

D. G. ROSSETTI'S "THE CARD-DEALER":

A DEVOTIONAL POEM

"The Card-Dealer" is a well-structured poem that has received little critical attention.¹ Parts of it faintly echo "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" while others are clearly rooted in the Book of Job. The poem can rightly be understood, it seems to me, only when read against this essential background. Here, for instance, is a section of Coleridge's description of LIFE-IN-DEATH and her mate (lines 185-198):

Are those her ribs through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate?
And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
Is DEATH that woman's mate?

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.

The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twin were casting dice;
"The game is done! I've won! I've won!"
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.

Place these lines for a moment beside the concluding stanzas of "The Card-Dealer" and the similarities become fairly obvious:

And do you ask what game she plays?
With me 'tis lost or won;
With thee it is playing still; with him
It is not well begun;
But 'tis a game she plays with all
Beneath the sway o' the sun.

Thou seest the card that falls, -- she knows
The card that followeth:
Her game in thy tongue is called Life,
As ebbs thy daily breath:
When she shall speak, thou'lt learn her tongue
And know she calls it Death.²