

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *Io*

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“Thanks for *Io* come safe to hand”: so begins a letter from Christina Rossetti to Alexander Macmillan, dated only “Thursday morning” (*Letters* 1:148). Antony H. Harrison, editor of *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, finds the reference “obscure” but suggests that Rossetti may be referring to a cheque sent as payment for a poem contributed to *Macmillan’s Magazine*. Harrison states that “Elsewhere she uses the abbreviation *Io* to mean both ‘ditto’ and ‘quarto,’” but he instances no passage in which “*Io*” is so used. He may have in mind such a letter as that from Rossetti to her mother, of 28 April 1853, in which, in referring to bonnets, “I°.” must mean “ditto”: “your white straw trimmed with white remains here, and my I°. I°, and I°. trimmed with blue” (*Letters* 1:63).¹ But “I°.” is not “*Io*”. Or perhaps such a letter as that in which Rossetti tells Caroline Gemmer that “‘Marmion’ still has charms for me, and I can even repeat a little. D°, I°, Macaulay’s Lays of Ancient Rome” – Macaulay’s poems still having some charms and even being repeatable (*Letters* 4:188, which reads “D°, D°.”). But, again, “I°.” is not “*Io*”. I know of no letter in which Rossetti uses “*Io*” for “ditto”; and, even if we were to come across a letter in which “*Io*” is so used, it is difficult to see how the beginning of this letter to Macmillan – “My dear Sir | Thanks for *Io* come safe to hand.” – could possibly be such a use.

One possibility that Harrison does not consider is that “*Io*” is the title of a literary work. Richard Garnett’s *Io in Egypt, and Other Poems* had been published by Bell and Daldy in 1859. Garnett sent a copy to Dante Rossetti, who liked the title-poem (letter to Garnett, [9 April 1859], *Correspondence* 2:256). Garnett, from 1860, was a contributor to *Macmillan’s Magazine*, and by the end of that year was invited to Macmillan’s Thursday evening literary gatherings in London (Macmillan, letter to Garnett, 4 December 1860). Perhaps, then, Macmillan had a copy of Garnett’s volume of poems and posted it to Rossetti. Yet I know no other evidence for that, nor reason to think him likely to have done that. Macmillan’s letters to Rossetti – of which the passages most illuminating of her literary life are now published in Humphries, *Christina Rossetti: The Critical Heritage*, and dovetailed with passages from