

## CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S BREAST CANCER: "ANOTHER MATTER, PAINFUL TO DWELL UPON"

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On the day Christina Rossetti died, her brother William Michael Rossetti wrote to family friend Theodore Watts-Dunton: "You and Swinburne will be sorry (and yet, after such lingering stages of illness, one ought not to be sorry) that my dear good Christina died this morning – most peacefully at the last.... Her illness was functional malady of the heart, with dropsy in left arm and hand: there was another matter, painful to dwell upon, which I leave in the background" (*Selected Letters* 575). Rossetti's death certificate lists the following information under cause of death: scirrhus of the breast, operation 25 May 1892, 2½ years, cardiac failure.<sup>1</sup> Obviously the "matter" William found "painful to dwell upon" was breast cancer, the primary cause of death. This reluctance to speak of breast cancer is also displayed in William's published memoirs. For example, in his memoir that serves to introduce his 1904 edition of her collected poems, the surgery of 25 May is described simply as "an operation of a very severe kind" (*Poetical Works* lix). The closest he comes in any public document to referring specifically to Christina's breast cancer appears in *Some Reminiscences* when he mentions the "insidious approaches of cancer in [her] chest and shoulder" (2:530).

For at least eighty years, biographers tended to allude to Rossetti's breast cancer in similarly evasive terms. Mackenzie Bell, author of the first full-length biography of the poet, states briefly: "In May of 1892 she was operated on for cancer" (184). Almost forty years later, Dorothy Stuart offers even less information, referring only to a "formidable operation" (159), and as recently as 1981, Georgina Battiscombe uses the same vague phrase, "formidable operation" (202). Stanley Weintraub, in *The Four Rossettis*, published in 1978, is the first to suggest that this severe operation may have been a "radical mastectomy" (262). A letter not published until 1991 indicates that Weintraub's choice of the word "mastectomy" is quite likely appropriate. The day