Christina Rossetti – Proto-feminist Poet?

Is it justifiable to think of Christina Rossetti's poetry as having feminist ideas before their time? Teacher Alice Kirby examines this idea in relation to some of Rossetti's most well-known poems.

Written long before the advent of feminism, Rossetti's poetry demonstrates a concern with the position of women in Victorian society and the constraints placed upon them. In her own life, Rossetti challenged these restrictions: she was born into an artistic, literary family, who gave her a rich intellectual education at home, she worked for a living and she chose to stay unmarried at a time when matrimony, along with motherhood, was seen by many as a women's highest achievement.

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Unconventional Use of Conventional Forms

Rossetti's poems reflect this unconventional set of personal experiences and attitudes. She may choose conventional forms, such as the sonnet or the ballad, but what she does with them is unusual, challenging some of the givens of Victorian poetry and thought. For instance, Rossetti makes use of the sonnet form but, while the sonnet is traditionally used to express love of a male persona for a female subject, her sonnets are exclusively narrated by a female persona, addressing a (presumably male) subject. In the ballad, 'Maude Clare', which uses another traditional form, a bridegroom is confronted on his wedding day by his former lover. Maude Clare reminds Sir Thomas of,

That day we waded ankle-deep
For lilies in the beck.

The lilies, connoting innocence and fragility, could be symbolic of Maude Clare's virginity, and the fact they are 'budding now' could hint at an illegitimate pregnancy. Maude Clare has become a 'fallen woman.' However, where traditional ballads might choose a similar subject matter, Rossetti's stance towards this kind of woman is very different.

The Fallen Woman

The fallen woman was a popular figure in Victorian culture. The poet laureate of the time, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, explored the subject in poems such as 'Mariana', with sympathy towards the woman but from a different standpoint. This and other writings of the time are often written from the female point of view but always recounted by a – presumably male –omniscient narrator. By giving the fallen woman herself a voice in 'Maude Clare', Rossetti is challenging Victorian society's outlook on women who step outside their predetermined roles.

Maude Clare, having lost her virginity and hence her respectability, does not behave the way Victorian society would have expected of a woman in her situation, or the way in which such material is conventionally treated in literature, where the woman's repentance is often a prerequisite for generating the audience's sympathy. She is unashamed and proud, with a 'lofty step and mien…like a queen.' Her speech opens with the interjection 'Lo,'

expressing her authority and determination to be heard. In showing Maude Clare's confrontation of Sir Thomas, Rossetti is again questioning of the societal values of the time.

Goblin Market – Female Companionship

The case for Rossetti as a proto-feminist poet is most compelling in her narrative poem 'Goblin Market'. In The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that the poem is partly about the exclusion of women from the male-dominated artistic world of the Victorian period. They assert that, in the opinion of Victorian society,

> *Young ladies like Laura [...] should not loiter in the glen of imagination, which is the haunt of [...]Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his compatriots of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.*

This was the artistic movement founded by Rossetti's brothers, Dante Gabriel and Michael Rossetti, respectively an artist and a writer. Although her brothers encouraged her writing, and even permitted her to attend meetings, they never invited her to officially join what was an exclusively male 'club.' As an unmarried woman whose presence in the world outside her home depended upon a chaperone and whose activities were governed by what was seen as 'respectable,' Rossetti did not enjoy the friendship and support of fellow artists, like her male counterparts. Instead, Rossetti enshrined in literary form a parallel model of companionship.

Laura and Lizzie live together in domestic bliss: ‘Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,’ they ‘(Air) and set to rights the house.’ They are, in some respects, the epitome of Coventry Patmore’s influential idea of the ‘Angel in the House,’ derived from his Victorian narrative poem portraying the ideal woman of the time as a paragon of domesticity and virtue. Patmore’s Angel, however, is a wife and mother, while there is an absence of men in the sisters’ household, indeed in the whole poem. This solely feminine world could be seen as Rossetti’s answer to her sibling’s exclusive ‘brotherhood.’

The ‘sisterhood’ Rossetti creates mirrors the restrictions of Victorian women’s lives. Laura and Lizzie, like the protected upper to middle-class young women of the time, don’t even go out after dark as ‘twilight is not good for maidens.’ Rossetti’s version of sisterhood may seem limited and restrictive, especially when compared to the libertine excess of the Pre-Raphaelites. Rossetti could be suggesting that Victorian society is so rigid and the predetermined roles for women are so inflexible that there is no place for an artistic sisterhood. Only a domestic version can exist – one that fits within the clearly defined roles of the Victorian woman.

Laura’s Self-exploration

Rossetti’s criticism of society is furthered by the character of Laura, who attempts to explore possibilities outside the sister’s sheltered existence. Laura is described as being ‘like the restless brook,’ suggesting her boredom with the constraints of her domestic life. Her fascination with the Goblins and their ‘fruit globes, fair or red’ has been read by critics as an allegory for her exploring her own sexuality. She pays the Goblins with ‘a precious golden lock,’

perhaps representing the loss of her virginity. However, if we return to Gilbert and Gubar's reading, the Goblin's glen represents the artistic imagination, the fruit, often described using the language of the artist's palette, 'Russet and dun,' could represent art itself. By 'loiter(ing) in the glen of the imagination,' Laura is exploring her identity as an artist.

In either case the poem can be read as an allegory for a woman trying to transcend the boundaries placed upon her by society. Laura is exploring her own identity beyond the domestic sphere. The goblins, therefore, represent the perceived danger of a woman neglecting her responsibilities to pursue other, forbidden, roles. Once Laura has tasted the Goblin fruits she

> *no more swept the house,*
> *Tended the fowls or cows…*

She wastes away, then, after Lizzie sacrifices herself to save her sister, undergoes a painful transformation: 'Writhing as one possessed… ' The punishment visited upon Laura is indicative of Victorian society's attitude towards 'fallen' women. However, the fact that Rossetti worked as a volunteer at a 'house of charity' for former prostitutes and single mothers for many years suggests her sympathy with the plight of such women, linking back to her portrayal of Maude Clare.

The Ending of 'Goblin Market'

At the end of 'Goblin Market', Laura and Lizzie

both were wives
With children of their own.

This could be read as a return to conventional Victorian values, a very ordinary ending to an otherwise, arguably, subversive text. However, the continued absence of men (the children are referred to as 'sisters' and the husbands are nowhere to be seen) may suggest something different.

Laura tells the children of the Goblin's

fruits like honey to the throat
But poison in the blood,

then

how her sister stood
In deadly peril to do her good.

However, there is no explicit warning; Laura does not forbid the girls to seek the Goblins, to 'loiter in the glen of imagination.' Instead, 'joining hands to little hands,' she tells them

there is no friend like a sister…
To fetch one if one goes astray.

Here, Rossetti portrays sisterhood as the way through the ‘haunted glen’ of the imagination, perhaps a manifestation of a ‘Pre Raphaelite sisterhood’ which didn’t, and couldn’t, exist in reality.

Perhaps the most persuasive confirmation of proto-feminist values in Rossetti’s poetry is that her characters are given the agency to make their own decisions. Lizzie does not stop Laura from tasting the Goblin’s wares, just as Laura does not forbid their daughters. Rossetti’s women challenge male authority, like Maude Clare in her confrontation with Sir Thomas. Rossetti lived an often unconventional life within the confines of Victorian mores, and her female characters act as a reflection of her experiences.