Henry Duff Traill (1842-1900)

1 After Dilettante Concetti

"Why do you wear your hair like a man,	
Sister Helen?	
This week is the third since you began."	
"I'm writing a ballad; be still if you can,	
Little brother.	5
(O Mother Carey, mother!	
What chickens are these between sea and heaven?)"	
"But why does your figure appear so lean,	
Sister Helen?	
And why do you dress in sage, sage green?"	10
"Children should never be heard, if seen,	
Little brother?	
(O Mother Carey, mother!	
What fowls are a-wing in the stormy heaven!)"	
"But why is your face so yellowy white,	15
Sister Helen?	
And why are your skirts so funnily tight?"	
"Be quiet, you torment, or how can I write,	
Little brother?	
(O Mother Carey, mother!	20
How gathers thy train to the sea from the heaven!)"	
"And who's Mother Carey, and what is her train,	
Sister Helen?	
And why do you call her again and again?"	
"You troublesome boy, why that's the refrain,	25
Little brother.	
(O Mother Carey, mother!	
What work is toward in the startled heaven?)"	
"And what's a refrain? What a curious word,	
Sister Helen!	30

Is the ballad you're writing	about a sea-bird?"	
"Not at all; why should it be	e? Don't be absurd,	
	Little brother.	
(OMoth	er Carey, mother!	
Thy brood flies lower as low	vers the heaven.)"	35
$(A\ big\ brother\ sp$	eaketh:)	
"The refrain you've studied	a meaning had, Sister Helen!	
It gave strange force to a we		
But refrains have become a		
2 00 101101112 110 10 20001110 0	Little brother.	40
And Mo.	ther Carey, mother,	
Has a bearing on nothing in		
"But the finical fashion has	had its day,	
	Sister Helen.	
And let's try in the style of a	a different lay	45
To bid it adieu in poetical w	ay,	
	Little brother.	
So, Moth	ner Carey, mother!	
Collect your chickens and go	o to — heaven."	
(A pause. Then the big b	rother singeth, accompa	nving
•	e wise on the triangle:)	,
"Look in my face. My nam	e is Used-to-was;	50
I am also called Played-ou	ut and Done-to-death,	
And It-will-wash-no-more	e. Awakeneth	
Slowly, but sure awakening	it has,	
The common-sense of man;	and I, alas!	
The ballad-burden trick, 1	now known too well,	55
Am turned to scorn, and g	grown contemptible —	
A too transparent artifice to	pass.	
"What a cheap dodge I am!	The cats who dart	
Tin-kettled through the s	treets in wild surprise	
Assail judicious ears not o	otherwise;	60

And yet no critics praise the urchin's 'art,'
Who to the wretched creature's caudal part
Its foolish empty-jingling 'burden' ties."

1882

(From *Recaptured Rhymes*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882)