

EMOTIONAL SIMILES: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S APPROPRIATION OF CAROLINE NORTON

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Rossetti, having just had a fresh consignment of "stunning" fabrics from that new shop in Regent Street, tries hard to prevail on his younger sister to accept at any rate one of these and have a dress made of it from designs to be furnished by himself.

D.G.R. "What is the use, Christina, of having a heart like a singing bird and a water-shoot and all the rest of it, if you insist on getting yourself up like a pew-opener?"

C.R. "Well, Gabriel, I don't know – I'm sure you yourself always dress very quietly."

– Max Beerbohm, *Rossetti and His Circle* plate 12

This caption for the well-known Beerbohm cartoon of Dante Rossetti and his sister points to a significant fact about Christina Rossetti's poetry: both then and now there appears to be a disjunction between the poet and her work. This is particularly the case with "A Birthday," one of Rossetti's best-known and most Pre-Raphaelite poems, though one which receives less critical attention today than in earlier commentaries on her work. Written in a regular metre, it is a lively expression of joy, full of colour, movement, and rich textures. The poem was written in 1857, and published first in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1861, and then in Rossetti's first collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862. It is often seen as emblematic of her early exuberance, a secular poem of ecstasy, in contrast to her later, more sombre devotional poems, though, as I shall argue, this apparent divide is a misapprehension. The poem is also close in style and tone to Caroline Norton's poem "My Heart is like a Withered Nut!," a similarity previously overlooked, and I suggest that Rossetti reworked Norton's poem into a very different, although formally similar, text.

Though William Michael Rossetti worked hard to memorialize his illustrious siblings, his accounts have done his sister Christina, at least, some disfavours: he seemed determined both to read her work biographically (at least in part because she was female, and thus seen as more inclined towards emotion than artistry) and simultaneously reluctant to ascribe any specific