

LISA WILSON: "A FRIEND OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI"

Diane D'Amico

All biographies of Christina Rossetti include some brief mention of Lisa Wilson, and most depict her as a close friend of Rossetti's during the last years of the poet's life. For example, Rossetti's first biographer, Mackenzie Bell, singles out Wilson as one of those friends whom a dying Rossetti valued highly: "Christina Rossetti was also very grateful for the frequent presence during the same period [in her last illness] of Miss Lisa Wilson, the 'fior-di-lisa' of her lovely poem with that title" (170-71). In *The Life of Christina Rossetti*, published in 1930, Mary Sandars, who had the opportunity to interview Wilson, describes her as Rossetti's "most intimate friend" (254). And Jan Marsh, author of the most recent biography of the poet, asserts that "in personal terms, the most important admirer, who became Christina's close friend and companion, was Lisa Wilson" (538). However, despite the repeated appearance of Wilson's name in connection with Rossetti, very little is known of her life. Thus far, scholars have been unable to provide even as much as a date of death or an exact date of birth. Furthermore, the signs of this friendship, such as Rossetti's poem "To My Fior-di-Lisa" and Wilson's own volume of poems *Verses*, a book dedicated to Rossetti, have been considered if at all only slightly. Certainly if this friendship was as biographers have suggested such an important relationship in the life of one of the nineteenth century's major poets, then Lisa Wilson deserves more of our attention. The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, to offer a clearer image of the woman who has so far been merely a shadowy presence in Rossetti scholarship, and second, to consider how a fuller examination of this friendship adds to our understanding of the last years of Rossetti's life.

When I began my research on Lisa Wilson, I thought that finding dates of birth and death would be easy. Sandars tells us that Lisa was twenty years younger than Rossetti, who was born in December of 1830 (254). Thus, I concluded that Lisa was born in or around 1850, and since Wilson was alive when Sandars was working on her 1930 biography, I imagined that, given the normal life span, she must have died not long after the publication of this book. However, I could find no trace of a Lisa Wilson in birth records from 1849 to 1854. Nor could I find her listed in the death