

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI AND THE “ROSSETTI MANUSCRIPT” OF WILLIAM BLAKE

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The influence of William Blake on the two Rossetti brothers has been extensively canvassed; but less attention has been devoted to his reception by and influence on their sister Christina Rossetti. June Sturrock disclaims any intention to impute influence, and concerns herself with the relation of both poets to the pastoral tradition. Mary Arseneau usefully mentions Rossetti's probable indebtedness to the “two-part volume structure” of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in her *Goblin Market* collection (Arseneau, *Recovering* 98). Blake's combination of microscopic natural detail with mystical allegory, and his attempt to conflate the textual and graphic in his illustrated books were highly attractive to the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Rossetti brothers had the advantage of possessing, in the “Rossetti Manuscript,” a large body of the poetry which Blake himself did not publish. It is impossible to be certain that Christina Rossetti read the manuscript itself. It contains a number of highly scatological and obscene poems and epigrams which the brothers probably relished, but from which they may have wanted to shelter their more straitlaced sister, who believed in avoiding ticklish subjects in her reading. In *Time Flies* she records, with evident approval, “the courageous reverence with which one to whom a friend was exhibiting prints from the Book of Job, avowed herself afraid to look at a representation which went counter to the Second Commandment, and looked not at it” (71). This “representation” refers to Blake's engravings from the Book of Job; the “one” was her sister Maria, the “friend” quite possibly herself. But she must have read the poems that Dante Rossetti printed in his selection of Blake's poetry for the second volume of the *Life of Blake*, which the brothers completed in 1862 following the death of Alexander Gilchrist, and read them, moreover, with a sense that they were the