

# 'Rupes Topseia': Further Thoughts

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I should like to endorse Jan Marsh's convincing re-dating and interpretation of Rossetti's caricature *Rupes Topseia*.<sup>1</sup> Virginia Surtees' original suggestion that the drawing was a satirical comment on the dissolution of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1874 seemed so plausible as to rule out further discussion despite the obvious chronological difficulty if her suggestion that the two bearded sages were Marx and Engels was accepted. Most subsequent writers, including, my now repentant self, accepted Surtees' proposition without question.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Marsh's thesis that the cartoon refers to Warrington Taylor's criticism of Morris's extravagance and incompetent management of 'The Firm' in 1869 solves many of the apparent inconsistencies in the iconography which have previously been ignored. The fact that, with the exception of Brown and, arguably, Rossetti, the dissolution was amicable makes nonsense of the row of starving partners and her identification of the outstretched supplicant, to their right, as Warrington Taylor, 'a tall thin man with a very large Roman nose',<sup>3</sup> makes a date of 1874 impossible, as Taylor died in 1870.

The earlier date may also be supported on stylistic grounds, for the cross-hatching and the caricature likeness of Morris have much in common with Rossetti's *Bard and Petty Tradesman* of 1868 (London, British Museum) and the Bad Ems caricatures of 1869 (London, British Museum).

The only remaining problem is the identification of the two sages, in their fiery nimbus, on which Jan Marsh wisely refuses to speculate; it may be pertinent to add that the art historian John Gere, whilst doubting Surtees' suggestion, is equally reticent.<sup>4</sup> The Editor's suggestion that they may be Darwin and Huxley<sup>5</sup> is typically ingenious but unconvincing as Darwin was bald by 1868 and Huxley was beardless.<sup>6</sup> My own hesitant proposition is that they represent nobody, or at least nobody mortal. Surtees' original speculation, by tying the images to particular personalities, has led later writers to assume that they must be portraits, and it is true that they have great (and possibly misleading) individuality. I, however, wish to suggest that they represent God and Christ who, with the irreverent Dove, symbolising The Holy Ghost, above them, form the Trinity. The forked beard of the younger figure is frequently seen in stained glass representations of Christ designed by members of The Firm<sup>7</sup> and I believe the spectacles of God the Father and the monocle of God the Son to be a private joke made by the irreligious Rossetti at the expense of the pious Roman Catholic Warrington Taylor.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, XII, 4, (Spring 1998), pp. 4–6.
- <sup>2</sup> In *William Morris at Home*, (London: Ebury Press 1996), p. 94. A further example of the confusion caused by accepting Surtees' suggestion may be seen in A. C. Faxon's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, (London: Phaidon Press 1994), p. 181, where she writes that the drawing 'predict[s] "Topsy's" fall from grace in socialism'.
- <sup>3</sup> Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, (London: Macmillan 1904), II, p. 290.
- <sup>4</sup> J. A. Gere, *Pre-Raphaelite Drawings in the British Museum*, (London: British Museum 1994), p. 54.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, op. cit., p. 6.
- <sup>6</sup> See the photograph of Darwin by Julia Margaret Cameron, 1868-9, London Portrait Gallery (P8) and Huxley's portrait by John Collier, 1883, London, National Portrait Gallery (3168).
- <sup>7</sup> Examples include Rossetti's *Sermon on the Mount* (Selsey, 1861), Albert Moore's *Salvator Mundi* (Bradford Cathedral, 1864) and Madox Brown's *Christ Walking on the Water* (Scunthorpe, 1864) and *Supper at Emmaus* (Troutbeck, 1873).