

ROSSETTI AND SIDDAL:
RECONSIDERING THE RIFT 1858-1860

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When, in April 1860, Dante Rossetti announced to his family his impending marriage to an ailing Elizabeth Siddal, they were clearly taken aback. His brother William's understated "we were a little taken by surprise" (14 May 1860 to W.B. Scott; W.M. Rossetti, *Selected Letters* 111) and (following the event) his sister Christina's rather too casual "Who, think you, is married?" (qtd in Marsh, *Christina* 250) do little to conceal the family's astonishment. What is less clear is the full extent of their surprise. The suddenness of the announcement is the obvious chief element in this question, and William seems to have wondered whether the family were the last to know, tentatively asking the brothers' mutual friend, William Bell Scott, whether he had heard anything about it (*Selected Letters* 111), but their reactions suggest a broader sense of unexpectedness that this should have come about at all.

Scott's surprisingly outspoken response to William once the marriage had taken place supports this: "So Gabriel's wedding has come off after all. How helpless a man seems to be with a fixed idea in his mind, years pass on it seems all done with, when the slightest breeze of emotion ... and it is flaring away again beyond the remedy of fire engines" (qtd in D.G. Rossetti, *Correspondence* 2:296n1). A friend would hardly risk such comments without expecting at least some agreement on the matter, so we can reasonably assume that William's thoughts – and those of his mother and sisters – travelled along similar lines: they were surprised at the development because the likelihood of Dante Gabriel's marrying Elizabeth Siddal now or at any time in the future is not something that would have occurred to them for a moment, despite what may have been mooted in the past.

Even so, Scott's words are ambiguous. It is difficult to tell whether he – and, by extension, Rossetti's family and other associates – had previously thought the relationship was over or whether they had been convinced a marriage would never now take place following a quasi-engagement that, while still nominally active, had limped along for so many years. Biographers