

REAPPRAISALS OF THE FLESH:  
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI AND THE REVISION OF  
PRE-RAPHAELITE AESTHETICS

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In the autumn of 1863, over a year after Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market and Other Poems* appeared to a welcoming public, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson took a series of photographs of the Rossetti family in the garden of Dante Gabriel's London home. According to the "Memoir" William Michael appended to his 1904 edition of his sister's collected poems, among the several poses of the individuals Dodgson "found at hand" on those days – Christina and her mother included--were three family groupings, two extant and one subsequently "spoiled by splashes" (lxiii-iv). "In each of these," he goes on to write, "Christina is capitally characterized; one is a standing figure, giving an intellectual profile, and one a seated figure, with a cheerful and somewhat bantering air" (lxiv). William Michael's ever-generous reading of the imagery aside, the photographs are indeed striking--particularly the first which features Mrs. Rossetti and Dante Gabriel brooding over a chess-board while Christina and her sister Maria loiter on the garden steps (fig. 1). The rendering is a superb study in Victorian formality: the figures are spaced evenly and counter-balanced; the leafy background complements the sweep of the balustrade and the square regularity of the chess table; the postures are upright and the manners sedate. Resembling a nineteenth-century equivalent of an action shot--with Dante Gabriel's hand poised above the board in the act of advancing a piece--the image ironically calls attention to its very artificiality, to the rigidity of the whole; it becomes clear how much the rigor and novelty of early photography, when coupled with the conventions of portraiture, actually championed the proprieties and formality of the pose. The photograph, then, seems to offer a representation which is easily read, an iconography that fixes and binds its figures, strictly containing them in a manner reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic championed by the Rossettis themselves. It is an aesthetic Christina Rossetti would both embrace and critique, exposing in consequence both the limits of physical representation and their resonance in literary depictions of female agency.

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