Fallen Women and Hopes of Heaven Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde (e97)

John Hathaway sets this late poem by Christina Rossetti in the context of Victorian ideas about female virtue and the potential for redemption, as well as in the context of her other poetical works about women, morality and faith. He suggests that the vision in this poem is a particularly bleak one.

Two themes that are particularly prominent in the work of Christina Rossetti are the theme of self-postponement as characters endure the hardships of their mortal existence whilst waiting for a joyous fulfilment of their hopes in heaven and an exploration of the invidious position of the fallen woman. In 'Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde', first published in 1881, towards the end of Rossetti's life, both of these themes are conjoined, but in ways that perhaps sit uneasily alongside her other works.

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Louise de la Vallière (1644-1710)

What distinguishes this poem from others by Rossetti is the choice of speaker. This poem is a dramatic monologue, a style of poetry famously used by another Victorian poet, Robert Browning, which allows the speaker to assume the voice of an entirely different character. Here, Rossetti imagines the thoughts and feelings of a real-life historical figure, Louise de la Vallière, which is different from many of her other lyrical works written in the first person, where there is less of a clear differentiation between Rossetti

herself and the persona she assumes. It is possible that Rossetti was influenced by Felicia Hemans, an earlier female Victorian poet, whose collection Records of Women was published in 1828 and presents mythical and historical narratives of famous female characters, exploring their suffering and sacrifice.

Louise de la Vallière is an intriguing choice of speaker, both in terms of the stark differences between herself and Rossetti but also the illuminating similarities. She is a famous figure in French history as she was the mistress of Louis XIV, bearing him five children, before she lost his favour and was replaced by various other mistresses. Humiliated and dejected, she sought spiritual solace by leaving the French court and joining a Carmelite nunnery in 1674, which is the date Rossetti includes at the very beginning of the poem. The Carmelites were specifically chosen by Louise de la Vallière because of the many rules and regulations they followed, circumscribing the freedom of their adherents. Eventually, even the special shoes that Louise wore to prevent her limping were taken away from her, similar perhaps to Rossetti's willingness to sacrifice relationships and hobbies because of her faith. Louise gladly sought such deprivations both because she felt they were part of a penance she was obliged to fulfil after her life as a mistress, but also because they reminded her of the far greater suffering she experienced in the French court. Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde, or Sister Louise of Mercy, was the name given to Louise when she took her vows in 1675. She stayed there for thirty-six years, writing Reflections on the Mercy of God, a semi-autobiographical text exploring God's grace for sinners, particularly former courtesans who repented and sought God's forgiveness. Although she is studied as a poet today, it is important to remember that, like Louise de la Vallière, by the time of her

death in 1894, Rossetti was thought of as an exclusively religious writer, thanks to the very successful meditative prose works that she wrote.

The Archetypal ‘Fallen Woman’

Rossetti therefore chooses a particular character at a particular moment in time, pinpointing a precise moment in the past, much as she does in ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi’, as the basis of this poem. This allows the poet to assume the character of a woman who had lived as a courtesan and now bitterly repents her former lifestyle. Thus, Louise de la Vallière becomes an example of the ‘fallen woman’ so condemned by Victorian society, and that Rossetti herself had first-hand experience of, having worked in St Mary’s Highgate penitentiary that sought to rehabilitate former prostitutes. This is, of course, when she wrote her most famous work, ‘Goblin Market’, and it is easy to see the influence of this experience in her writing of ‘Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde’. The speaker uses the word ‘desire’ eight times, and in every case ‘desire’ is denounced as bringing nothing but pain and sadness. One of the most haunting images in this poem is the ‘disenkindled fire’ that the speaker compares herself to twice: ‘fire’ stands as a symbol of her life and vitality, which now lies ‘disenkindled’, an adjective that emphasises not only that her life force and spirit has been extinguished but also, through the prefix ‘dis-’, that there is no hope of resurrection, as even the smallest pieces of kindling have been removed. Such is the result of ‘spent desire’, and the speaker is only left to poignantly ask ‘Where is the hire for which my life was hired?’, using the economic term ‘hire’ to highlight how she was purchased for her beauty, and now

is cast aside. Rossetti leaves us under no illusions: this is a woman who feels empty and hopeless as a direct result of her experience as a courtesan and whose 'rose of life' has now been replaced by 'prickles', referencing her present pain.

The despair and guilt of the speaker in this poem seems to align itself with the contemporary view of 'fallen women', and with William Acton, a Victorian gynaecologist, describing them as 'a woman with half the woman gone' and 'instrument[s] of impurity'. The writings of Acton and others such as Michael Ryan, an evangelical physician, led to a strong belief that 'fallen women' represented a threat to Victorian society, which the Contagious Disease Acts of 1860 attempted to control and regulate. Rossetti herself wrote in The Face of the Deep, one of her famous prose religious works, that 'Eve, the representative woman, received as part of her sentence 'desire', viewing desire as being one of the negative outcomes of the Fall of Man that women have had to struggle with ever since. The repeated refrain of the poem, 'Oh vanity of vanities, desire!', alludes to Ecclesiasties 1:2, which underlines the worthlessness and emptiness of pursuing desire. Whereas Rossetti elsewhere seems to challenge the passive position of the fallen woman, describing the eponymous Maude Clare as being 'like a queen' in contrast with Nell, the bride, this poem seems to be written as a didactic warning about the dangers of desire, with no fairy tale happy ending of the kind that Lizzie experiences in 'Goblin Market'. Indeed, if anything, the speaker seems to be more similar to Jeanie who 'dwindled and grew grey'.

An Absence of Religious Hope

The bleakness and despair of this poem raise other troubling questions. Whilst many of Rossetti's poems do present life on this earth as a struggle, this is offset against the eventual hope of achieving fulfilment and happiness in heaven after death. Earthly love in Rossetti's works is constantly set alongside the deferred rewards that will come as a result of exchanging earthly love for divine love. Thus it is that the speaker of 'Twice', for example, urges God to 'purge' the 'dross' of her heart so that she is able to offer it to God and declare defiantly, that she 'shall not die, but live.' In contrast to this image of refining and purging, the speaker of 'Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde' seems to have no opportunity to go through the painful process of purification. Her 'dross' is pictured dribbling out of her heart, described as 'love's deathbed', like pus from an infected wound. The repetition of 'trickles' and 'drop by drop' creates a painful image of someone who is mortally wounded and is slowly but inevitably dying with no hope of recovery.

Likewise, the speaker metaphorically compares herself to a 'garden plot' which, although it was once fertile and full of promise, is now nothing more than 'barren mire': worthless dirt where nothing can grow. Her 'hope' is compared to a plant that 'might have strained up higher' but is now 'stunt[ed]' as a result of her desire. Such imagery perhaps alludes to the Garden of Eden, with the 'barren mire' emphasising how the speaker is now a spiritual outcast. There is no reassuring answering speaker to offer comfort and encouragement, as in 'Uphill'. Instead, the persona seems to only face the rejection and isolation of the speaker in 'Shut Out', who finds herself 'quite alone', excluded from the Edenic garden she once had possession of. Both poems are similar in the lack of hope that the speakers are offered: even the eventual

consolation of some sort of heavenly gain seems to have been taken from them. This is particularly odd in 'Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde', as the title identifies the new name of Louise de la Vallière, which we might have seen as symbolic of the new start she was offered as she began her life as a nun, yet instead, the speaker seems fixated on the sins of her past. On the one hand, she longs deeply to renounce her former life, but on the other hand, her language seems to suggest that she is unable to move on and is doomed to dwell endlessly on her past misdeeds. Her memory, after all, is presented as a 'bottomless gulf of mire', without end or limit. The extensive use of repetition and the simple rhyme scheme, that becomes even more so in the final stanza, indicates a deliberately limited use of rhyme and a circumscribed use of language mirroring the speaker's mental closed circuit of lament and guilt from which she appears unable to escape. In spite of the hope embodied in her new name, Rossetti seems to offer very little 'mercy' to her speaker.

'Oh vanity of vanities, desire!'

Rossetti is known for her 'aesthetics of renunciation', to quote Gilbert and Gubar, which made a virtue of rejecting any earthly pleasures and joys in exchange for heavenly reward. Even her brother, William Rossetti, described his sister as being 'replete with the spirit of self-postponement.' Yet what is so troubling about this poem is that, even though she has turned to God and rejected human love for divine love, the speaker experiences none of the deep sense of contentment and fulfilment that Rossetti writes of elsewhere. Studying the panoply of different voices in Rossetti's work can sometimes feel like trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. Whilst other poems can be viewed as

being more progressive and subversive, there is no attempt to offer hope to this most fallen of women. What Rossetti does achieve is a powerful and lyrical evocation of female suffering that perhaps could be said to implicitly criticise a system that allows the negative consequences of desire to be borne by women alone. There were, after all, no 'fallen men' in Victorian discourse.

'Nater, after all'?

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