

## Thoughts on D.G. Rossetti's Humor

Because of a number of tragic episodes in the life of Rossetti and the plangency of much of his verse, he has often been portrayed as a sombre Romantic hero. That myth is effectively exploded by a close reading of Rossetti's letters or by a look at his satirical drawings, his limericks and the many anecdotes testifying to his power of brilliant repartee. DGR's humor was both rich and diversified. It found expression in four major modes: his letters; his reported conversations; his light verse and his burlesque sketches. All of these modes were started early in his career and continued throughout his life, even during its most trying phases.

A sense of the ridiculous appears to have been a family trait. Rossetti's father, Gabriele, was reared in the tradition of Abruzzese and Neapolitan repartee and accustomed to creating satirical rhymes. His children sharpened their skills at *bouts-rimés*, both in English and Italian, early on. Christina was especially adept at this genre, witness her pungent lines on the decline of the P.R.B. and her funerary poem (this one in Italian) on the demise of her brother's wombat. Even prim William Michael did not disdain to publish a number of Dante Gabriel's limericks<sup>1</sup> and witty aphorisms<sup>2</sup> and would on occasion contribute some wry or mordant sallies of his own.

Rossetti's wit was characteristically exercised on people, especially those he knew well. Yet he was also prone to poke fun at literary works, particularly those in high favor with the public, such as Longfellow's *Hiawatha* which he nicknamed "Wishi-washi" in a letter to his friend William Allingham: "How I loathe Wishi-washi—of course without reading it. I have not been so happy in loathing anything for a long while—except, I think, *Leaves of Grass* . . ."<sup>3</sup> Altogether, his appreciation of American literature was not very great; he especially disliked Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which was published in the *Washington National Era* in 1851, then reprinted in Boston in March 1852 and in

London in April of the same year. His parody on "Old Uncle Ned", written around 1852, expresses his feelings exactly:

*Dere was an old nigger, and him name  
was Uncle Tom  
And him tale was rather slow;  
Me try to read de whole, but me only read  
some,  
Because me found it no go.  
Den hang up the author Mrs. Stowe  
And kick de volume wid your toe—  
Dere's no more public for Uncle Tom,  
He am gone where de trunk linings  
go. . . .*<sup>4</sup>

Another aspect of Rossetti's wit was his lively repartee reported by many contemporaries. He vastly enjoyed puns, no matter how outrageous, and relished both Cockney pronunciations and slang. His friend Theodore Watts-Dunton reports the announcement by Rossetti's cook at Cheyne Walk that "salary" (for celery) would be the vegetable for dinner. Rossetti turned to Watts-Dunton and exclaimed, "Cooked salary! I've heard of cooked accounts—but cooked salary—No!"<sup>5</sup>

His cartoons and caricatures and his limericks demonstrate another characteristic of Rossetti's humor: his delight in sharing jokes with friends, even if the joke was on himself. Many of his forays into the ridiculous are found in his letters to his friends and family; in the caricatures included in the text of the letters as well as in the letters themselves. His limericks were created on the spur of the moment, usually at dinners with his friends, to be shared and responded to by all the company. Although a few of these were made about women, such as Elizabeth Siddal and Georgiana Burne-Jones, he never ventilated his wit at the expense of women *qua* women.

He was quick in the deflation of pomposity and he detested cant. Rossetti's outlook was the polar opposite of Victorian hypocrisy and prudery, as is shown by the following in-