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Rossetti and his artist friends called women such as Jane Morris “stunners.” The epithet can also be applied to Rossetti’s poetry, especially his later writings. In his maturity he used stunning polyphallic diction to convey opulence and density. Earlier poems such as “My Sister’s Sleep” (1850) are usually much less elaborate in manner and reflect the original aesthetic values of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in which Rossetti played a central and founding role. In 1848 a group of young artists and writers came together in what they called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The most prominent members were painters, notably John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, and Rossetti. Their principal object was to reform English painting by repudiating the established academic style in favor of a revival of the simplicity and pure colors of pre-Renaissance art. Because each artist preferred to develop his own individual manner, the Brotherhood did not cohere for more than a few years. Rossetti grew away from the Pre-Raphaelite manner and his early choice of religious subjects, cultivating instead a more richly ornate style of painting. In both the early and the late phases of his art, however, many have viewed him as essentially a poet in his painting and a painter in his poetry. “Colour and meter,” he once said, “are the true patents of nobility in painting and poetry, taking precedence of all intellectual claims.”

For images of some Rossetti paintings, see “The Painterly Image in Poetry” at Norton Literature Online.

The Blessed Damozel

The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;

She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary’s gift,
Fatingly worn;

Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn;

Herseemed she scarce had been a day
One of God’s choristers;

The wonder was not yet quite gone
From that still look of hers;
Albeit, to them she left, her day
Had counted as ten years.

(To one it is ten years of years.
... Yet now, and in this place,
Surely she leaned o’er me—her hair
Fell all about my face....

1. A poetic version of "damozel," signifying a young unmarried lady. Rossetti once explained that "Blessed Damozel" is related to Edgar Allan Poe’s "The Raven" (1845), a poem he admired. "I saw that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so I determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven." The thoughts of the damozel’s still-living lover appear in the poem in parentheses.

2. It seemed to her.
Nothing: the autumn-fall of leaves. 
The whole year sets apace.)

25 It was the rampart of God's house 
    That she was standing on; 
    By God built over the sheer depth 
    The which is Space begun; 
    So high, that looking downward thence
    She scarce could see the sun.

30 It lies in heaven, across the flood 
    Of ether, as a bridge. 
    Beneath the tides of day and night 
    With flame and darkness ridge
    The void, as low as where this earth 
    Spins like a fretful midge.

Around her, lovers, newly met 
    'Mid deathless love's acclaims, 
    Spoke evermore among themselves 
    Their heart-remembered names; 
    And the souls mounting up to God 
    Went by her like thin flames.

40 And still she bowed herself and stooped 
    Out of the circling charm; 
    Until her bosom must have made
    The bar she leaned on warm,

And the lilies lay as if asleep 
    Along her bended arm.

50 From the fixed place of heaven she saw 
    Time like a pulse shake fierce 
    Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove 
    Within the gulf to pierce
    Its path; and now she spoke as when
    The stars sang in their spheres.

55 The sun was gone now, the curled moon 
    Was like a little feather 
    Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
    She spoke through the still weather. 
    Her voice was like the voice the stars
    Had when they sang together. \(^3\)

(Ah, sweet! Even now, in that bird's song, 
    Strove not her accents there, 
    Fain to be harkened? When those bells 
    Possessed the midday air,
    Strove not her steps to reach my side
    Down all the echoing stair?)

70 "I wish that he were come to me, 
    For he will come," she said. 
    "Have I not prayed in heaven?—on earth, 
    Lord, Lord, has he not prayed? 
    Are not two prayers a perfect strength? 
    And shall I feel afraid?

    "When round his head the aureole\(^b\) clings, 
    And he is clothed in white, 
    I'll take his hand and go with him 
    To the deep wells of light; 
    As unto a stream we will step down, 
    And bathe there in God's sight.

    "We two will stand beside that shrine, 
    Occult,\(^h\) withheld, untrod, 
    Whose lamps are stirred continually 
    With prayer sent up to God; 
    And see our old prayers, granted, melt 
    Each like a little cloud.

80 "We two will lie in the shadow of 
    That living mystic tree\(^h\) 
    Within whose secret growth the Dove\(^i\) 
    Is sometimes felt to be,

\(^3\) Job 38.7. 
5. The tree of life, as described in an apocalyptic vision in the Bible (Revelation 22.2).
While every leaf that His plumes touch
Saith His Name audibly.

"And I myself will teach to him,
I myself, lying so,
The songs I sing here; which his voice
Shall pause in, hushed and slow,
And find some knowledge at each pause,
Or some new thing to know."

(Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st! Yea, one wast thou with me That once of old. But shall God lift To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul Was but its love for thee?)

"We two," she said, "will seek the groves Where the lady Mary is, With her five handmaidens, whose names Are five sweet symphonies, Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen, Margaret, and Rosalys." 6

"Circlewise sit they, with bound locks And foreheads garlanded; Into the fine cloth white like flame Weaving the golden thread, To fashion the birth-robés for them Who are just born, being dead.

"He shall fear, haply," and be dumb; Then will I lay my cheek To his, and tell about our love, Not once abashed or weak; And the dear Mother will approve My pride, and let me speak.

"Herself shall bring us, hand in hand, To Him round whom all souls Kneel, the clear-ranged unnumbered heads Bowed with their aureoles; And angels meeting us shall sing To their citherns and citoles." 7

"There will I ask of Christ the Lord Thus much for him and me— Only to live as once on earth With Love—only to be, As then awhile, forever now, Together, I and he."

She gazed and listened and then said,
Less sad of speech than mild—
"All this is when he comes." She ceased.
The light thrilled toward her, filled With angels in strong, level flight. Her eyes prayed, and she smiled.

(I saw her smile.) But soon their path Was vague in distant spheres; And then she cast her arms along The golden barriers, And laid her face between her hands, And wept. (I heard her tears.)

My Sister's Sleep!

She fell asleep on Christmas Eve.
At length the long-ungranted shade Of weary eyelids overweighed The pain nought else might yet relieve.

Our mother, who had leaned all day Over the bed from chime to chime, Then raised herself for the first time, And as she sat her down, did pray.

Her little worktable was spread With work to finish. For the glare Made by her candle, she had care To work some distance from the bed.

Without, there was a cold moon up, Of winter radiance sheer and thin; The hollow halo it was in Was like an icy crystal cup.

Through the small room, with subtle sound Of flame, by vents the fireshine drove And reddened. In its dim alcove The mirror shed a clearness round.

I had been sitting up some nights, And my tired mind felt weak and blank; Like a sharp strengthening wine it drank The stillness and the broken lights.

6. Rossetti creates this list of Mary's handmaidens from various saints, historical figures, and allegorical characters.
7. Guitar-like instruments.
1. The incident in this poem is imaginary, not autobiographical.
By sea or sky or woman, to one law,
The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.

This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise
Thy voice and hand shake still,—long known to thee
By flying hair and fluttering hem,—the heat
Following her daily of thy heart and feet,
How passionately and irretrievably,
In what fond flight, how many ways and days!

78. Body's Beauty

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,) That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
And subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.

1848–80

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
1830–1894

Referring to the title of George Gissing's 1893 novel about women who choose not to marry, the critic Jerome McGann calls Christina Rossetti "one of nineteenth-century England's greatest 'Odd Women.'" Her life had little apparent incident. She was the youngest child in the Rossetti family. Her father was an exiled Italian patriot who wrote poetry and commentaries on Dante that tried to find evidence in his poems of mysterious ancient conspiracies; her mother was an Anglo-Italian who had worked as a governess. Their household was a lively gathering place for Italian exiles, full of conversation of politics and culture; and Christina, like her brothers Dante Gabriel and William Michael, was encouraged to develop an early love for art and literature and to draw and write poetry from a very early age. When she was an adolescent, her life changed dramatically: her father became a permanent invalid, the family's economic situation worsened, and her own health deteriorated. Subsequently she, her mother, and her sister became intensely involved with the Anglo-Catholic movement within the Church of England. For the rest of her life, Rossetti governed herself by strict religious principles, giving up theater, opera, and chess; on two occasions she canceled plans for marriage because of religious scruples, breaking her first engage-
ment when her fiancé reverted to Roman Catholicism and ultimately refusing to marry a second suitor because he seemed insufficiently concerned with religion. She lived a quiet life, occupying herself with charitable work—including ten years of volunteer service at a penitentiary for fallen women—with caring for her family, and with writing poetry.

Rossetti’s first volume of poetry, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), contains all the different poetic modes that mark her achievement—pure lyric, narrative fable, ballad, and the devotional verse to which she increasingly turned in her later years. The most remarkable poem in the book is the title piece, which early established its popularity as a seemingly simple moral fable for children. Later readers have likened it to S. T. Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and have detected in it a complex representation of the religious themes of temptation and sin, and of redemption by vicarious suffering; the fruit that tempts Lorn, however, clearly is not from the tree of knowledge but from the orchard of sensual delights. In its deceptively simple style *Goblin Market*, like many of Rossetti’s poems, demonstrates her affinity with the early aims of the Pre-Raphaelite group, though her work as a whole resists this classification. A consciousness of gender often leads her to criticize the conventional representation of women in Pre-Raphaelite art, as in her sonnet “In an Artist’s Studio” (1896), and a stern religious vision controls the sensuous impulses typical of Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting. Virginia Woolf has described the distinctive combination of sensuousness and religious severity in Rossetti’s work:

Your poems are full of gold dust and “sweet geraniums’ varied brightness”; your eye noted incessantly how rushes are “velvet headed,” and lizards have a “strange metallic mail”—your eye, indeed, observed with a sensual pre-Raphaelite intensity that must have surprised Christina the Anglo-Catholic. But to her you owed perhaps the finery and sadness of your muse... No sooner have you feasted on beauty with your eyes than your mind tells you that beauty is vain and beauty passes. Death, oblivion, and rest lap round your songs with their dark wave.

William Michael Rossetti wrote of his sister, “She was replete with the spirit of self-postponement.” Christina Rossetti was a poet who created, in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s phrase, “an aesthetics of renunciation.” She writes a poetry of deference, of deflection, of negation, whose very denial and constraints give her a powerful way to articulate a poetic self in critical relationship to the little that the world offers. Like Emily Dickinson, she often, as in “Winter: My Secret” (1862) uses a coy playfulness and sardonic wit to reduce the self but at the same time to preserve for it a secret inner space. And like Dickinson, she wrote many poems of an extraordinarily pure lyric beauty that made Virginia Woolf compare Rossetti’s work to that of classical composers: “Your instinct was so sure, so direct, so intense that it produced poems that sing like music in one’s ears—like a melody by Mozart or an air by Gluck.”

Song

She sat and sang alway
By the green margin of a stream,
Watching the fishes leap and play
Beneath the glad sunbeam.

I sat and wept alway
Beneath the moon’s most shadowy beam,
Watching the blossoms of the May
Weep leaves into the stream.

I wept for memory;
She sang for hope that is so fair:
My tears were swallowed by the sea;
Her songs died on the air.

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:

Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,

Haply? I may remember,
And haply may forget.

The curtains were half drawn, the floor was swept
And strewn with rushes, rosemary and myrrh
Lay thick upon the bed on which I lay,
Where thro’ the lattice ivy-shadows crept.

He leaned above me, thinking that I slept
And could not hear him; but I heard him say:
“Poor child, poor child”; and as he turned away
Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.

He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold
That hid my face, or take my hand in his,
Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head:
He did not love me living; but once dead
He pitied me; and very sweet it is
To know he still is warm tho’ I am cold.

1. The cypress tree is associated with mourning.
1. Flowers associated with death.
Dead before Death

Ah! changed and cold, how changed and very cold!
With stiffened smiling lips and cold calm eyes;
Changed, yet the same: much knowing, little wise;
This was the promise of the days of old!

Grown hard and stubborn in the ancient mould,
Grown rigid in the sham of lifelong lies:
We hoped for better things as years would rise,
But it is over as a tale once told.

All fallen the blossom that no fruitage bore,
All lost the present and the future time,
All lost, all lost, the lapse that went before:
So lost till death shut to the opened door,
So lost from chime to everlasting chime,
So cold and lost for ever evermore.

Cobwebs

It is a land with neither night nor day,
Nor heat nor cold, nor any wind, nor rain,
Nor hills nor valleys; but one even plain
Stretches thro' long unbroken miles away:

While thro' the sluggish air a twilight grey
Broodeth; no moons or seasons wax and wane,
No ebb and flow are there along the main;
No bud-time no leaf-falling, there for aye—
No ripple on the sea, no shifting sand,

No beat of wings to stir the stagnant space,
No pulse of life thro' all the loveless land:
And loveless sea; no trace of days before,
No guarded home, no toil-won resting place,
No future hope no fear for evermore.

A Triad

Three sang of love together: one with lips
Crimson, with cheeks and bosom in a glow,
Flushed to the yellow hair and finger tips;
And one there sang who soft and smooth as snow
Bloomed like a tinted hyacinth at a show;

And one was blue with famine after love,
Who like a harpstring snapped rang harsh and low
The burden of what those were singing of,
One shamed herself in love; one temperately
Grew gross in soulless love, a sluggish wife;

One famished died for love. Thus two of three
Took death for love and won him after strife;
One drooped in sweetness like a fattened bee:
All on the threshold, yet all short of life.

In an Artist's Studio

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One farsight figure sits or walks or leans;
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loneliness.

A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel;—every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feasts upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

A Birthday

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;
My heart is like an apple tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickest fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a cairn of silk and down;
Hang it with vair; and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.

1. According to Christina's brother William Michael, this poem focuses on the work of their older brother, Dante Gabriel. "The reference is apparently to our brother's studio, and to his constantly repeated-headed the lady whom he afterwards married, Miss Siddall."