

## EPISTOLARY RELATIONS: THE CORRESPONDENCE OF CHRISTINA AND DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI<sup>1</sup>

Antony H. Harrison

The first two volumes of *The Collected Letters of Christina Rossetti* will publish for the first time all extant correspondence from Christina to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Some facts concerning these letters may surprise students of her life and art. For instance, only 132 such letters remain – far fewer than we have to William Michael Rossetti. Among these, moreover, the earliest is dated 7 May 1864, even though a number of earlier letters from Gabriel to his sister survive. (Five of these have been published in Oswald Doughty and John R. Wahl's four volume edition of Dante Rossetti's letters.)

The body of correspondence that *has* come down to us, in fact, raises more questions than it answers. Why no letters before 1864? Why were particular letters kept and not others? Why the absence of any commentary whatsoever on memories of shared childhood experiences – such as we find with some frequency in letters to William Michael Rossetti? Why the curiously varied tone of the letters to Dante Rossetti – sometimes playful and ironic, often self-deprecating, sometimes subtextually (or even openly) competitive, sometimes simply tense or careful – again so different from the uniformly loving and unthreatened tone of the letters to William Michael?

A possible explanation for the paucity of correspondence derives from the simple fact that Christina habitually destroyed letters of her own that came into her hands after the deaths of friends or relatives – except for a few precious ones which she kept, such as those to Charles Bagot Cayley or to her mother, Frances. When Gabriel died in 1882, most of his property was inherited by Frances Rossetti, who may then have allowed Christina to dispose of her own letters to him as she chose. Obviously many *were* destroyed. But which ones and why these? The curious fact is that very little consistency can be traced in the letters that were kept. Some are far more substantive and informative than others. Many merely contain reports on health or movements or impending visits. Why save these? Others – such as the well known letters concerning revisions to poems for *The Prince's Progress* volume or those, not previously published, providing detailed reports on Maria's Rossetti's deteriorating health in 1876 – might clearly have been kept for their documentary or memorial value.