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*In the Shadow of Death:
"The Card-Dealer"*
by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

by D. M. R. BENTLEY

AT THE very beginning of his creative career, in such poems as "The Blessed Damozel" and "My Sister's Sleep," Dante Gabriel Rossetti shows himself to have been intrigued by the prospect of life after death and by the process of the soul's rebirth into eternal life. A concern with such themes was bound, sooner or later, to cause Rossetti to focus his attention on death itself, a subject with which, as his own life progressed, he would become increasingly preoccupied, if not obsessed. In fact, it was in the Spring and Summer of 1848, when he founded a "Mutual Suicide Association"¹ and wrote of "how Death seems a comely thing"² in "The Fall of the Leaf," that the poet-painter began, with an intensity belied by his habitual flippancy, to fix his imagination on the fearful prospect of death. Several illustrations dating from 1848—"La Belle Dame sans Merci" from Keats' poem, "The Sun May Shine and We Be Cold" from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Romaunt of Margret" and two, possibly three, designs to Goethe's *Faust*, I³—reflect the concern with death, conceived in relation to human destiny and to evil, which received its earliest, most intense, and most memorable, poetic expression in "The Card-Dealer."

Like many of Rossetti's poems of the late 'forties, "The Card-Dealer" derived a large measure of its inspiration from a painting. When it was first published in *The Athenaeum* on October 23, 1852, "The Card-Dealer" was subtitled "Vingt-et-un. From a picture" (*Works*, p. 664). By Rossetti's own admission, the picture concerned was "one painted by . . . Theodore Von Holst; and represents a beautiful woman, richly dressed, who is sitting at a lamp-lit table, dealing out cards with a peculiar fixedness of expression." Also by Rossetti's own admission "an engraving after that great painter Von Holst, together with only one other picture, constituted the "sole pictorial adornment of [his] room" in March, 1848 (*Letters*, I, 36). Jerome H. Buckley has suggested that

1. *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl (Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), I, 42. Hereafter cited as *Letters*.

2. *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. with a Preface and Notes by William M. Rossetti (London, 1911), p. 172. Hereafter cited internally as *Works*.

3. See Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel (1828-1882): A Catalogue Raisonné* (Oxford, 1971), I, Nos. 32-36. Hereafter cited internally as *Catalogue*.

Rossetti concentrated on the central figure of this engraving "until her enigmatic gaze had drawn him into the very picture, and he, too, became a player in the game of chance."⁴ And G. H. Fleming considers the subject of Von Holst's picture and of "The Card-Dealer" itself entirely appropriate for "a man to whom life was a capricious game."⁵ Although we may question the felicity of Fleming's estimation of Rossetti's character, there can be no doubt that in 1848 the idea of the card-game, with its associations, not only of chance but of spiritual as well as physical death, appealed strongly to him as a summary metaphor for a particular attitude to life. The hypothesis that will be explored in the following discussion of "The Card-Dealer" is that in 1848, with what looks superficially like little more than adolescent morbidity, Rossetti embarks upon what would be a life-long search for a metaphysic of death that would give meaning and purpose to life. In "Soothsay," the Rossettian equivalent of Kipling's "If," written between twenty and thirty years after "The Card-Dealer," the poet-painter defends "the sweet right to render grace" whether it be "to God at best" or "to chance at worst" (*Works*, p. 222). "The Card-Dealer" is his earliest exploration of the deadly consequences of rendering grace to chance.

Of Rossetti's youthful interest in card-games and in cards themselves there is other evidence besides his fascination with Von Holst's painting and the poem which the fascination inspired. Evidently all the Rossetti children were impressed by their parents with a "horror of gambling"⁶ since one of their uncles (Dr. John Polidori, at one time Byron's private secretary) had virtually gambled himself to death. But William Michael Rossetti recalls that "towards the ages of fifteen and fourteen" his brother and himself "often sat playing [cards] for two or three hours at a stretch."⁷ These two factors, the one psychological and the other merely practical, go some way towards explaining, not only the association of Rossetti's card-dealer with death, but also the closely observed and highly tactile description of the "Smooth polished silent" cards in the poem, which pass "softly through" her fingers and "fall . . . on the bright board."⁸ Moreover, the portrayal of Death (The King of Spades) as a skeleton holding a spade over a half-dug grave in the set of illustrated "Playing Cards" that Rossetti executed in c. 1840-41 and had lithographed in c. 1845⁹ looks forward to the "spade to dig a grave" in the card-dealer's deck. Games of chance are also depicted in *Hesterna Rosa* and "The Bride's Prelude." In the former—composed in

4. *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), p. 167.

5. *Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London, 1967), p. 192.

6. William M. Rossetti, "Memoir," *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters* (London, 1895), I, 46.

7. *Some Reminiscences* (London, 1906), I, 186.

8. *Works*, p. 174. All subsequent quotations from "The Card-Dealer" are taken from this text.

9. See *Catalogue*, I, No. 4. Although none of the cards is reproduced by Surtees, two can be seen in H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of His Life and Art* (London, 1899), pp. 214-215, and several more in *The Bookman* (London), XL (June 1911), 130-131.

1850 and executed in 1853¹⁰—a dice-game is used as the focal point of an object-lesson in innocence corrupted by depravity. In the latter a "game of cards" is used as a fortune-telling device whereby each of the ladies "by painted arms might find / What knight she should be given to" (*Works*, p. 28). Although there are elements both of the "Playing Cards" and of *Hesterna Rosa* in "The Card-Dealer," it is the superstitious and fatalistic involvement with the card-game manifested by the bride in "The Bride's Prelude," her conviction that the cards will reveal what, by her own admission, she already knows ("I threw / Lest I should learn the thing I knew"), which is closest to the attitude of the gamblers in the earlier poem. While Rossetti's brother thought "the stanzas . . . about [the] pack of cards" in "The Bride's Prelude" too "minute" in their "particulars" (*Works*, p. 648), the poet himself considered them "the best thing—as a unit—in the poem."¹¹ Both these views are, in their separate ways, reflections of the fascination which cards held for Rossetti, a fascination which seems to have been at something of a peak in 1848 when he used a card game as a metaphor of the deadly game of fate in "The Card-Dealer."

The crux of any interpretation of "The Card-Dealer" is to explain the significance of the card-dealer herself and, concomitantly, the significance of the game that "she plays with all / Beneath the sway o' the sun." According to Harold Weatherby, the card-dealer is a "female death symbol" and the juxtaposition of "realistic detail with supernatural machinery works to good advantage" in the poem largely because Rossetti "believed in the horror"¹² at its centre. G. H. Fleming, on the other hand, maintains that the card-dealer represents Fate, while *Vingt-et-un*, a game in which "it is mathematically certain that all players will eventually be subdued by the dealer . . . stands for the game of life."¹³ To other critics the card-dealer has evoked echoes of the medieval goddess Fortuna with her turning Wheel.¹⁴ This parallel is illuminating because it allows for a distinction to be made between the correct, medieval and Christian attitude to Fortune, whereby the beatific goddess is the servant of God and part of the Divine plan, and the mistaken attitude of Rossetti's gamblers whose concentration is fixed obsessively on the mysterious card-dealer and whose questions, like those of Dante before he is sharply corrected by Virgil in Canto vii of the *Inferno*, point

10. See *Catalogue*, I, No. 57.

11. T. Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London, 1882), p. 265.

12. "Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Victorian Poetry*, II (Winter 1964), 18.

13. *Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, p. 191.

14. See, for instance, Ronalje Roper Howard, *The Dark Glass: Vision and Technique in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Ohio Univ. Press, 1972), p. 9. The notion of Fortune enters into Rossetti's drawing of *Taurello's First Sight of Fortune* (1848 or 1849), his illustration of the incident in Browning's *Sordello* where Taurello learns that he has been selected by fate to promulgate the decree of Friedrich. And the figure of the Wheel of Fortune is implicit in Aloyse's remark, towards the end of "The Bride's Prelude," that "Dumb / And blind, life's wheel with earth's had come / Whirled around" (*Works*, p. 34). In the 'seventies Rossetti contemplated painting "FORTUNA, [with] a wheel, with a peacock [emblem of worthy pride and vanity] and a raven [emblem of death] seated on it" (*Works*, p. 614).

to a failure to see beyond the mundane, temporal reality to the workings of Providence. The point must be made that the gamblers' submission to the dealer and to chance in "The Card-Dealer" is radically different from the serene acceptance of the Divine will manifested by James I in "The King's Tragedy" (1881), where the King, ignoring the warnings of the seeress, puts his faith in Providence and, oblivious to the murderous plot taking shape around him, sings "of the pit / That is under Fortune's wheel" (*Works*, p. 160), and goes to his death there trusting in God. By contrast, the gambler's notion of fortune—and we shall see in a moment that the monetary connotations of this word are crucial to "The Card-Dealer"—is the same as that which is condemned in the *Inferno*, vii, where the spectacle of the avaricious, weighted down by mundanity, provides the occasion for Virgil's corrective explanation of Fortuna to Dante. In fact, a direct, medieval parallel for Rossetti's conception of the game of cards can be found in the game of "hazard" as it occurs in "The Pardoner's Tale." Chaucer, in accordance with the Pauline condemnation of Avarice in I Timothy 6.10—"radix malorum est cupiditas" (Vulgate)—sees death, both spiritual and physical, as the inevitable consequence of an obsession with worldly "fortune." The gamblers in "The Card-Dealer," then, are characterized by a mistaken attitude to Fortune; and the game they play recalls the notion of "hasardrie"¹⁵ which has come down to the literature and film of our own century through the conventional and evocative image of the deadening and deadly game, be it cards, dice, chess, or Russian roulette.¹⁶

Despite the textual autonomists' enunciation of the intentional fallacy, it is helpful to approach "The Card-Dealer," as no critic seems to have done, with the author's conception clearly in mind. In a letter to William Holman Hunt in September, 1848, Rossetti discusses "The Card-Dealer," then entitled the "Vingt-et-un" poem, at some length, explaining that the lady herself is a personification of "intellectual enjoyment" and that the game in which she deals represents "the age (twenty-one) at which the mind is most likely to be beguiled for a time from its proper purpose" (*Letters*, I, 46). (All references to "Vingt-et-un" were, in fact, deleted from the final version of the poem.) That Buckley, Weatherby, Fleming and others have correctly perceived the fearful, eschatological, significance of the dealer and her game points surely to a very complex, metaphysical ramification for what Rossetti himself calls "intellectual enjoyment"; moreover, the adjectival and denigrating use of the word "intellectual" in Rossetti's phrase raises the question of the nature of the "proper purpose" being ignored by the players in the poem. There may be a partial analogue to this aspect of

15. See "The Parson's Sermon," l. 793 ff., in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston, 1957), p. 253.

16. Perhaps relevant here is Rossetti's early (July 1845) sketch of a *Man with Dagger Bending Over a Woman* (*Catalogue*, I, No. 15), where a death struggle is taking place over a table littered with dice and cards. See also the game of chess in "The King's Tragedy," *Works*, p. 151.

"The Card-Dealer," and a partial answer to the questions it raises, in the personification of Philosophy (a form, after all, of "intellectual enjoyment") as the "lady of the window" (*Works*, p. 341n.) in the *Vita Nuova* who, "for a time," "beguiled" Dante's mind from its "proper purpose"—namely the contemplation of Beatrice. It would be a mistake to push this comparison too far, however, although it does add resonance to the poem and suggest the extent to which "The Card-Dealer" can be viewed, as it was by Rossetti himself, as an allegorical poem representing, at several levels, a particular view of the susceptibility of human nature to mundane considerations and of the consequences of that susceptibility for individual destiny. A further, tantalizing glimpse into the way Rossetti viewed "The Card-Dealer" is supplied by the fraudulent French "Motto" (purportedly from the *Calendrier de la Vie*, 1630) which he wrote for the poem in 1849:

Ambition, Cupidité,
Et délicieuse Volupté,
Sont les soeurs de la Destinée
Après la vingt-première année. (*Works*, p. 249)

The three sisters of this "Motto," the unholy trinity of Ambition, Avarice, and Sensuality, are, as shall be seen in a few moments, actively operative in the poem itself. It is to the body of "The Card-Dealer" that we may now turn, with a sense of the concepts and resonances behind the poem.

"The Card-Dealer" opens with a direct invitation—"Could you not drink her gaze like wine?"—which, once accepted, involves the reader ineluctably in the gamblers' superstitious fascination with the dealer whose eyes can "unravel the coiled night / And know the stars at noon." Although not stressed, there is a satanic, black mass, element to the opening description, which emerges clearly if full attention is paid to the sinister connotations of the word "coiled"¹⁷ and if the effect of the wine-like gaze of "The Card-Dealer" is compared with the wine-like light and silence in "My Sister's Sleep," which was published for the first time in September, 1848.¹⁸ While the (sacramental) light and silence act like a "sharp strengthening wine" on the "tir'd mind" of the speaker in "My Sister's Sleep," the "gaze like wine" of "The Card-Dealer" has just the opposite effect. It merely makes the gamblers want to "swoon / Into the silence languidly," to succumb to the spell of the "vain strange land" which, in the sixth stanza, turns out to be

17. The association of "coiled" with a snake and, hence, with Satan is obvious and traditional enough; but see Rossetti's early drawing of *Two Female Figures with Cross and Serpent* (c. 1846; *Catalogue*, I, No. 22), where the sinuously coiled snake clearly represents Satan. See also stanza 27 of *Jan Van Hunks*, ed. John Robert Wahl (New York, 1952), p. 92, in which the smoke produced by the Dutchman's "wager" with the Devil twines "in snakes of knotted blue / And ever at heart of the inmost coil / Two fiery eyes shot through" (italics added).

18. See D. M. R. Bentley, "The *Belle Assemblée* Version of 'My Sister's Sleep,'" *Victorian Poetry*, XII (Winter 1974), 321-334.

A land without any order,—
 Day even as night, (one saith,)—
 Where who lieth down ariseth not
 Nor the sleeper awakeneth;
 A land of darkness as darkness itself
 And of the shadow of death.

The sleep-death of the gamblers in "The Card-Dealer"—the description of which is virtually a stanzaic version of Job 10.22¹⁹—is, in essence, the complete and sterile antithesis of the sleep-death-rebirth pattern in "My Sister's Sleep." Moreover, the necromantic eyes of the card-dealer, which "know the stars at noon," work in the opposite direction to those of the speaker and his mother in "My Sister's Sleep," which, at midnight, look at what is, cyclically, the reborn light of dawn and, dialectically, the "resurrection-light" (*Works*, p. 233) of a new day. In effect, the card-dealer's ability to "know the stars at noon," to make "Day even as night," is a sinister inversion, even a satanic perversion, of the traditional, Christian associations of light which operate, as has been suggested elsewhere,²⁰ in much of Rossetti's early work. The argument, then, is that the gamblers, in succumbing to the faustian spell of the card-dealer, align themselves in the fullest sense with the forces of darkness rather than of light, that they therefore stand at the opposite pole from such figures in Rossetti's early work as the speaker of "My Sister's Sleep" or, indeed, the Chiaro of "Hand and Soul" who, like Job, is able finally to see beyond human folly and the vicissitudes of fortune to the workings of Providence. It is the tragedy of the gamblers in "The Card-Dealer" that, in electing to see life as a game, all they can ever expect to discover is that it is a game that ends with death.

In the second stanza of the poem Rossetti plays upon the erotic, visceral associations of gold to forge a link between the gold of money and the gold of the card-dealer's hair. By so doing he subtly consolidates the reader-gambler's fatal involvement with the dealer and her game:

The gold that's heaped beside her hand,
 In truth rich prize it were;
 And rich the dreams that wreath her brows
 With magic stillness there;
 And he were rich who should unwind
 That woven golden hair.

Rossetti's technique for associating ideas in this passage, his repetition of the word "rich" three times, each time with slightly different connotations, serves to give the stanza an appropriately spell-like quality.²¹

19. "A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness."

20. See "Light, Architecture, and Awe in Rossetti's Early Annunciations," *Ariel*, VII (April 1976), 22-30, and "Rossetti's Bride-Chamber Talk," *Wascana Review*, XI (Fall 1976), 94-95, as well as the item mentioned in note 18.

21. The word "magic," coupled with the repetition of "rich," here suggests a possible comparison of "The Card-Dealer" with "Sister Helen" (1851), where variations are worked on the refrain "O Mother,

Besides drawing the reader-gamblers, by an almost compulsive association of images, into a closer, curiously erotic, involvement with the dealer and her game, the various connotations of "rich" in this stanza serve to make the card-dealer herself into an attractive amalgam of the poem's "Motto" ("Ambition," "Cupidité," "Volupté"). On one level, all the reader-gamblers are drawn to the card-dealer by mere sexual attraction. In the version of the poem printed in *The Athenaeum* it is explicitly stated that "all deem her bosom grand."²² But more than this, each of the reader-gamblers is seduced into the sleep which is death by his own, individual preoccupations. There are the cupidinous, who are drawn to the card-dealer by the love of riches (they love "Those gems upon her hand"); there are the ambitious, who are drawn to her by the lust for power (their cards are the diamonds "Skilled to make base seem brave"); and there are the voluptuous, who are drawn by lust itself (their suit is the "heart, that doth but crave / More, having fed"). But perhaps most important of all, for this is the category in which the speaker includes himself, there are those "who search her secret brows," who desire to know the inner workings of her mind. As the focal point of this desire for unattainable, even forbidden knowledge, of this "intellectual enjoyment" of the mysterious, the card-dealer certainly calls to mind the Fortuna of the *Inferno*, who occasions Dante's question of what "Fortune . . . is" and Virgil's reply that man's "utmost wisdom" "Against her nought avails" (Cary's translation). She invites comparison, moreover, with the Sphinx in Rossetti's "The Question" (1875). Both the card-dealer and the sphinx are symbols of the folly, futility, and ultimate fatality of man's attempts to learn the secrets of existence. And the parallels do not end there. In "The Card-Dealer," the speaker observes of the game that "With me 'tis lost or won; / With thee it is playing still; with him / It is not well begun." This tripartite division of the gamblers in "The Card-Dealer" corresponds to the three figures in "The Question": a youth already dead at the foot of the Sphinx, soon to be followed by a young and then an old man. For each and all, the attempt to question the meaning of existence leads to the discovery that the name of this game is not life but death:

Thou seest the card that falls,—she knows
 The card that followeth:
 Her game in thy tongue is called Life,
 As ebbs thy daily breath:
 When she shall speak, thou'lt learn her tongue
 And know she calls it Death.

Mary Mother, / . . . between Hell and Heaven" to lend a spell-like quality to the entire poem. The comparison gains stature when it is remembered that both poems were originally published pseudonymously under the initials H.H.H. and that both poems had fraudulent French "Mottoes" written for them (see *Letters*, II, 792, and *Rossetti's "Sister Helen,"* ed. J. C. Troxell [Yale Univ. Press, 1939], p. 8).

22. *The Athenaeum*, October 23, 1852, p. 1147.

This, the final stanza, not only represents the climax of the poem but it also has the effect of sending the reader-gambler back through "The Card-Dealer" to substitute death for life. Thus the stanza which, with frenetic actuality, treats the "eager heat" of the game as a "dance" where the cards—the "dancers' feet"—fall as regularly as a beating heart becomes an allusion, not to the dance of life, but to the dance of death. But while the reader-gambler is held in suspense as to the significance of the dealer and her game until the last line of the poem, he has, as we have seen, been prepared for the discovery that he is playing with death by a combination of ominous Biblical allusion and resonantly sinister images.

"The Card-Dealer" is a poem that is both disturbing and successful. By subtly controlling his reader's response Rossetti leads him from curiosity, through involvement, to an uneasy fascination, and, finally, to an astonished horror at the deadly significance of the game he has been playing. At base, the poem is about the gambler's "intellectual enjoyment" (as opposed to, say, the mystic's spiritual understanding) of life, about the cast of mind that makes of man a slave to possibilities, a player of games and odds, a questioner whose concentration on the trivial and mundane can yield answers, not in the realm of first and final causes, but only at the level of the superstitious and the insignificant. "Whom plays she with?" "What be her cards, you ask?" "And do you ask what game she plays?" The focus of these questions, their obsessive nature and their banality, indicate that the answer, when it comes, must be death. For the gambler, life is a deadening and deadly game, a product of the laws of chance governed, not by God through Fortuna, but by self-interest and fortune, by a mysterious dealer who plays with "all men, bless'd or bann'd." Since there are no ethical or theological considerations in the world of chance, and because the game has its own strict and stultifying rules, the gambler is powerless, impotent, and dehumanized; he can do no more than succumb, swoon, and discover, too late, that the game he has been playing is not life but death. This, finally, is the message of "The Card-Dealer," a fine and complex poem which shows that, in 1848, at the time when Rossetti was examining various other philosophies, including epicureanism and fatalism, in "The Choice" sonnets, he was also looking intently and intensely at the "mental set" of the gambler, at an approach to life based on mere "intellectual enjoyment," the consequences of which he appears intuitively yet fully to have understood.

It is perhaps one of the tragedies of Rossetti's life that "The Card-Dealer" echoes forward to much of what he would write and paint later in his life. In "The Card-Dealer," as in another poem which takes a painting as its point of departure, his 1851 sonnet on Leonardo's "Our Lady of the Rocks," there appears present as a formative impulse the need to express an almost cathartic mixture of wonder and dread

through the description of a female figure who could easily be called a *femme fatale*. Present, too, is the desire to succumb to the sinister attractions of the fatal woman, though in "The Card-Dealer," it must be observed, this desire is controlled by the evaluative, metaphysical framework of the poem, and finally, rejected. Nevertheless, "The Card-Dealer" affords a glimpse down one of the dark passages which Rossetti's imagination, in its concern with the attractions of death, would follow in the 'sixties and 'seventies in pieces such as "The Orchard Pit" (1869) and "The Doom of the Sirens" (1869), where the three sirens stand for the three members of the unholy trinity of "Cupidité," "Ambition," and "Volupté."²³ Rossetti himself seems to have been looking down this same, dark passage when, in one of his *bouts-rimés* of 1848, he wrote of "Death [as] an arched path too long to see the end, / But which hath shadows that seem pure and cool" (*Works*, p. 265). Given the cast of mind that, on the eve of the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, could think of death as a "comely thing" with "shadows that seem pure and cool" it seems hardly surprising that, when his involvement with the P.R.B., with the ideas of the Oxford Movement, and, in the 'fifties, with Morris, Burne-Jones, and the Catholic middle ages, was over or waning, he turned almost obsessively to the contemplation of dark, nefarious figures such as Lilith, Lucrezia Borgia, and Helen of Troy. Thus it would seem that "The Card-Dealer," who possesses the fatal attraction and even the attributes ("That woven golden hair") which Rossetti came to associate with the *femme fatale* marks the beginning of his exploration, not only of the consequences of "intellectual enjoyment" and of rendering grace to chance, but also of the decadent constellation of pessimism, voluptuousness, and death—that "The Card-Dealer" contains an impulse, an attitude, and a metaphysic which anticipates, but cannot exactly be classified with, subsequent, darker, and more extreme developments in Rossetti's poetry and painting.

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23. See *Works*, p. 610, for the three sirens who offer "wealth," "greatness and triumph over . . . enemies," and "love." It is notable that the age of twenty-one also figures in "The Doom of the Sirens."