

FROM *IMPROVVISATRICE* TO BEATRICE:
GABRIELE ROSSETTI'S INFLUENCE ON HIS DAUGHTER,
CHRISTINA

Petra Bianchi

One of the difficulties in approaching the poet Christina Rossetti lies in understanding her choice to live a life which was singularly uneventful and quiet. She rejected two proposals of marriage, hardly travelled abroad and rarely left London, spending most of her adult life living with her widowed mother. She was devoted to religion, yet chose not to become a nun like her sister Maria. She did some charity work, but soon gave that up as well. Her two brothers knew most of the literary and artistic lights of London, but the socialising she did can only be described as minimal when compared to the opportunities she must have had. One reason for her reticence, at least socially, was that she was very shy, but this is not a wholly adequate explanation for her withdrawal. Her poems point towards more complex reasons. Another explanation for Christina's 'renunciation' of the world is that she did so out of a sense of religion (Festa, 25-35). Christina was an ardent Tractarian, whose religious character was formed under the influence of the preacher William Dodsworth at Christ Church in London in the 1840s.

It is known, from William Michael Rossetti's memoirs, that the young Christina Rossetti was very different from the woman she later grew into. He describes his sister as a lively and spirited girl (21). Somewhere in her teenage years, when she was about fifteen, she became ill, possibly suffering from a nervous breakdown. Once recovered, the young vivacious girl seems to have been lost. She settles into Victorian womanhood: modest, self-effacing, quiet, sober, and extremely devout. While accepting that as a young woman Christina became fully absorbed in the religious ideals which continued to dominate the rest of her life, and also that Victorian patterns of womanhood would have encouraged her attitude, here I will leave aside religious and social constraints and explore the poetic models which may have influenced the development of her character. My entry point and framework to this argument is the intense, spirited, and influential figure of her father, Gabriele.