

A New Way to be Woman: Christina Rossetti's Retrieval of Pre-Reformation Catholic Models of Virgin Mothers and Female Saints

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An article printed in England for *The National Review* in 1862 asked this pointed question in its title: “Why are Women Redundant?” The article went on to interpret the situation this way:

The problem . . . is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number quite disproportionate and quite abnormal; a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong. There are hundreds of thousands of women – not to speak more largely still – scattered through all ranks, but proportionally most numerous in the middle and upper classes – who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own.¹

For our purposes here, this excerpt highlights two noteworthy things. The first is its grounding in the middle-class Victorian discourse of domestic ideology, which, in its starkest form, said that the place of women was the

home, or the “private sphere,” where they were untainted by the rough and dirty world. This construction of gender led to women being conceived of solely as wives and mothers, so that, as is seen in this article, a woman’s fundamental value was found in “completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others.” As a part of domestic ideology, women were also seen as more spiritually attuned and able than men, both personally and on behalf of others. This discourse is embodied in Coventry Patmore’s iconic poem, “The Angel in the House,” which he wrote in praise of his wife in 1854.² A brief excerpt gives a taste:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman’s pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself . . .

The second thing to note in the excerpt from *The National Review* article is that there was a real and perceived “problem” in the Victorian period of what to do with the increasing numbers of single women. That there were more single women than single men in the Victorian period is statistically true, due in part to the casualties of the Crimean War (1853-6). However, the increasing number of single women was problematic on another level beyond the numerical. Given that the discourse of domestic ideology defined women’s roles and value in society in reference to husbands and children, those without these familial relationships were ostensibly excluded from society and thus “redundant.” As the above excerpt laments, single women were being “compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own,” which was “indicative of an unwholesome social state.”

This article examines some of the ways in which Christina Georgina Rossetti, an Anglo-Catholic British writer who lived from 1830 to 1894, discovered in pre-reformation Catholicism new ways of imagining how one could be an independent, single, Christian woman. Rossetti functions as a case study of a larger trend in Victorian British society to retrieve medieval models and ideals, for a variety of religious, artistic, and political purposes. Rossetti is an interesting case study because she was single by choice (she turned down two offers of marriage), whereas at least some women in her demographic were not single by choice. In particular, this paper argues that, through the model and legacy of female medieval mystics, Rossetti found space to choose celibacy and singleness at a time

when, culturally, socially, and religiously, this was seen as deeply problematic and even suspect.

Perhaps the connection between Rossetti in the nineteenth century and mystics in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries seems unlikely. Of course, Victorian England was in many ways a markedly different context from the medieval period; however, there are some notable commonalities that warrant consideration. A significant one is that, as in the Victorian period, “[d]uring the Middle Ages, for the first time in European history, women outnumbered men.”³ Though not without challenge, mystics often operated within their communities as writers, theologians, and spiritual guides. Mystics who wrote inadvertently offered their lives and writing as inspiration, encouragement, and a model for subsequent generations of women who also sought meaningful ways of being in the world, even if they were not biological mothers or wives. This shared aspect of singleness of many women’s lives in the medieval and Victorian periods is significant in our case study, because, despite the Victorian suspicions of celibacy and singleness, Christina Rossetti consistently showed that celibacy was a viable option for women of her day through her lived example and in her writing. And not just as a last resort. Frederick Roden underlines this when he writes that, “the single woman’s spiritual life is everywhere elevated in Rossetti’s prose, offering an alternative vocation to marriage and motherhood.”⁴ An example of this comes in her book, *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (1883), where Rossetti describes the celibate woman:

Her spiritual eyes behold the King in His beauty; wherefore she forgets, by comparison, her own people and her father’s house. Her Maker is her Husband, endowing her with a name better than of sons and of daughters. His Presence and his right hand are more to her than that fulness of joy and those pleasures which flow from them . . . She loves Him with all her heart and soul and mind and strength; she is jealous that she cannot love Him more; her desire to love Him outruns her possibility, yet by outrunning enlarges it. She contemplates Him, and abhors herself in dust and ashes. She contemplates Him, and forgets herself in Him . . . a pure oblation of unflinching self-sacrifice.⁵

Rossetti’s description could easily be of one of the female medieval mystics, such as Catherine of Siena (1347-80) or Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207-82/94). Rossetti goes on to describe the married wife in this

contrasting way:

She sees not face to face, but as it were in a glass darkly. Every thing, and more than all every person, and most of all the one best beloved person, becomes her mirror wherein she beholds Christ and her shrine wherein she serves Him . . . Her earthly love and obedience express to her a mystery; she takes heed to reverence her husband, as seeing Him Who is invisible; her children are the children whom God has given her, the children whom she nurses for God. She sits down in the lowest place, and is thankful there . . .⁶

In these side-by-side passages, Rossetti does not dismiss the culturally accepted standard of femininity: that of mother and wife. She never disparaged women who were married; indeed, when her brothers married, she gladly celebrated with them and their new wives, and she was engaged for almost two years herself, from 1848 to 1850, before breaking off the engagement. Yet, as Roden notes, “in Christina Rossetti’s poetry we find a subtle reconfiguring of familial relationships. Her work consistently portrays women’s preferences for spiritual bridegrooms over love of husbands on earth.”⁷ And in this reconfiguration of relationships, particularly familial ones, she finds space for another model that, by its very presence, challenges the strictures of Victorian middle-class femininity, as articulated in the discourse of domesticity.

In the medieval period, female mystics were typically assumed to be virgins; or, to put it bluntly, to be a mystic, one had to be a virgin or, at the very minimum, celibate.⁸ For mystics, the choice to eschew the responsibilities of wifehood and motherhood meant other roles were a possibility; thus, many of these women took on responsibilities in their communities as spiritual guides, artists, writers, and leaders. Similarly, a life of singlehood and celibacy is a life that Christina; her sister, Maria; and her three maternal aunts, Eliza, Margaret, and Charlotte, also chose. In both the medieval and Victorian periods, celibacy offered a paradigm of being female that opened up new possibilities, both philosophically and practically. In the Victorian period, single, independent women joined nunneries; engaged in work in the political, educational, and philanthropic spheres; and participated in a wide range of societies that gave them both viable work and community. Rossetti, in particular, engaged with the world outside of the familial home by serving at St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary at Highgate, an Anglo-Catholic house run loosely like a convent, with a mandate to minister to former prostitutes; by supporting

the nascent Protestant sisterhoods, which were directly modeled on pre-reformation Catholic convents; and, perhaps most importantly, by participating in the literary culture of Victorian England, where she became an important and successful member. The opening of such spheres of influence and engagement meant that, as one scholar says: "With the help of the Catholic tradition . . . [women] could now place alongside the Protestant ideal of the married mother in the conjugal home, an icon of a virgin, moral or social mother doing self-sacrificial work with the poor and needy in the public world and introducing a home influence into it."⁹ Beyond this, it gave women permission to explore their vocations and skills in an alternative context to the home.

In both the medieval and Victorian periods, a woman by herself was not considered complete. The mystical language of Christ as lover and consummation through marriage to Christ lent credence to the culturally perceived requirements for women to be completed in reference to another. Scholar Julie Melnyck affirms this aspect of the connection between Rossetti and the mystics when she writes that:

[C]hurch tradition . . . provided a mystical tradition which allowed women greater scope for reimagining the relationship between God and human beings. Christina Rossetti, for example, revived the imagery of Christ as Bridegroom and the Soul as Bride, portraying the feminine figure as the paradigm of Christian experience and providing the mystic with direct knowledge of God as Love.¹⁰

When the soul is seen as bride and Christ as bridegroom, women no longer needed to marry in order to be completed. Even so, most people in the Victorian context remained suspicious of language that pictured women as the brides of Christ, because this "challenged women's roles as wife and mother and elevates celibacy above marriage."¹¹ This was seen clearly in the opening excerpt from the *National Review*, where women were seen primarily as "completing . . . the existence of others." While women such as Rossetti were not attempting to deny the necessity of submission to God, in practice this theological emphasis of Christ as lover and bridegroom and a life of intentional singlehood and celibacy brought with it greater practical freedom and independence, as well as spiritual authority.

One brief example of increased independence is demonstrated in a letter that Rossetti wrote to her good friend, Charles Bagot Cayley, concerning her financial situation. (Incidentally, Cayley was one of the men who had proposed to her decades earlier.) As her writing had begun

to provide her with royalties, she was able to live more independently and even sought to pay her brother, William, back for taking care of her over the years. Rossetti writes:

William made me a home for so many years that (especially now that he has a young family) I am inclined to rate the money-portion of my debt to him . . . I am an indefinite distance off from having much at my pure disposal [considering the sum she wanted to pay back to William]. If I live long enough, that is if I survive certain members of my family, I believe I shall be amply provided for . . .¹²

With the vocation of writing came increased independence, financial and otherwise.

Religion has often been blamed for restricting and repressing women – and, of course, this is justified more often than not; however, Rossetti is at least one counter-example that complicates the narrative that religion is only capable of oppressing women. Regardless, it does so in a way that continues to baffle some twenty-first century scholars because, for Rossetti, religion was not a tool to gain more personal freedom. Diane D’Amico pinpoints this when she observes that, in Rossetti’s writing, women contemplatives seek freedom in order to sacrifice for Divine Love, not for their personal freedom.¹³ Rossetti’s personal subservience to Christ and her willingness to suffer continue to break modern paradigms and categorizations of either progressive feminist or repressed anti-feminist.

To conclude, it is from within the tradition of Christianity, particularly the legacy of pre-reformation medieval mysticism, that Rossetti was nourished and given space to live as a woman, a writer, and a Christian. There are many other ways that Rossetti retrieved and re-appropriated the legacy of the medieval mystics, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to do more than gesture toward them. As one scholar notes, “the way in which . . . religious women from different times and places reached strikingly comparable conclusions on similar questions about the Divine and their place as women within God’s creation” is remarkable.¹⁴ Four brief examples of resonant themes in both Rossetti and the medieval mystics’ writings are a core emphasis on the fundamental reality of God as Love, the centrality and paradox of suffering, intimacy with Christ in this life, and union with Christ in the next life. Each of these themes, retrieved from the legacy of medieval mysticism, significantly affected Rossetti’s theology, her writing, and her lived experience.

Ultimately, her identity as a writer and a woman was inextricably

rooted in her spiritual identity and heritage. Somewhere between the culturally dominant model of marriage and motherhood, which saw singleness as problematic, and the nascent model of the Anglican sisterhoods, modeled on Roman Catholic nunneries, Rossetti discovered her particular identity and vocation. As one scholar put it, “the pre-Reformation church, with its Virgins and saints, its abbesses and mystics . . . afforded new visions . . . for female leadership and intellectual and artistic achievement.”¹⁵ Of this, Christina Rossetti is a prime example.

Endnotes

1. “Art. VII.-Why are Women Redundant?” *The National Review* 28 (1862): 434-60.
2. Domestic ideology is best known from Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s seminal book, *Family Fortunes* (first published in 1989). This argument has since been significantly refined and nuanced, but is still a dominant narrative in the scholarship. This paper seeks to complicate this construction of masculinity and femininity, even while acknowledging its presence and power in mid-Victorian culture.
3. Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.
4. Frederick S. Roden, “Sisterhood is Powerful: Christina Rossetti’s Maude,” in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, eds. Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), 63-77.
5. Christina G. Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (London: SPCK, 1883), 92.
6. Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit*, 92-93.
7. Roden, “Sisterhood is Powerful,” 63-77.
8. Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 237. Also, Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) notes that in the medieval period, virginity was less about whether a person had sex or not and more about freedom from gender itself. This, of course, has mixed implications. A positive implication is explored in the chapter above. A negative implication is that women were not honored as women, and virginity was a way for them to transcend their gender and become more like men, who were seen to be the ideal of humanity. To be

truly spiritual, a woman must be freed of her womanhood. This is one interpretation, one that is certainly not wholly unfounded in the history of Christianity. However, further exploration of this topic, though important, is beyond the scope of this study.

9. Eileen Janes Yeo, "Protestant feminists and Catholic saints in Victorian Britain," in *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eileen Janes Yeo (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 127-48.
10. Julie Melnyck, "Women, Writing, and the Creation of Theological Cultures," in *Women, Gender, and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, eds. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline deVries (London: Routledge, 2010), 41.
11. Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 57.
12. Antony H. Harrison, ed., *The Letters of Christina Rossetti* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1997), 3:99.
13. Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 61. Diane D'Amico also makes the particular claim that seeing the nun as the bride of Christ challenged Victorian norms and ideals of womanhood (*Faith, Gender, and Time*, 57).
14. D'Amico, *Faith, Gender, and Time*, 61.
15. Kimberly VanEsveld Adams, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 226.