Christina Rossetti: A Feminist Visionary

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CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: A FEMINIST VISIONARY

A Thesis
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The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Cindy K. Currence

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Author

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Meryl Altman

Christopher MacGowan

Terry Meyers
DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to Don Johnsen, James L. Johnsen, Eunice E. Currence, and Mr. and Mrs. Fred C. Lange.
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ABSTRACT

Christina Georgina Rossetti's status as a feminist currently is a topic of much discussion among literary scholars. Recently, several critics have suggested that Rossetti's literary works provide important documentation in revealing and illuminating the plight of Victorian women. However, a comparison of 19th-Century feminist philosophy and the poetry of Christina Rossetti will show that her works do not merely reflect the conditions of the era, but similarly discuss and criticize the oppressive, sexist society in which Victorian women lived and worked.

A close reading of Rossetti's works reveals a concern about the role of women in Victorian society that parallels the most radical feminist theory of the day. The themes, imagery, and structure of Rossetti's poetry suggest as much dissatisfaction with the marital, educational, and professional limitations imposed on women as do the most forceful tracts and speeches of Victorian feminists.

An analysis of Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and several other poems more directly related to issues of matrimony illuminates the poet's advocacy of economic independence for women. This paper also examines Rossetti's poetic commentary on the spiritual damage women suffer in a sexist, repressive society. Particular attention is given to her use of Christian metaphors in discussing these issues.

Rossetti is not usually viewed as a Victorian feminist, but the results of this study indicate that she can be ranked as one of the 19th Century's foremost advocates of women's rights.
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: A FEMINIST VISIONARY
INTRODUCTION

Christina Georgina Rossetti's status as a feminist currently is a topic of much discussion among literary scholars. Recently, several critics have suggested that Rossetti's literary works provide important documentation in revealing and illuminating the plight of Victorian women. However, a comparison of 19th-Century feminist philosophy and the poetry of Christina Rossetti shows that her works do not merely reflect the conditions of the era, but similarly discuss and criticize the oppressive, sexist society in which Victorian women lived and worked.

A close reading of Rossetti's works reveals a concern about the role of women in Victorian society that parallels the most radical feminist theory of the day. The themes, imagery, and structures of Rossetti's poetry suggest as much dissatisfaction with the marital, educational, and professional limitations imposed on women as do the most forceful tracts and speeches of Victorian feminists. Ultimately, Christina Rossetti must be ranked as one of the foremost advocates of Victorian women's rights.
CHAPTER 1

19TH CENTURY WOMEN

Nineteenth-Century women lived in a perpetual state of confinement. From birth to death, the social and economic structures of their society forced adherence to a lifestyle that severely limited personal development and restricted educational and professional opportunities. Historical documents suggest that a baby girl born to Victorian families was met with less than enthusiasm. French peasants commonly referred to the birth of a daughter as a "miscarriage" and Elizabeth Cady Stanton recalls friends of the family commenting on the birth of her little sister: "What a pity it is she's a girl."¹

Young girls were required to wear the cumbersome clothing adult women wore--vest, chemise, petticoat, stockings, dress, and pinafore--including stays, the tight whalebone girdles that laced up the back. Despite medical professionals' warnings that stays actually caused deformation of developing bones and restricted normal function of the lungs and other organs, parents continued this practice in order to give their daughters a "lady-like" appearance at an early age.²
In addition to the unhappiness with which parents often greeted their daughters and the confining fashion in which they dressed them, the training and education Victorian girls received reveals even more about how limited their expectations were. Daughters of the lower classes learned only those skills directly related to the management of a home and the raising of children; their mothers were their teachers and they were expected to take on their duties at an early age. Girls of the middle and upper classes received a similar education, although their duties as homemakers differed somewhat due to the availability of cheap household labor during the Victorian era. They were taught music and reading and writing, but only in order to amuse their families, stimulate conversation, or keep their homes running more smoothly. Their education was based on a philosophy articulated a century earlier by the "progressive" Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing to his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all times, and this is what she should be taught when she is young. 3

Even the brightest young women from wealthy and influential families rarely received more than the equivalent of today's grade-school education followed by a short time at a "finishing" school (note the reductive language of the term, suggesting the end result is some
sort of product) where the most challenging curriculum included the superficial study of music, art, and perhaps a foreign language. Frances Power Cobbe, a 19th-Century writer and feminist, wrote "quite frankly" of the school she attended in the 1830's:

... it can hurt nobody to record my conviction that a better system... could scarcely have been devised had it been designed to attain the maximum of cost and labour and the minimum of solid results. It was the typical Higher Education of the period.⁴

Most women of the Victorian era, however, never received an education beyond what could be provided through home tutoring. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, received an education comparable to her brother Bro's until home schooling became inadequate for the boy and his parents sent him to Charterhouse—for the thirteen-year-old male serious study began, for the fourteen-year-old female, formal education came to an abrupt halt. While Elizabeth Barrett certainly did well enough without Charterhouse, her inability to study with the best teachers was a source of frustration and envy mentioned often to her brother in letters during his tenure as a student there.⁵ In the face of such inequities, educational issues logically became one of the central rallying points for 19th-Century feminists. Many of these women recognized the important link between education and economic independence, not only for the upper classes, but for the middle and lower classes as
well. Barbara Bodichon wrote in 1857 that women's wages were disastrously low; in London alone more than 100,000 women worked for less than one shilling a day. Working women, she wrote:

-. . . are placed at a great disadvantage in the market of work because they are not skilled labourers and are therefore badly paid. They rarely have any training . . . . So long as nearly every remunerative employment is engrossed by men only, so long must the wretchedness and slavery of women remain what it is.  

But even if Victorian women had received the type of education that would have allowed them to compete in any substantial economic or intellectual manner with their male counterparts, British law provided more than enough statutory regulation to keep them in a subservient position. Ironically, considering Queen Victoria's ostensible rule of the nation, no woman was allowed to participate in the election of representatives, much less compete for the decision-making positions of public officials. If they had been allowed to do so, it is unlikely that British law for most of the 19th Century would have placed married women in a category with children, criminals, and the mentally deficient. Until 1882, married women were not entitled to any income, inheritance, or property, or even had any legal entitlement to say how such holdings should be managed.  

In addition, before 1839, a married woman had no rights whatsoever in regard to her children, and even
after political leaders adopted the Custody of Infants Bill that year, women lost any custody rights to children past age seven. Women also could not divorce their husbands legally until the laws changed in 1857, and even then the law allowed it only if the woman could prove physical abuse or in the event of desertion. Although men always could divorce an unfaithful spouse, no 19th-Century English woman could do so. Harriet Martineau, a prolific journalist and author of numerous sociological studies, wrote as late as 1877:

Nobody can be further than I from being satisfied with the condition of my own sex, under the law and custom of my country... The time has not come which certainly will come, when women who are practically concerned in political life will have a voice in making the laws which they have to obey.

In addition to the economic and political issues facing women of their era, some 19th-Century feminists made the convincing argument that women, as guardians of domestic virtue, were in a unique position to contribute positively to the moral development of British society. Josephine Butler wrote in "Women's Work and Women's Culture" (1869) that women have special skills honed by a long tradition of caring for children and families.

This individual care... could be harnessed to social good, in alleviating the 'wholesale' impersonal nature of 'masculine' institutions, and in constantly reminding people of the basis of love and respect on which relations between individuals should be conducted.
This is very different . . . from arguing that women's sphere should be in the home. . . .

While many men and women worked toward women's suffrage, these women stand out in the debate because they wrote extensively during their lifetimes about the condition of women in Britain, in addition to working actively to effect change in the political and social structures that stood against equality for women. Their frustration and anger may best be articulated by a fragment of Florence Nightingale's writing: "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity--these three--and a place in Society where no one of these can be exercised?"
CHAPTER II

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S STRUGGLE

Christina Rossetti, born in 1830, lived in the society that fostered such feminist opposition. She did not belong to any of the feminist groups advocating social change, such as the Langham Place Circle or the Kensington Society, and if she wrote any overt feminist tracts or essays, they are lost. However, biographical evidence suggests that she lived the fettered life responsible for such an outpouring of dissatisfaction among women of her generation and station.

Perhaps the most illuminating examination compares Rossetti's life experience to that of her elder brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Biographers frequently mention the similarity of the two siblings in appearance, demeanor, talent, and intellect. Relatives and close friends often made references to the two children's likenesses and their own father referred to them as his "two storms." Terms used to describe Christina included "wilful," "skittish," "fractious," and "given to tantrums." The high spirits and the extremes of passion that shone so in her "bright, bright eyes" made her a difficult child, but also extremely loving and giving.12
In the winter of 1836 Mrs. Rossetti became ill and took Dante Gabriel and Christina to their grandfather's country house where Gaetano Polidori reported to his son-in-law that the children often "quarrell and fight and yell at each other." Brother William called Dante Gabriel a "familiar spirit--familiar but fiery and not lightly to be rebelled against." Mrs. Rossetti described her eldest son as an insatiable reader: "He does nothing but read: this is his greatest passion . . . . He knows many passages from Shakespeare by heart and recites them with spirit."\(^{13}\) Christina also loved to read and exhibited early on a literary gift. In fact, according to her Grandfather Polidori, Christina seemed to be the most intellectually gifted of all four Rossetti children.

Despite such assessments of her abilities, the only education Christina received came from her mother, who limited discussions to literature and religion. In 1837, by contrast, both William and Dante Gabriel attended a small private school headed by the Reverend Paul and went on to attend King's College School. William reported that the boys missed the family and did not enjoy formal education, but R.D. Waller writes:

\[\ldots \text{ at the same time their minds were sending out independent shoots of their own in response to the new stimuli. In the case of Gabriel the conflict between self-will and duty, between the inbred idealism and the instinctive realism was already beginning, only to end with his death.}^{14}\]
Undoubtedly Christina battled with similar impulses all of her life, but without the exposure to the various philosophies that Dante Gabriel encountered, she never was able to break the bonds of duty. Once Dante Gabriel left the nest, he spent the rest of his life experimenting with the human condition. He wanted to squeeze every experience dry, to live life on the edge of passion and excitement. Christina, on the other hand, remained in the Rossetti enclave and directed her efforts toward containing those same urges. That effort produced the adult Christina Rossetti--a severe, rigid personality who bore little resemblance to the bright, bright-eyed girl her father described. Christina's niece, Helen Rossetti Angeli, recalled the following telling anecdote about her aunt:

[I was] naughty in some way and gave vent to an outburst of unseemly temper. Aunt Christina remonstrated with me in her urbane manner. I was calmed and tears of rage had given way to tears of contrition, when my aunt, exhorting me to self control, said to me, 'You must not imagine, my dear girl, that your aunt was always the calm sedate person you now behold. I, too, had a very passionate temper; but learnt to control it. On one occasion, being rebuked by my dear mother for some fault, I seized upon a pair of scissors, and ripped up my arm to vent my wrath. I have learnt since to control my feelings--and no doubt you will.'

While Dante Gabriel certainly suffered physically from his excesses of passion, the societal and psychological constraints Christina experienced were far more damaging--her artistic spirit suffered.
Christina Rossetti's life also provides an excellent example of how economic subjugation affected Victorian women. Several Rossetti biographers have attempted to explain Christina Rossetti's decision not to marry: was James Collinson too Catholic, was Charles Bagot Cayley too liberal in his Anglican beliefs? Lona Mosk Packer even goes so far as to create a love affair with a married man to explain Christina's resistance to marriage. A far more likely argument, however, seems to reside in the legal and social status of married women discussed previously in this paper. Christina had enough trouble controlling her spirited nature within the bounds of an 1800's Bohemian family; to enter into a legal contract of non-personhood would be folly for a woman with her gifts and literary ambitions. Eve Walsh also links Christina's mysterious illnesses to this same issue:

... Rossetti was not a selfless martyr but rather a self-centered, strong-willed person who sought to maintain her independence through the only means available to a respectable Victorian woman: by avoiding the servitude and total commitment of a lifetime as a governess, wife or nun. Thus her tendency toward hypochondria was reinforced when she realized that illness would prevent her from working as a governess to support her needy family. In a letter she once wrote, 'I am well content with the privileges and immunities which attach to semi-invalidism.'
Her illnesses and single status meant she did not have to cope with the restrictive and reproductive issues of marriage, but it also meant financial uncertainty, an issue of special importance to the Rossetti sisters, both of whom were required to contribute to family finances due to their father's failing health from 1851 onward. Work opportunities were, of course, extremely limited.

Mrs. Rossetti had some brief success with a school and Maria and Christina both were governesses, but complained long and loudly about the job. Christina was a poet and she wanted to make a living at it. Not surprisingly, many of her letters have as their topic the getting and spending of money. She facetiously explains in a letter to William (Aug. 13, 1853) "a first-rate scheme for rebuilding the shattered fortunes of our house" based on the sale of her short story, "Nick:"

Hannay (l'amí de la maison) forwards Nick (in Addey's absence) to Addey's man of business; accompanying the work by my portrait. Man of business (a susceptible individual of great discernment) risks the loss of his situation by immediately forwarding me a cheque for 20 pounds, and sets his subs to work on an elegant edition of Nick. Addey returns; is first furious; but, seeing the portrait, and with a first-rate business head perceiving at a glance its capabilities, has it engraved, prefixed to Nick, and advertised all over the civilized world. The book spreads like wildfire. Addey at the end of 2 months, struck by a late remorse, and having an eye to future contingencies, sends me a second cheque for 200 pounds; on which we subsist for a while. At the publication
of the 20th edition Mrs. Addey (a mild person of few words) expires; charging her husband to do me justice. He promises with one suppressed sob. Next day a third cheque for 2000 pounds reaches me.  

In her later life Christina Rossetti's name was mentioned as a candidate for poet laureate. William reported that she "trembled" at the very idea, but the response may well have been one of anger at the impossibility rather than fear of the likelihood.
CHAPTER III
POETICAL EVIDENCE

Christina Rossetti did not join the feminist movement, but her poetry speaks as clearly and effectively as the most radical feminist tract. Economic subjugation of women is a theme in several Rossetti poems. A close reading of "Goblin Market," one of her earliest poems, reveals a strong feminist statement. In any discussion of whether a work of art is "feminist," it is important to define the term. According to Janet Brown, author of Feminist Drama: Definition and Critical Analysis, "the feminist impulse is expressed dramatically in woman's struggle for autonomy against an oppressive, sexist society: when women's struggle for autonomy is a . . . central rhetorical motive, a work can be considered feminist." Feminist literature also tends to be didactic and political in the sense that it is designed to attack structures responsible for the sub-human status of women.

This definition of feminist literature fits "Goblin Market" in a number of ways. First, it is clear that Rossetti's women are "oppressed" on several levels, particularly economically and sexually. From an economic standpoint, the imagery of buying and selling is telling.
The goblin men are completely in charge of the market. They have the goods, the bargaining power, and apparently control the means of production of a very desirable and valuable commodity. Laura, on the other hand, is in a very vulnerable position. The goblin men do an excellent job of selling their fruits; they describe them in the most enticing terms: "plump," "ripe," "bloom-down-cheeked," "sweet to tongue and sound to eye." Madison Avenue could not have waged a more convincing ad campaign than that accompanied by the shrill cry, "Come buy, come buy." Laura "longs" for the fruits and there is a suggestion in the phrase, "sweet tooth Laura," of a kind of addiction over which she has little control. Despite Laura's desire--and possibly need--for the fruits, she is unable to buy them with the coin of the land. She tells the goblin men:

Good Folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin;
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather. (11. 116-22)20

The men, crafty fellows that they are, suggest an alternative method of payment: "Buy from us with a golden curl" (1. 125). Laura clips a curl and drops "a tear more rare than pearl" (1. 127), apparently saddened and humiliated by the transaction. In this poem, Laura ends up using her body as currency in order to partake in that
which the goblin men offer. The result of their encounter is disastrous for Laura:

She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
To swift decay and burn
Her fire away. (11. 278-80)

The goblin men, however, are unaffected, and we see them shortly afterward hawking their fruits to a different customer.

The situation Rossetti describes in "Goblin Market" begs comparison with the economic position of the unmarriageable Victorian woman. Her alternatives were few. If she had some formal education, she could become a governess or tutor for a wealthy family. This option, of course, was limited to the wealthy themselves; few females of the lower classes received an education in the Victorian era. Most women of lower economic status were forced to make a living as shop clerks at appallingly low wages. Unfortunately, for many of them the road from clerk to prostitute was a short one. Rossetti addresses this issue in "Goblin Market" through Laura, and there is much evidence to suggest that the character is a prostitute. First, the use of her body in exchange for goods cannot be ignored. In addition, the buying and selling of fruit clearly is a metaphor for sex. Images of "bright-fire-like barberries", (an oblong fruit) and "figs to fill your mouth," indicate that Laura will receive male genitalia for her golden lock and tear. It also is possible that Laura contracted venereal disease, a common
malady of the "oldest profession," following her transaction with the goblin men. Lizzie cautions Laura right away in the poem:

We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots? (ll. 43-45)

And the degeneration of Laura following her encounter with the goblin men parallels the symptoms of syphilis. Lizzie's inability "to watch her sister's cankerous care" suggests the kind of spreading corruption characteristic of the disease's progression. Laura's illness, whether syphilis or not, also could represent the metaphorical death of the women who became prostitutes in Rossetti's day; their existence certainly was not acknowledged by a large segment of society.

While Laura provides an example of the desperate situation faced by some unmarried women in the Victorian era, Rossetti presents a positive alternative in Lizzie. That Rossetti does not simply address and discuss the issue of oppression, but actually presents a solution, makes "Goblin Market" a radical feminist statement far ahead of its time. Lizzie is different from Laura in several respects. First, her motivation for engaging the goblin men is not lust for their fruits, but rather the altruistic desire to help her sister Laura avoid the fate of Jeanie, a friend who died as a consequence of her encounter with the goblin men. In addition, Lizzie comes with "a silver penny" and offers to purchase the fruits
with legal tender: she has an immediate economic advantage over Laura in her dealings with the goblin men. The merchants, however, do not choose to do business with women in this manner and plead with her to be their guest: "Sit down and feast with us" (l. 380). When she refuses to join them and demands her penny back if they will not sell the fruits, they become hostile and attempt to force her to join in their evil "feast." But Lizzie resists their advances:

They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her,
Clawed with their nails,
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,
Twitched her hair out by the roots,
Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat. (ll. 399-407)

Yet Lizzie remains pure despite their attempts to sully her, "like a royal virgin town/ Topped with gilded dome and spire/ Close beleaguered by a fleet/ Mad to tug her standard down" (ll. 418-422). For Rossetti, the most important difference between Laura and Lizzie, the one that ultimately saves them both, is Lizzie's willingness to confront the enemy and test her uncompromising moral standard—a test she passes despite overwhelming and frightening pressure to do otherwise. Rossetti resorts to a bromide in this passage, "One may lead a horse to water,/ Twenty cannot make him drink" (ll. 423-424), but she uses it to express a radical feminist thought: Women
have free will; they can take control of their lives and do not have to do what men and society tell them to do.

The Christian symbolism in "Goblin Market" is an important part of Rossetti's theme, but not as viewed in the traditional manner. Critics have suggested that the poem is a Christian allegory and that the action represents the fall and redemption of mankind. Jerome J. McGann sees Christianity as "a conscious part of the work."

'Goblin Market' repeatedly alludes to the story of the fall in Eden, and when Lizzie, at the climax, returns home to 'save' her sister, the poem represents the event as a Eucharistic emblem. Other, less totalizing Christian topoi and reference abound. The important 'kernel stone' which Laura saves from the fruit she eats, and which she later plants unavailingly, is a small symbolic item based upon the New Testament parable about the fruit of bad trees: indeed, the entire symbology of the fruits is Biblical, just as the figures of the merchant men are developed out of texts in the book of Revelation.23

Marian Shalkhauser makes a more direct comparison: Lizzie is the symbol of Christ and Laura represents all of mankind. When Lizzie returns with the antidote for Laura, she watches over her throughout the night. Shalkhauser writes:

Thus does Christ comfort mankind through his darkest hours, bringing him at last to everlasting innocence . . . . "Goblin Market" sets forth Christina Rossetti's beliefs in original sin and in the sacrificial nature of Christ's death through her creation of a Christian fairy tale in which a feminine Christ redeems a feminine mankind from a masculine Satan.24
The Christian allegory in "Goblin Market" is clear. Laura is fallen and Lizzie does save her from death through a willing act of sacrifice and triumph over evil.

Only in a feminist context, however, is the full complexity of Rossetti's work revealed. From a feminist perspective, "Goblin Market" can be seen as an allegory within an allegory, i.e., the Christian allegory serves as a vehicle for a more specific feminist allegory. For example, within the text, Rossetti describes an idyllic community of women and their complete control of the events surrounding the day-to-day routine:

Early in the morning
When the first cock crowed his warning,
Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,
Laura rose with Lizzie:
FETCHED in honey, milked the cows,
Aired and set to rights the house,
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
Next churned butter, whipped up cream,
Fed their poultry, sat and sewed;
Talked as modest maidens should (11. 199-209)

It is only the entrance of the goblin men that disturbs this scene of rural perfection. The merchants will not leave the women alone, tormenting and tantalizing until they become quite mad; Jeanie has already fallen prey and Laura is on her way to becoming their next victim. Lizzie, however, is of stronger stuff. She stands up to the men and then returns to Laura triumphant, shouting, "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices . . . . /Eat me, drink me, love me" (11. 468, 471). This passage can be explained as symbolic of the Christian communion ritual in
which followers of Christ eat his body and drink his
blood. However, Lizzie's triumph is hardly Christ-like.
She is proud, bragging, reveling in her triumph over the
goblin men. The focus is on Lizzie and her triumph.
Indeed, the role of women is so strong and so central in
this poem, it completely subsumes the Christian aspects.
Christian imagery is used, yes, but it is in the context
of two women celebrating a triumph over men, over society,
over death—an extremely sensuous celebration at that, far
more so than any Eucharist ceremony. Whether this passage
in "Goblin Market" actually suggests lesbian sexual
activity (as Germaine Greer claims) probably is not as
important as the result of the incident—two women are
joined spiritually in love.

In this poem, Rossetti is suggesting a total
separation from men, a world apart and impregnable. Her
utopia is the community of women she describes in "Goblin
Market," without the intrusion of disgusting little men
selling lewd and dangerous fruits. It is important to
note, however, that Rossetti acknowledges the desirability
of the fruits and makes them extremely attractive. This
indicates that she is aware of the sensual side of
herself, and other women, and must address that issue in
describing her utopian society. Rossetti seems to be
saying in "Goblin Market" that women can love each other
even better than men can love them. Her definition of
love may be opaque, but this poem surely promotes a
society of women alone, together, serving all of their own needs, spiritual and physical, without the intrusion of men.

That Christian imagery is so much a part of her utopian vision is no surprise considering Rossetti's strong religious faith and the fact that only one model community of women existed in her era—the convent. At that time, communities of women religious, both Catholic and Protestant, offered the only opportunity for anything even close to feminine autonomy. Of course, all convent administrations ultimately were responsible to a male superior, but the day-to-day operations of the community (as they are today) were completely controlled and directed by the women. It is through these institutions that women's issues, such as prostitution, unwed motherhood, and the education of women, first were addressed. The idyllic community described by Rossetti in "Goblin Market" bears a remarkable resemblance to convent life. It can be argued that even the last passage reveals such a society of women without men:

   Afterwards, when both were wives
   With children of their own;
   Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
   Their lives bound up in tender lives;
   Laura would call the little ones
   And tell them of her early prime,
   Those pleasant days long gone
   Of not-returning time;
   Would talk about the haunted glen,
   The wicked quaint fruit-merchant men,
   Their fruits like honey to the throat
   But poison in the blood . . . . (ll. 544-555).
The "wives" in this description easily could be brides of Christ, or nuns. The "children of their own" could also be young women who have joined the novitiate and are in training for the sisterhood. The hierarchical structure of a convent is very similar to that of mothers and daughters and, significantly, all of the members are called "Sister." Apparently, the alternative that Lizzie represents and Christina Rossetti advocates is a community of women, living within Christian doctrine, fulfilling each other's spiritual and physical needs.

"Goblin Market," although the most well-known sisterhood poem, is not the only forum in which Rossetti discusses the power of women. Helena Michie's study of "Cousin Kate," "Noble Sisters," and "Maude Clare" finds that all three minor poems parallel themes in "Goblin Market," particularly those of competition and control. She views these poems "as strategies to gain power."  

"Cousin Kate" is the story of a young woman whose lover leaves her in order to marry her cousin, Kate. The young woman seems very bitter toward Kate, blaming her for the loss of her lover, but the poem finally concerns not so much competition between the women as contrasting forms of love. Michie concludes:

The poem has moved from an opposition of the reputation and fortunes of the two women to something more essential and more deeply personal . . . . Kate's goodness and purity are rejected in favor of a new system of morality based on one's ability to love. These lines,
of course, are a reaffirmation of the
speaker's morality, which was in doubt
earlier in the poem.26

The sisters in all three poems do compete with each other,
and they are not presented as nurturing or kind women;
they do, however, learn from competition and use it as a
guide toward a kind of self-knowledge, to an understanding
of power and how to use it. Interestingly, Dolores
Rosenblum also sees in "A Helpmeet for Him" an indirect
statement on the power of women. "While affirming the
orthodoxies that disempower women, Rossetti seems also to
suggest that women are strong even when they appear weak
and that they choose to mask their power."27
CHAPTER IV
IN SEARCH OF SELF

The economic and political issues were, of course, important to 19th-Century feminists, and certainly occupied the limelight of public debate, undoubtedly due to the quantifiable nature of pounds and pence. Feminist leaders, however, also had to grapple with the equally important, though more difficult to present, emotional and spiritual conflicts created by the social and legal structures in place during the 19th Century. In this arena, Christina Rossetti remains unparalleled. Her poetry, the ideal medium for discussing such issues, comments on the true quandary of Victorian women: love and marriage meant the loss of "self"; "spinsterhood" meant the loss of community acceptance and the social identity promised to wives and mothers. Both conditions are equally untenable for the poet.

Rossetti's views on love and marriage throughout her work are for the most part extremely negative. In one of her earliest poems, "A Triad," she speaks of three women who "sing" of love. The songs represent poetry, and she characterizes one of the women, "blue with famine after love," as a musical instrument--the poet. However, because the poetry of love is false, the burden of the lie...
causes the harpstring to snap and "ring harsh and low." Two of the women die, and the other "droned . . . like a fattened bee." The conclusion: all were "short of life." Even at such an early age, Rossetti recognized that love and poetry would be incompatible.

Of special concern to female music makers--poets--is the role of passivity inherent in a woman's love relationship, as then constituted by social and literary convention. Rossetti emphasizes the inability of women to act once involved in a male/female love relationship. For a woman poet, this is an especially debilitating phenomenon; without life experiences poetic fodder is greatly reduced and significantly altered. Many critics comment on Rossetti's largely passive and reactive lyric voice, but that is precisely her point--women were forced to remove themselves from a significant number of life experiences, leaving the female poet the options of discussing only internal, emotional issues, or recording the events of others' lives.

"The Prince's Progress," for example, allows Rossetti's protagonist to "live" the life of a man by imagining his adventures as he moved through the world to her door. "The Lowest Room" also presents a young woman longing for worldly adventure. The poem depicts two women; one the model of Victorian femininity, the other a rebellious sister who would like to have lived the life of
"Hector and each clangorous King . . . . Why should not you, why should not I/ Attain heroic strength?"
Rossetti's poetic response to that question can only be viewed as ironic: ". . . life is in our hands . . . in our own hands for gain or loss . . . . Our life is given us as a blank/ Ourselves must make it blest or cursed . . . ." Though the main speaker of "The Lowest Room" ultimately indicates her acceptance of being "second and not first," Barbara Fass is not completely convinced and sees the resignation as "self-conscious":

The final acceptance of the speaker in 'The Lowest Room' puts her into the role of the passively awaiting woman who we can see by now is a dominant figure in Christina's verse. Longing for an heroic age and the splendid men of a time gone by in which she can find vicarious outlets for her own energies, negating the value of being wed in an age of dross while paradoxically conceiving of her sister's marriage as a reward for docile femininity, she submits to an existence of self-conscious repression.28

Rossetti also addresses the issue of marriage by depicting several situations in which young women are in the position of rejecting suitors, only to find this course of action impossible. In "Jessie Cameron," the protagonist is "fearless," "plain," "outspoken," "heedless with her tongue," "mirthful," and "kind hearted in the main." She rejects the marriage proposal of her neighbor's son, because "I've planned other plans." They walk along the beach and he continues to implore and she continues to resist. However, a mysterious force keeps
her from leaving his side and the tide rushes in and carries them both away to a watery grave. Significantly, up until the moment when Jessie is swept away, she retains her voice and is able to tell him that she does not want to marry him. The mysterious but potent force that keeps her with him is called black magic, but more likely Rossetti intends the force to be seen as social convention. Once metaphorically tied to a man, even though not technically married, the protagonist loses her voice:

And watchers by the dead have heard
A windy swell from miles away,
With sobs and screams, but not a word
Distinct . . . .

Even in poetry where love and marriage themselves are presented positively, Rossetti cannot view the woman as happy and contented. In "The Ghost's Petition," the wife loves her husband, but his early death leaves her in a desperate situation. In her grief she criticizes his faithlessness, asking, "Is it thus now you keep your word?" She sees his death as betrayal and seems to chastise him for making her dependent on him and then leaving her.

Woe's me! woe's me! for this I have heard.
Oh night of sorrow! O black tomorrow!
. . .Oh you who used to shelter me
Warm from the least wind--why now the east wind
Is warmer than you . . . .

Interestingly, in this poem, though the wife is in the midst of passionate sorrow, she reminds the ghost of what she had to sacrifice in order to marry him, making the
sacrifice itself particularly prominent, given its unusual placement: "Oh my husband of flesh and blood/ For whom my mother I left, and brother/ And all I had. . . ."

In love, Rossetti's women almost always lose "all" they have; they lose their families, they lose their independence, and they lose themselves. Nowhere is this theme of loss more evident than in "Amour Mundi." Two lovers meet on a walk and decide to take the downhill path because uphill is too difficult. For Rossetti, the difficult route of love lay in the abandonment of social convention, in her decision to eschew marriage in favor of a poetic vocation. The easy route was "downhill," going with her lover through the world of love. She speaks eloquently, however, against that choice in this poem. On the way downhill the beautiful day turns dark with "blackest clouds," a message "dumb, portentous,/ An undeciphered solemn signal of help or hurt." The slippery slope becomes progressively unpleasant as the poem unfolds. A cloying scent rises up from the ground, a "scaled and hooded worm" appears and up ahead they see a "thin dead body" beckoning. It does not take long to realize death is imminent, and not only death, but "hell's own track." The loss of self that Rossetti anticipates is not some kind of peaceful, sleepy death, but an actual fiery, eternal hell. Her warning to Victorian women is clear.
The real tragedy for Victorian women, however, is not so much that a choice of direction must be made, but that either choice would result in a limitation of the human experience. Naturally, the 19th-Century woman would have liked to have had a family and the opportunity for a career, but the reality of their social structures allowed them nothing. Despite Rossetti's decision not to marry, she could never fully develop her poetic power. At the same time, in order to fulfill her poetic ambition to the greatest extent possible, she realized she also would never have a husband or family of her own. The poetic voice in "I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes Unto the Hills" sums up the dilemma:

My soul saith: I have sought
   For a home that is not gained,
I have spent yet nothing bought;
   Have laboured but not attained;
My pride strove to mount and grow
   And hath but dwindled down;
My love sought love, and lo!
   Hath not attained its crown.

Rossetti's poetry also often comments on barrenness, and flowering buds that never open are a frequent image in her work. While this relates directly to the issue of economic and professional impotence, it also cries out for a more personal interpretation. Rossetti loved children, wrote for children, and was by all accounts a delightful aunt to William's children. The fact that she never had children of her own left her with a sense of deep personal loss that echoes throughout her work. One short poem, entitled "Buds and Babies," mourns
the number of beautiful flowers that live and die "and leave no fruit to show. Sweet unfulfilled." Despite this lament, the poem attempts recovery from despair and the speaker finds "joy" in the simple beauty of the blossoms themselves. Unfortunately, the word "beauty" does not come close to balancing the weight of the first stanza—"sweet promise," "wither," "barren bed," "no fruit," "unfulfilled," thus emphasizing the early sense of loss. In "An Immurata Sister," the mysterious "something which I have not had" may also be a baby. She comments on the special nature inherent in womanhood: "Men work and think, but women feel" and suggests women's lives are more filled with "pains" and "yearnings without gain." Truth seems to be what the speaker seeks, but her "empty I" sounds like a woman without children, perhaps suffering a spiritual as well as physical emptiness from the loss. Even in her children's poems, Rossetti longs for "motherless babies" and "babyless mothers" to be united in love. Motherlove also holds special importance for Rossetti, who dedicated A Pageant and Other Poems to her own mother. The love sonnet addressed to Mrs. Rossetti reminds the reader that her mother was Rossetti's "first love," a love that is not "troublesome." Her mother's heart is her "heart's quiet home," and the poet celebrates the abiding strength of a love, "whose blessed glow transcends the jaws/ Of time and change and mortal life and death."
The terms of marriage and family dictated by Victorian society would not allow Rossetti the freedom to pursue her art and participate in perpetuating motherlove or romantic love. Her poetry reveals longing not only for a family, but also for the kind of relationship with a man that would allow her the freedom to be herself and to be an equal. Rossetti advocates in "Maggie A Lady" the loving camaraderie of childhood between playmates. The speaker contrasts her married existence, a gilded cage affair, with the days of childhood freedom when she and Philip, her "playfellow," romped through blue forget-me-nots along a flowing stream.

I'm a great lady in a sheltered bower
With hands grown white through having naught to do:
Yet sometimes I think of you hour after hour
Till I nigh wish myself a child.

Significantly, the speaker does not long for the adult Philip, who has died in a shipwreck, but for the "playmate" of their childhood.

Rossetti presents her utopian family in "Child's Talk in April," a wren couple who work together, taking turns caring for their children, as well as taking turns "singing" and traveling from branch to branch. Rossetti presents this image as truth, the natural state of family life, and it must be viewed as an important work of advocacy. Unfortunately for her, and all of Victorian society, the ideal existed only in childhood and in some forms of nature.
While Rossetti's early poetry exhibits a strong tendency toward sisterly love as a solution to the inequities dealt 19th-Century women, her later poetry views Christian love as far more promising. Rosenblum's study of Rossetti's religious poetry notes the similarity of themes in her early secular poems and her later religious works--lack of fulfillment, barrenness, exile, the "unmoved stone soul."

... the thirsty and hungry soul is a version of the insatiate Laura in 'Goblin Market,' and of the woman who, in so many secular poems, simply wants more. All these essential themes are redefined by the new context, however. The speaker of the lyrics in 'Christ Our All in All' has an intimate and often reciprocal relation with Christ, who first and foremost accepts her as she is. Rossetti must have realized as she grew older that the societal barriers to female equality would be difficult to break down during her lifetime, sisterhood or not. In spite of this realization, she never seems to lose hope for a time when women will be valued and respected and allowed full participation in the human experience of love and work. She found a basis for this hope in Christianity. For instance, the bridegroom in her poem "Some Feasts and Fasts," (p. 211) is met with "rapture and a shout," quite a contrast from most of her other poems on marriage. With Christ as the suitor, Rossetti's poetic voice is filled with delight and triumph at the union. She uses the same words to describe the bride and
bridegroom, making it sound as if they are equals, even in "voice." Importantly, the bride is described as Christ's "sister."

His eyes are as a Dove's, and she's Dove-eyed;
He knows his lovely mirror, sister, Bride.

He speaks with Dove-voice of exceeding love,
And she with love-voice of an answering Dove.

Rossetti's heaven is a place where earth's "weariness," "loss," and "dividing sea" are things of the past. In "Saints and Angels" flowers never stop blooming, trees always bear fruit, songs are never muted and lovers can love without "fear"--without fear of having to give up "all" they had. Rossetti may be speaking of a heavenly reward for women, but the poems also must be viewed as a lesson for those on earth; just as Christ's instruction regarding charity and peaceful coexistence must be followed by all Christian disciples, so too must his emphasis on equality and love instruct the living. Rossetti never found Christianity, per se, detrimental to women, as did some feminists of her era who roundly criticized the church for its participation in the subjugation of women; rather, she viewed Christ himself as the final arbiter of women's rights and the only one that mattered ultimately.
CHAPTER V
A NOTE ON STRUCTURE

Finally, further evidence of Rossetti's rebellion against a male-dominated, sexist society exists in her choice of poetic form and meter in her work. The frequent use of the fairy-tale form was quite ingenious, given the controversial nature of her poetry's subject matter. "She uses a literary form that purports to be nothing more serious than a tale told by a woman to amuse and instruct children," writes Mermin of "Goblin Market." "The form, like the content, seems to betray an assumption that women can only be grown-up, independent, productive, and active in a life without men." The poem's rhyme scheme also indicates how far the poem departs from tradition. The irregular versification of "Goblin Market" was so disturbing to John Ruskin that when the Rossettis submitted it to Cornhill Magazine, he returned the poem with a curt note: "your sister," he chided, "should exercise herself in the severest commonplace of meter until she can write as the public likes; then if she puts in her observation and passion all will become precious. But she must have form first." Subsequently, Rossetti managed to master nearly every verse form and has even
been criticized for adhering too rigidly to structure at the expense of creativity. No doubt Rossetti learned a lesson from Ruskin's response and felt she had to prove her technical merit in order to prove mastery of her craft.
NOTES


3 Hellerstein 16.

4 Hellerstein 72.


9 Spender 62.

10 Spender 107.

11 Moore xiii.


14 Waller 137.


[Notes to Pages 14 to 36]


26 Michie 41.

27 Kent 149.

28 Fass 43.

29 Kent 153-54.

30 Spender 144.


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