The Rossettis

Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was an English poet, illustrator, painter and translator. He founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 with William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, and was later to be the main inspiration for a second generation of artists and writers influenced by the movement, most notably William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born in London. His works include *Sir Hugh the Heron: A Legendary Tale in Four Parts* (1843), *Poems* (1869), which was published in several editions with slightly different content, *Ballads and Sonnets* (1882), *Ballads and Narrative Poems*, and *Sonnets and Lyrical Poems* (1894).

ew Victorian families were as gifted as the Rossettis: the oldest child, Maria Rossetti, published *A Shadow of Dante* (1871) and became an Anglican nun; William Michael Rossetti was along with his brother an active member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and became an editor, man of letters, and memoirist; the youngest, Christina Georgina Rossetti, became an important and influential lyric poet. As a child Dante Gabriel Rossetti intended to be a painter and illustrated literary subjects in his earliest drawings. He was tutored at home in German and read the Bible, Shakespeare, Goethe's *Faust, The Arabian Nights*, Dickens, and the poetry of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron.

After leaving school, he apprenticed himself to the historical painter Ford Madox Brown, who later became his closest lifelong friend. He also continued his extensive reading of poetry—Poe, Shelley, Coleridge, Blake, Keats, Browning, and Tennyson—and began in 1845 translations from Italian and German medieval poetry.

In 1847 and 1848 Rossetti began several important early poems—”My Sister’s Sleep,” “The Blessed Damozel,” “The Bride’s Prelude,” “On Mary’s Portrait,” “Ave,” “Jenny,” “Dante at Verona,” “A Last Confession,” and several sonnets, a form in which he eventually became expert.

Rossetti divided his attention between painting and poetry for the rest of his life. In 1848 he founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with six other young men, mostly painters, who shared an interest in contemporary poetry and an opposition to certain stale conventions of contemporary academy art. In a general way, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood sought to introduce new forms of thematic seriousness, high coloration, and attention to detail into contemporary British art. Members of the group included John Everett Millais, its most skilled painter and future president of the Royal Academy; William Holman Hunt; Thomas Woolner; Frederic Stephens; and William Michael Rossetti, who as P.R.B. secretary kept a journal of activities and edited the six issues of its periodical, the *Germ* (1850). Associates of the group included the older painter Ford Madox Brown, the painter and poet William Bell Scott, the poet Coventry Patmore, and Christina Rossetti, six of whose poems appeared in the *Germ*.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brothers provided each other with companionship, criticism, and encouragement early in their careers and defended each other against initial public hostility. Dante Gabriel Rossetti shaped the group’s literary tastes, pressed for the founding of the *Germ*, and published several poems in it, including “My Sister’s Sleep.” He also contributed an allegorical prose tale, “Hand and Soul,” in which a 13th-century Italian painter, Chiaro dell’ Erma, is visited by a woman representing his soul, who tells him, “Paint me thus, as I am … so shall thy soul stand before thee always”—an early suggestion of Rossetti’s later artistic preoccupation with dreamlike, heavily stylized female figures.

In 1856 several university undergraduates, including William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, began a journal modeled after the *Germ*.

Entitled the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, it had a run of 12 issues to which Rossetti contributed three poems. Through his connection to the magazine, Rossetti met Jane Burden—his life-long muse and mistress—and introduced her to her future husband William Morris.

The years of Rossetti's relationship with Jane Morris coincided with some of his most vigorous poetic activity: 1869 was an annus mirabilis. In addition to about 17 "House of Life" sonnets, Rossetti worked on revisions to "Dante at Verona," "Jenny," and "A Last Confession"; composed the highly erotic "Eden Bower" and "Troy Town"; wrote several more sonnets on pictures; and began "The Stream's Secret," which he completed the next year. In the March 1869 *Fortnightly Review*, he published the four Willowwood sonnets, whose presentation of erotic frustration and intensity exemplifies his best style.

Rossetti decided in 1869 to publish a volume of his poems, and in October he employed Charles Augustus Howell and others to exhume the manuscript from his wife's grave. Throughout 1870 Rossetti lodged in various country houses with Jane Morris, continuing to write poems and add sonnets to his long sequence, "The House of Life." Almost all the reviews of Rossetti's 1870 *Poems* were favorable, and the book had sold unusually well (four editions in 1870).

Rossetti's "House of Life" is a collection of 100 sonnets, written over a longer period of time that describe the narrator's relationship with two women. These are the wife, based on the poet's wife Elizabeth Siddal, and the woman in the affair, based on the poet's mistress Jane Morris. The sonnets within this collection are written as one continuous emotional roller coaster that torments the subject. The collection is divided into two sections, "Youth and Change" (Sonnets 1 to 59) and "Change and Fate" (Sonnets 60 to 101).

In 1871, the *Contemporary Review* published a pseudonymous article by Thomas Maitland (Robert Buchanan) that attacked Rossetti as a leader of a school of poets of sensual lust: “he is fleshly all over, from the roots of his hair to the tip of his toes.” Though it was the work of a minor poet, Buchanan’s review upset Rossetti. Rossetti replied with an article in the *Athenaeum*, “The Stealthy School of Criticism,” and Buchanan then expanded his views for publication under his own name in the spring of 1872 as *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day*.

Rossetti suffered mental breakdowns in 1877 and 1879, though a last surge of poetic energy in 1880 and 1881 anticipated the publication of his poems in 1881. In this edition, he added six sonnets to “The House of Life,” completed 17 more sonnets and short poems, revised “Sister Helen,” finished “The White Ship,” and wrote a carefully developed historical ballad, “The King’s Tragedy.”

A sudden decline in February 1882 caused him to move to Birchington, where he revised the comic poem *Jan Van Hunks*, was visited by his mother, William, and Christina, and died of blood poisoning from uric acid on April 9, 1882. At his death he left behind the almost completed “Joan of Arc” and “Salutation of Beatrice.”

Christina Rossetti

Christina became one of the Victorian age’s finest poets. She was the author of numerous books of poetry, including *Goblin Market and other Poems* (1862), *The Prince’s Progress* (1866), *A Pageant* (1881), and *The Face of the Deep* (1882).

By her sixteenth birthday Christina, who was regarded as the poet in the family, had written more than fifty poems that were transcribed

into a notebook by her sister. In 1847 a collection of her poems, titled *Verses*, was privately printed by her grandfather Polidori.

It was circulated among family and friends and was well received. The thirty-nine poems are notably literary in their inspiration, which is traceable to the Gothic writers Radcliffe, Lewis, and Charles Maturin; the English poets George Herbert, George Crabbe, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and the Italian poets Dante, Torquato Tasso, and Pietro Metastasio.

The first and most striking poem in the collection is "The Dead City," an ambitious 275-line dream vision of a magnificent city, succulent banquet, and voluptuous revelers all turned to stone, the evocative descriptions of which anticipate the Pre-Raphaelite style. Here, as in Rossetti's most famous poem, "Goblin Market" (1862), lusciously described fruits represent the temptations of self-indulgence and pleasure.

This genre—a narrative that combines fantasy with moral allegory—was an important one for Rossetti, and she employed it in more-accomplished poems such as "Goblin Market," "From House to Home," "The Prince's Progress," and "A Ballad of Boding," as well as in her tales "Nick," "Hero," and *Speaking Likenesses, with Pictures thereof by Arthur Hughes* (1874).

A morbid strain can be seen in many of the poems in the collection: themes of mortality, inconstancy, and corruptibility figure prominently. Although Rossetti's mature style is not fully realized at this point, *Verses* is important as a tangible sign of her commitment to poetry and of her family's recognition of her vocation."

In 1848 she had her first taste of fame when, at Dante Gabriel's instigation, she submitted two of her poems, "Death's Chill Between" and "Heart's Chill Between," to the prestigious literary periodical *The Athenaeum;* their acceptance made her a nationally published poet

at seventeen. During this period Dante Gabriel was gathering around him the circle of young men who named themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Later in her career a reviewer in the *Catholic World* (October 1876) called her the "queen of the Preraphaelite school".

Late in 1849 the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood initiated a periodical, *The Germ*, as a vehicle for the members' innovative views on art. Its four issues—dated January to April 1850—provided a venue for seven of Rossetti's poems: "Dreamland," "An End," "Song" ("Oh roses for the flush of youth"), "A Pause of Thought," "A Testimony," "Repining," and "Sweet Death." These publications, which were anonymous in the first issue and pseudonymous thereafter, found an appreciative, though small, audience.

In 1850 Rossetti wrote *Maude: A Story for Girls* (1897), a novella that was not published until after her death. The title character's appearance and personality bear many similarities to accounts of the author, and this work, with its exploration of the tensions among the sometimes incompatible categories of female, poet, and Anglo-Catholic, is usually considered a semi-autobiographical portrait of the adolescent Rossetti. Fifteen-year-old Maude Foster is a poet whose "broken-hearted" verse dwells on themes of suffering, world-weariness, resignation, and religious devotion.

Some of Rossetti's important early poems, later published under the titles "Song" ("She sat and sang alway"), "Three Nuns," and "Symbols," are included as Maude's productions, and a *bouts rimés* contest also appears in the narrative. Rossetti returned to this mixing of genres—prose punctuated with poetry—in her devotional works *Called to Be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied* (1881), *Time Flies*, and *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (1892). Religious issues play a central role in the story when Maude suffers a spiritual crisis, and Anglo-Catholic practices are described as she discusses with her cousins the

heavily symbolic lectern cover they are embroidering, the question of a vocation as a nun, and the Eucharist. The main conflict in the narrative revolves around Maude's experience of the incompatibility of ladylike behavior and poetic achievement. Like the author, Maude is torn between pride in her work and moral qualms about that pride. The heroine's overactive conscience and endless self-recriminations provide considerable insight into Rossetti's own overscrupulous nature.

Throughout her twenties Rossetti continued to write poetry and prose. Her Italian heritage is apparent in the Italian poems "Versi" and "L'Incognita" and an unfinished epistolary novel, "Corrispondenza [*sic*] Famigliare," which were published in a privately printed periodical, *The Bouquet from Marylebone Gardens* during 1851 and 1852. Attempts at publication in prestigious periodicals such as *Blackwood's* and *Fraser's* in 1854 failed.

By the summer of 1859 Rossetti was devoting a good deal of time to her work at Highgate, and its influence can be seen in her poems about illicit love, betrayal, and illegitimacy, such as "Cousin Kate," "'The Iniquity of the Fathers upon the Children,'" and "From Sunset to Star Rise," though poems composed before the period of her work at Highgate— "An Apple-Gathering," "The Convent Threshold," and "Maude Clare" for instance—demonstrate her prior interest in the fallen woman.

"Goblin Market," with its theme of a fallen woman being saved by a "sister," can also be seen as informed by Rossetti's experiences at the St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary. Her interest in this topic reflects the Victorian concern about prostitution as a social evil; other Pre-Raphaelite treatments of the subject include Dante Gabriel's poem "Jenny," begun in 1847 and revised in 1858-1859 and again in 1870; his unfinished painting *Found* (1854-1881); and William Holman Hunt's *The Awakened Conscience* (1853)."

In the 1850s a few of Rossetti's poems were published in anthologies; "Maude Clare" appeared in *Once a Week* (5 November 1859) and the short stories "The Lost Titian" (*The Crayon*, 1856) and "Nick" (*National Magazine*, October 1857). In 1861 she submitted poems to *Macmillan's Magazine*, and Dante Gabriel sent "Goblin Market" to the art critic John Ruskin in the hope that he would recommend it to William Makepeace Thackeray, editor of *The Cornhill.* Ruskin's criticism of Rossetti's masterpiece is infamous. In his letter of 24 January 1861 to Dante Gabriel, Ruskin singled out for criticism the original meter that is now so often praised: he acknowledged the poem's "beauty and power" but asserted that it was unpublishable because it was "so full of quaintnesses and offences," adding, "Irregular measure… 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."

Almost simultaneously, Rossetti's poem "Up-hill" was accepted enthusiastically for *Macmillan's* (February 1861), and Alexander Macmillan expressed an interest in seeing more of her work. During 1861 *Macmillan's* published two more of Rossetti's poems: "A Birthday" (April 1861) and "An Apple-Gathering" (August 1861). In June of that year Rossetti took a short vacation in France."
In 1862 the Macmillan firm brought out Rossetti's first commercially published volume of poetry, *Goblin Market and Other Poems.* Although some of the poems had been published in *Macmillan's, Once a Week*, and *The Germ*, and others were included in the manuscript for *Maude*, most were taken from the notebooks in which Rossetti had been writing since the private printing of *Verses* in 1847.

Comparisons of the manuscript and printed versions of the poems show that most were not substantially revised. Usually the earliest extant version of a given poem is the fair copy transcribed into the notebook; if Rossetti reworked it in the act of composition, such

drafts no longer exist. She often changed a word or two in preparation for publication; where major revisions occurred, they took the form of the deletion of whole stanzas, sometimes reducing a poem by more than half its original length: such is the case with "Maude Clare," "Echo," and "Bitter for Sweet."

Goblin Market and Other Poems was a critical success, with favorable notices in many periodicals, including *The London Review* (12 April 1862), *The Spectator* (12 April 1862), *The Athenaeum* (26 April 1862), *The Saturday Review* (24 May 1862), *The Eclectic Review* (June 1862), and *The British Quarterly Review* (July 1862).

Other poems in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* are- "Dream-land," "At Home," "Remember," "After Death," "An End," "Song" ("Oh roses for the flush of youth"), "Echo," "A Peal of Bells," "May," "A Pause of Thought," "Shut Out," "Song" ("When I am dead, my dearest"), "Dead Before Death," "Bitter for Sweet," and "Rest", "Old and New Year Ditties" and "Amen".

During the early 1860s Rossetti published poems in the feminist periodicals *The English Woman's Journal* and *Victoria Magazine* and in various anthologies, in addition to making regular appearances in *Macmillan's.*

Her work *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* was met with mild reviews. *he Prince's Progress and Other Poems* lays great emphasis on the transitoriness of this life, a recurring theme in the Rossetti canon. The lesson to be learned from poems such as "On the Wing," "Beauty is Vain," "The Bourne," "Vanity of Vanities," "Grown and Flown," "A Farm Walk," and "Gone for Ever" is that all earthly things are unreliable, illusory, and passing. The failure of human love is a keynote in the volume, beginning with the title poem and appearing again in "Jessie Cameron," "The Poor Ghost," "Songs in a Cornfield," "One Day," "A Bird's-Eye View," "Light Love," "On the Wing,"

“Maggie a Lady,” “The Ghost’s Petition,” “Grown and Flown,” and “‘The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children.”’

In 1867 Rossetti published in *The Churchman’s Shilling Magazine* three religious and moralistic stories: “The Waves of this Troublesome World: A Tale of Hastings Ten Years Ago” (April and May 1867), “Some Pros and Cons about Pews” (July 1867), and “A Safe Investment” (November 1867); all were republished in *Commonplace and Other Short Stories* (1870). For this volume Rossetti was persuaded by Dante Gabriel to defect from Macmillan to his publisher, F. S. Ellis. *Commonplace and Other Short Stories* was a commercial failure, though reviewers singled out “The Lost Titian” and the title story, with its Jane Austen-like social comment, for praise.

The reception of Rossetti’s collection of stories left Ellis disinclined to publish her next work, a collection of poems for children. *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* was published by Routledge in 1872 and was favorably received; the public was particularly pleased by the illustrations by Arthur Hughes.

Rossetti published the first of her six volumes of devotional prose, *Annus Domini: A Prayer for Each Day of the Year, Founded on a Text of Holy Scripture* (1874). In these devotional writings readers can find explicit statements of themes treated in the poetry of previous decades, and in many instances Rossetti discusses natural and biblical images, virtually glossing favorite poetic symbols. *Annus Domini* consists of 366 meditations, each of which includes a passage from scripture followed by a collect beginning with an invocation to Christ. The texts are arranged in the order of their appearance in the Bible, and prayers throughout are intensely Christ-centered; even Old Testament passages prompt an address to Christ.

Rossetti returned to Macmillan for the publication of *Speaking Likenesses* in 1874. The book consists of three tales framed by the

dialogue among a storytelling aunt and her nieces. Many readers have noted the sexual implications of the monstrous children in the first tale—boys bristling with hooks, quills, and angles; girls exuding sticky and slimy fluids—and that the predatory games they play amount to a figurative rape. While terror predominates in the first tale, in the second a young child's desire to have a gypsy tea ends in frustration and despair as she fails to master the tasks of lighting a fire and boiling a kettle. The final tale, in which danger and temptation are overcome, rounds out the volume with a happy ending. The influence of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) is evident.

Rossetti's next book, *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies on the Benedicite* (1879), was published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), which published the rest of her devotional prose works as well as *Verses* (1893), her collection of devotional poems. *Seek and Find* consists of two series of studies on the Benedicite, a long poem praising a catalogue of God's works that is included in the Book of Common Prayer as an apocryphal addition to the Book of Daniel.

Rossetti's next work, *Called to Be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied*, published in 1881, had been completed by 1876; Macmillan had turned it down under its previous title, "Young Plants and Polished Corners." A devotional accompaniment for the red-letter saints' days, *Called to Be Saints* provides for each day an account of the saint's life, a prayer, an intricate "memorial" in two columns linking the saint's life with biblical texts, and descriptions of the emblem, precious stone, and flower associated with the saint and discussions of their appropriateness.

As her poetic creativity decreased, Rossetti cultivated a modest scholarly impulse. Earlier instances of her scholarly writing include her entries on Italian writers and other celebrities in the *Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* (1857-1863); in her article on

Petrarch she claims to be a descendant of Laura. In 1867 she had published the first of two articles on Dante, a commendatory piece written in support of Cayley's terza rima translation of *The Divine Comedy* (1851-1855). After attending lectures on *The Divine Comedy* at University College, London, from 1878 to 1880 she wrote a more ambitious article, "Dante: The Poet Illustrated out of the Poem" (1884). In 1882 she considered undertaking literary biographies of Adelaide Proctor and Elizabeth Barrett Browning; and she took a commission and began to research a life of Ann Radcliffe, but a lack of materials prevented her from completing it. She agreed to trace allusions to Dante, Petrarch, and Giovanni Boccaccio for Alexander Balloch Grosart's scholarly edition of *The Faerie Queene* in *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Edmund Spenser* (1882-1884), a project from which she withdrew because of ill health. She spent many afternoons at the British Museum and was a tireless reader of periodicals, including *The Athenaeum*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *The Saturday Review*, *Blackwood's*, and *The Edinburgh Review.*

Rossetti's research on Petrarch and Dante informs one of the most important poems of her maturity, "*Monna Innominata,*" which appeared in her third commercially published poetry collection, *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1880). A sequence of fourteen sonnets—thus subtitled "A Sonnet of Sonnets"—"*Monna Innominata*" draws attention to its links to the medieval amatory tradition both in its prose preface and in the epigraphs from Dante and Petrarch that introduce each sonnet.

Rossetti's next book, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*, published in 1885, is both the most readable and the most autobiographical of her devotional works. As the subtitle suggests, the book is diarylike in structure, with daily entries consisting of meditations on religious

feast days and saints' days, poetic compositions, or personal reflections and reminiscences.

The last of Rossetti's six devotional studies, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse*, published in 1892, bears the familiar dedication to her mother, but now "for the first time to her beloved, revered, cherished memory."

More important for today's reader, *The Face of the Deep* includes more than two hundred poems; Rossetti combined them with poems from *Called to Be Saints* and *Time Flies* into a volume of devotional poems titled simply *Verses.* Published in 1893 by the S.P.C.K., this collection of 331 religious lyrics was Rossetti's last volume to appear during her lifetime.

She died on 29 December 1894. Rossetti had attained fame as a poet and had earned high regard as a spiritual guide; some had even speculated, after Tennyson's death in 1892, that she would make a suitable successor to the laureateship. After her death many articles appeared with personal reminiscences, expressing admiration of her saintliness and assessing her poetry and prose. The sole surviving sibling, William made special efforts to document his sister's life and edit her work.

In *New Poems, Hitherto Unpublished or Uncollected* he made available carefully edited and annotated texts of poems from periodicals and anthologies and many unpublished ones, some written late in Rossetti's life and others that she had written earlier but had not published presumably because she deemed them either too personal or not up to the standard of her best work.

Maude appeared in 1897 and *The Poetical Works* in 1904; the latter remained, despite its awkward divisions and arrangement, the standard edition of her poetry until Rebecca W. Crump's *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition* (1979-1990), which prompted a modern reassessment of Rossetti's poetry.