for an Italian exercise book? I am doing some of the subordinate work for her down here in my hermitage. Truth to tell, I have a great fancy for her name endorsing a book, as we three have all got to that stage, so I work with a certain enthusiasm." (RP, 73.)

<sup>11</sup>Thompson 134.

backwards, while her mother hovers possessively over her.<sup>12</sup> However, if Rossetti was perpetually the youngest daughter and the subordinate sister, who repeatedly expressed extravagant, even dogged devotion for her mother and sister, and who dedicated almost every work she wrote to Frances, it is possible that this tight female encirclement literally "held" Rossetti together, and prevented the personal and creative fragmentation that the tensions of her life might otherwise have generated. It is also possible that a complex series of displacements took place; the female community was for Rossetti a refuge and haven from the bruising world of male creativity and competition (especially the depredations of Dante Gabriel) and was thus reified as sanctuary. This however, necessitated the projection of any latent hostility or frustration between Rossetti, Maria and their mother back onto the male family members and beyond them, the Brotherhood. Thus Rossetti's two worlds -- male and female -- had to be split and fixed at a safe distance from one another, each purged of conflicting elements. These projections, and their understanding of gender, however fixed in life, were constantly renegotiated in writing, generating the shifting flux and mobility we have seen to be characteristic of much of Rossetti's canon.

Next come the aunts, of whom we know almost nothing, except for the fact that Christina lived with them for most of her adult life, and nursed them for years after they became frail and senile. We have a few fragments, however: Aunt

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<sup>12</sup>Andrea Rose, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (1981), facing plate 1.

Charlotte almost single-handedly sponsored Dante Gabriel through his early career, by means of an apparently endless succession of "loans" which were mostly never paid back. She was also the custodian of her brother Henry Polidori's scandalous diary of Byron's life, and in spite of her pencilled censorship, she permitted her nephews and nieces to read it. Of Aunt Eliza (the unofficial housekeeper of the Polidori home) even less is known, other than the fact that she went to the Crimea with Florence Nightingale at a time when this was considered something no respectable lady could do. This experience was the high point of her life, of which she wrote a proud account; the Turkish medal she received from the Queen was a treasured Rossetti family memento.<sup>13</sup>

The figures of Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris have been retrieved from the stereotypical niches to which they had been consigned -- as adjuncts to the lives of William Morris and Dante Gabriel -- in the past few years by the investigations of Jan Marsh, Pamela Gerrish Nunn, Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock. Marsh and Gay Daly especially have relocated the lives of a dozen women, several of them artists in their own right, associated with the Pre-Raphaelites to a more central position within the movement: we now know more of not only Siddal and Jane Morris and her daughters, but Effie Ruskin, later Millais, Georgiana Burne-Jones, Lucy Brown Rossetti, Joanna Boyce, Marie Stillman, Annie Miller, Fanny and Edith Holman Hunt. Yet there are more

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<sup>13</sup>Memoir in *Collected Poems of DGR* 32.

"nameless girls," crowding in the wings. We know very little of the working-class models used by the Pre-Raphaelites; their histories are probably lost for good. For example, almost nothing is known today of Ruth Herbert and Alexa (Alice) Wilding, other than whether or not they were chaste in their line of work as painters' models.

I would like to close by glancing briefly at the woman (known to Christina) who was apparently her most striking converse: the successful prostitute Fanny Cornforth or Schott, also known as Sarah Cox.<sup>14</sup> Loud, Cockney, vulgar and earthy, she is generally dismissed or vilified in Pre-Raphaelite histories; as she never made any attempt to draw or write, feminist histories of the Pre-Raphaelite movement have remained vague about her. Certainly in Dante's pictures and paintings, she is firmly consigned to the sexual/fallen side of the split in constructing women: the siren, the "ruined" women, the temptress, the mistress who is unrepentant of her sin. Swinburne, who disliked her, in fact said that she was "at the other pole of the sex" in comparing her to Siddal, thus locating her on the "bad" side of the good girl/ bad girl (Virgin/Whore) split. It was not so much her obvious sexual function in his life that disturbed Dante Gabriel's friends as her unashamed class origins and entrepreneurial ambitions. Ruskin announced loftily, "I don't object to Rossetti having sixteen mistresses, but I

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<sup>14</sup>Her real name is elusive: it seems that she deliberately chose a pseudonym under which to "work"; she also went through at least two rather shadowy husbands; although one was violent, neither seemed to interfere much with her trade.

won't have Fanny"<sup>15</sup> and William Allingham mocked her accent, replicating it in a journal entry reporting Fanny's response to William Bell's Scott's skin disease: "He 'aint got a hye-brow or a hye-lash -- not a 'air on his 'ead!" (at which Dante Gabriel was meant to have "laughed immoderately") and mimicking her pretence at shock when Dante Gabriel used foul language: "Rilly Rissetti, I shall leave the room."<sup>16</sup>

Fanny Cornforth probably gave Rossetti more comfort, care and support than any other woman in his life; his letters to her show his real and consistent affection for her: a typical one begins, "Good Elephant .... It strikes me that you may be in want of a small cheque for the poor Elephant's trunk, so I enclose a tiddy one.... I am excessively out of spirits today, & wish I had a good Elephant to talk to...."<sup>17</sup> Yet she was brutally prevented by William Michael (who was admittedly in an impossible situation) from attending either Dante Gabriel's death-bed or his funeral. She was also shrewd; she intended to make a living from those functions which women are largely expected to render free of charge - housekeeping and sexual services -- and did so with successful panache. She

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<sup>15</sup>Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* 84.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in *Dante Gabriel's Rossetti's Letters to Fanny Cornforth*, ed. Paull F. Baum, 25.

<sup>17</sup>Baum, *Letters to Fanny Cornforth* 70. This collection also contains the twenty-odd brief notes Dante Gabriel wrote to Fanny, usually begging for company: for example, "My dear Fan Come in as early as you can. An old Rhinoceros is dull & quite alone." (105.)

saved so much money out of her association with Dante Gabriel that towards the end of his life, she was able to buy a tavern, (she acquired a husband simultaneously) and set herself up as a landlady of respectable bourgeois origins. Also with an eye to the future, she steadily accumulated odd art-works lying around the studio; she collected so many that she was able to hold an exhibition after Dante Gabriel's death and charge admission -- which outraged many of those members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle who had never objected to Dante Gabriel's far more dishonourable financial conduct. (His money affairs were in such a parlous state in the last years of his life that William Michael had to delay the news of his death to stave off an avalanche of creditors). Perhaps one day Fanny Cornforth will be lauded as an astute judge of art and collector; given the chaos, even occasional squalor, of Dante Gabriel's domestic environment, and the menagerie of exotic animals which roamed in and out the house at Cheyne Walk in Chelsea, she doubtlessly rescued many of his works from the corners and drawers into which they drifted, occasionally to be eaten by wombats and the like.

Fanny Cornforth's negotiation of a space from the "lowest place," (in her case, the gutter) and her efforts to create a life and independent career for herself, are not that dissimilar from Rossetti's own efforts to establish an autonomous existence as an artist, however dramatically their methods differed. They shared a frank hunger for an identity of their own, and both simultaneously engaged

with the patriarchal world apparently on its terms, while subverting its discourses in order to survive stealthily on their *own* terms. They participated in systems of competition and exchange, insisting on recognition rather than relegation to the intangible. Both colluded with dominant cultures in the interests of protecting their own agendas for self-expression and gratification, rather than suffer the fate of Elizabeth Siddal.

Some might feel that there is an element of the spurious or sensational in associating together two women so far apart on the social sliding scale of their community, not withstanding that they are curiously linked by their close connections with Dante Gabriel. Rossetti might be "spinning in her grave" at the notion that she and Fanny Cornforth had anything in common; and yet, if one looks at the female subjects who give voice to and justify the unexpected, the singular, the transgressive and the anti-social in the texts she wrote, perhaps this is to underestimate her.

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