

‘The author of the Earthly Paradise by Dante Gabriel Rossetti’: A newly-discovered drawing.

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A hitherto unknown portrait sketch of William Morris by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Figure 1) has been discovered in a copy of *The Earthly Paradise* once owned by Louisa Crabbe. Both book and drawing are in the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, which is on loan to the library of the University of Delaware. We are grateful to Mark Samuels Lasner, discoverer of the drawing, for permission to publish it here.

The pencil drawing is rough, almost scribbled. It depicts a half-length bearded figure, full-face, with unruly hair, hands clasped on his chest, holding two ill-defined objects, one a stick with a rounded end, the other shaped like a balloon. The background is filled with a diaper pattern. It is on a sheet measuring five by four-and-half inches (127 x 114 mm), which is the back of a printed page, cut or torn from a book, and is lightly pasted on to the title-page verso of Volume I of the first edition of *The Earthly Paradise* published by F.S. Ellis in Spring 1868; this one is from the special edition of twenty-five large paper copies printed on Whatman paper. On the title page is the signature and date ‘Louisa Crabbe / 1869’.

The printed page on the back of the sheet is from William Makepeace Thackeray’s poem, ‘The End of the Play’, written and published in 1848. The page, numbered 159, is either from a Christmas book issued containing the ballad in 1848, or a later reprint. The sketch is drawn within a double-line border, below which is the pencil inscription ‘The author of the Earthly Paradise by / Dante Gabriel Rossetti. 1858’. The inscription appears to be in Louisa Crabbe’s hand, and the inference is that it was added to an unscribed drawing when she acquired her copy of Morris’s work in 1869, and decided to insert the loose sheet.

The authorship and likeness are convincing when set beside Rossetti’s other sketches of Morris, mainly caricatures. The hair is drawn with the same circling

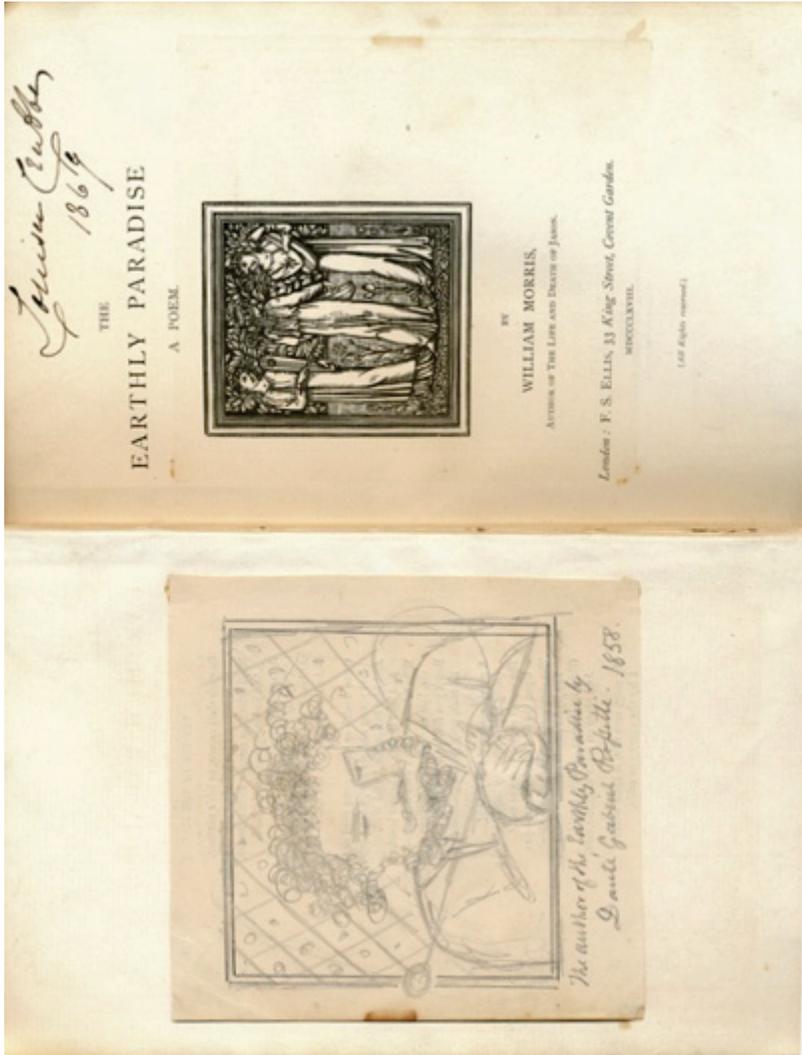


Figure 1: The author of the *Earthly Paradise* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1858. By kind permission of Mark Samuels Lasner

strokes as that in the undated image known as 'William Morris Presenting a Ring to his Future Wife' drawn in Oxford either in October 1857 or early the following year when Morris became engaged to Jane Burden.¹

How did Louisa Crabbe acquire the drawing of Morris, and how reliable is the inscription? Certainly, Louisa Crabbe, better known in Pre-Raphaelite circles by her stage name Ruth Herbert, was in contact with Rossetti by 1858, for in the summer of that year she agreed to sit to him for the head of Mary Magdalene in a projected painting. 'I am in the stunning position this morning of expecting the actual visit, at ½ past 11, of a model whom I have been longing to paint for years – Miss Herbert of the Olympic Theatre – who has the most varied and highest expression I ever saw in a woman's face, besides abundant beauty, golden hair, etc', Rossetti told a friend, continuing later 'O my eye! She has sat to me now and will sit to me for Mary Magdalene in the picture I am beginning. Such luck!'² On 25 June he sketched her feeding a cage-bird with seed from her tongue, and altogether thirteen portrait drawings and sketches of Crabbe/Herbert by Rossetti are known, together with a study for the Magdalene. Six bear dates – '25 June 1858', '1858', 'Sept 20 1858', 'Dec. 1858', '1858' and 'Oct 1859' – and the others are all ascribed to same period.³

Louisa Ruth Maynard was born around 1830 and as Miss Herbert made her London stage debut at the Lyceum in 1847. She married Edward Crabb in 1855 and separated from him in 1857, having in this same period borne a son and established herself as one of the rising stars of the theatre, playing both female and travesti roles. By 1858 she had several 'admirers', including John Rochfort, who would become her second partner. During this period of her greatest popularity, she sat to several artists, including G.F. Watts and Val Prinsep (whom she would have met at Little Holland House), W.P. Frith (for a figure in *Derby Day*), Frederick Sandys, Henry Weigall and James Rannie Swinton.⁴ When, years later, she met Georgiana Burne-Jones, Louisa recalled the aesthetic adulation she received, remarking that it was 'like being in a new world' to be among artists. 'I sat to them and was there with them, and they were different to everyone else I ever saw. And I was a holy thing to them – a holy thing'.⁵

On 21 June 1858 Rossetti began 'a delicate little drawing'⁶ entitled *Writing on the Sand*, showing lovers on a windy beach, which was destined for Louisa, probably in return for her sittings, and when on 12 July she was allocated a benefit performance at the Olympic Theatre, he both bullied his friends into attending and drew some sketches to amuse her, including two fairly detailed pen-and-ink images of the actress's head in profile flanked by those of two other, plainer women, one with a very hooked nose and prominent teeth, thus underlining Louisa's greater beauty.⁷ These were later framed together with a comic sketch showing Miss Herbert seated beside a row of admirers and in front of a large ugly man, which was inscribed by Rossetti 'For the Benefit of Miss Herbert July 12 /

58'.⁸ One of the admirers bears a thumbnail likeness to William Morris, which can be compared to that in the drawing of him pasted into her copy of the *Earthly Paradise*.

The figure is drawn schematically, in a format allusive of the face cards in a pack of playing cards, and the monarchical allusion is furthered by the objects he holds, the long stick with large knob perhaps representing an artist's mahl-stick, and the balloon-shape possibly a palette. In 1858, under Rossetti's persuasion, Morris was endeavouring to become a painter. Rossetti thought his features were similar to those of François Premier, king of France 1515-1547, whose remarkable portrait by Clouet Rossetti had seen in the Louvre, and on which he based his scribbled image of Morris.⁹

There is no direct evidence that Morris actually met Louisa at this time, however. Indeed it seems likely that Rossetti's caricature sketch was a similar *jeu d'esprit*, drawn to give her a quick impression of what his friend 'Topsy' looked like. It is probable that Louisa Crabbe paid little attention in 1858-9 to Rossetti's short, curly-haired friend. By all accounts Morris could be brusque and abrupt with women; he certainly did not flatter or flirt with them and is unlikely to have joined the fulsome chorus of her admirers. A decade later, he was newly well-known, as author of *The Earthly Paradise*.

By 1868-9 Louisa had virtually given up performing. During the previous ten years she had borne a second son (1859) and a daughter (1861) and continued to star in comedies and melodramas, including the famous *Lady Audley's Secret* (1863) and been installed by Rochfort in a fine house in the Boltons. At the end of 1864, when she became manager of the St James Theatre, she was described in the press as 'a graceful and sympathetic person of much beauty with exquisite golden hair and almost devotional features who supplied many of the Pre-Raphaelite Brethren with angelic faces for their canvases'.¹⁰ She continued to act, as Beatrice, Lady Teazle, Kate Hardcastle and Lydia Languish, giving her final benefit performance in April 1868. That summer, after claiming a civil marriage in Switzerland, she lived publicly with Rochfort, although retaining the name Crabbe. It is not known whether her expensive copy of the *Earthly Paradise* was a purchase or a gift from Rochfort, but it evidently offered a convenient and apt place to tip in the loose caricature from 1858.

NOTES

1. Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, A Catalogue Raisonné*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, 2 vols; Vol. I, no. 597. (Afterwards Surtees, 1971).

2. William E. Fredeman, ed, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2002-2010 (8 vols); Vol. 2, Letter 58.6, p. 214.
3. Virginia Surtees, 'Beauty and the Bird: A new Rossetti drawing', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 115, February 1973, pp. 84-87; Surtees 1971 nos. VS 325-336 and 109I; see also Surtees 1973, *ibid.*
4. One of Swinton's depictions of Herbert, as The Red Cross Knight from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, was shown at the Royal Academy in 1859, and must have been painted around the same time as she was sitting to Rossetti. For all details of her life, see Virginia Surtees, *The Actress and the Brewer's Wife: Two Victorian Vignettes*, Wilby, Norwich: Michael Russell, 1997, 176 pp. (Afterwards Surtees 1997)
5. Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, London: Macmillan, 1904, 2 vols.; Vol. 1, p. 169.
6. Virginia Surtees, ed, *The Diaries of George Price Boyce*, Norwich: New World Publishers, 1980, p. 24.
7. Surtees 1971, Nos. 599a and c.
8. Surtees 1971, No. 599.
9. Curiously enough, a thumbnail portrait of Morris, drawn in a similar manner within a square border, is contained in a sketchbook dating from 1860-62, owned by Morris (BL ADD.Ms45336, f.2). This sketch is attributed to Burne-Jones.
10. Quoted Surtees 1997, p. 68; original source unidentified. *The Illustrated London News*, 21 December 1864, p. 678 announced that Miss Herbert had resumed management of the St James's Theatre.