

# Two unpublished letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti

by Florence Boos

The Special Collections Department of the University of Iowa Library contains two hitherto unpublished letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti<sup>1</sup>. The first letter is addressed to Thomas Keightley, a writer on historical and mythological subjects, on the occasion of his publication of *An Account of the Life, Opinions, and Writings of John Milton*. Since Chapman and Hall issued this work in 1855, the letter must have been written in 1854 or 1855, possibly in spring or summer, for Rossetti comments that he hopes to see Keightley 'if I am able to get away this Summer'.

14 Chatham Place, Blackfriars  
Friday

Dear Mr. Keightley

I have just been reading the proof-sheet of your Preface which William brought, and must thank you for what you say in so friendly a spirit of my father's writings & of himself.

My reason for writing however is that I feel sure that the passage quoted from Macaulay (where you make mention of Dante's & Milton's portraits together) as referring to Dante's portrait by *Giotto*, must refer not to that, but to the older portraits, or else Macaulay supposes some older portrait to be by Giotto; whereas *Giotto's only* one, as no doubt you know, is that painted in youth — the fresco in the Bargello — which merely represents a young, handsome, & sensitive looking man with something almost feminine in the outline, very different from what Macaulay describes. If you are able to refer again to Macaulay, I am sure it would be worth while, as either he is mistaken or you have slightly misapplied the quotation.

I hope you are all well at Chiswick, & hope to see you again

<sup>1</sup> Rossetti's grandniece, Mrs Imogen Dennis of Woodstock, Oxfordshire, has kindly granted permission for the publication of these letters.

before leaving London, if I am unable to get away this Summer,  
and remain with kindest remembrances

Yours very sincerely

D G Rossetti

Thomas Keightley apparently was not able to use Rossetti's correction, for page 421 of *An Account* retains the original assertion:

We have only to look at the portraits of the two poets, the one by Giotto, the other by Faithorn; to see the difference of their characters. Of the former, Mr. Macaulay observes, with his usual felicity, 'No person can look on the features, noble even to ruggedness, the dark furrows of the cheek, the haggard and woful (sic) stare of the eye, the sullen and contemptuous curve of the lip, and doubt that they belong to a man too proud and too sensitive to be happy.'

Perhaps it was too late for Keightley to alter his text. In fact Macaulay made no mention of a specific portrait of Dante by Giotto; the passage cited by Keightley, from 'Milton', begins:

All the portraits of him are singularly characteristic. No person can look on the features noble even to ruggedness . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Rossetti is also accurate in his identification of Giotto's portrait, and his objection was not a quibble. The discovery of Giotto's fresco of the young Dante in the Maddalena Chapel of the Bargello in Florence had only recently occurred, in 1840; it was an event which inevitably would have interested the Rossetti family. Seymour Kirkup, one of several who claimed the discovery, wrote extensive descriptions of the portrait to Gabriele Rossetti in 1840 and 1841, and enclosed a drawing; he described the poet as 'about 28 — very handsome. . . .'<sup>3</sup> Soon afterwards Giotto's portrait was virtually destroyed by the 'restoration' of Marini, of

<sup>2</sup> *Critical and Historical Essays* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), vol 1, p 108.;

<sup>3</sup> *Gabriele Rossetti: A Versified Autobiography*, trans. and supplemented by W.M. Rossetti (London: Sands and Co., 1901), p 146.

whom Kirkup complained bitterly to Gabriele Rossetti:

. . . . he has daubed over the face in many parts, to the ruin of its expression and character. It is now 15 years older, a mean, pinched expression, and an effeminate character, compared to what it was.<sup>4</sup>

A reproduction of Kirkup's tracing of Giotto's fresco appears in Richard Holbrook's *Portraits of Dante From Giotto to Raffael* . . . .<sup>5</sup> It seems clear that Rossetti used this or some other copy of the Giotto fresco as the basis for his own paintings of Dante. Furthermore since the portrait had been irreparably aged and defaced, Rossetti might have been all the more concerned with the accurate representation of its original characteristics.

Rossetti also had good reason to thank Keightley for his comments on Gabriele Rossetti; not only did Keightley praise his recently deceased friend's scholarly and poetic abilities, he adopted his theories on the Divine Comedy, a gesture which Dante Rossetti was himself never able to make.

. . . . the late Gabriele Rossetti, himself a poet of a high order, and inferior to none in the critical knowledge of the poetry of his native language.(308)

From what precedes, the reader will perceive that we have embraced the theory of Rossetti on this subject. We confess the fact and are ready to take our share of the scoffs and sneers of ignorance, prejudice, and malevolence; for in all that has been written against Rossetti, we have discerned nothing else . . . . (424, 425)

The day, we are confident, will come when the work left incomplete by Rossetti, for want of encouragement, will be taken up and perfected . . . . (425)

Rossetti was not merely a most sagacious critic, he was a man of true genius; in our opinion, the greatest general poet, that Italy has produced since Torquato Tasso. He was even an Improvisatore, as we can testify of our own knowledge; and in his *Veggente in Solitudine* will be found one of his improvisations in Malta, taken down in short-hand. He was also a man of the purest virtue, and every region of his mind was pervaded by the spirit of true religion, as appears in all his writings, especially his last work, *l'Arpa Evangelica*, a coll-

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* p.148.

<sup>5</sup> (Boston and New York; Houghton Mifflin, 1911) facing p.86.

ection of sacred poems, the production of his declining years . . . .  
To ourselves it is a matter of grateful recollection, that we were so  
happy as to enjoy for many years the friendship and intimacy of a  
man of such eminent genius . . . . (429)

Keightley added an enthusiastic if not particularly relevant  
footnote:

Shortly after his arrival in England he married the daughter of his  
friend Polidore, a woman possessed of every mental, moral and per-  
sonal advantage, the best of wives and best of mothers. With her he  
passed seven-and-twenty years of uninterrupted harmony; he lived  
to see his children attain maturity, all possessed of superior talent,  
dutiful and affectionate to their parents and attached to each other.  
(429)

Dante Rossetti's handwiting had become more and more  
idiosyncratic and less legible by 1877, the date of the second  
letter. This is addressed to W. Davenport Adams; Rossetti  
may be discussing what eventually became the 1881 edition  
of his poems, although it is puzzling that no other publish-  
ed letters from this period refer to the same subject.

Hunter's Forestall  
Hern Bay  
23 Oct / 77

Dear Sir

I judge the programme now stands. Sea Limits; Sudden Light;  
Broken Music; Winged Hours; Love-Sweetness; Lilith; Hoarded  
Joys.

Thus we may consider at an end with excuses on my part for what  
was over-fastidiousness. As to the proof-sheets, I will trust to your  
own doubtless careful revision, as I do not know whether I am  
likely to be in town or elsewhere at the time.

Yours faithfully

D G Rossetti

W Davenport Adams Esq

P S It will not matter if 'Sudden Light' should appear as at first;  
though a reference to last edition might be better if not difficult.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> I wish to thank Professor Paul Baender of the University of Iowa  
for help in deciphering two difficult phrases from these letters.