



Christina Rossetti

No Thanks to Marriage

Lindsey Stewart considers Rossetti's exploration of marriage in four poems, arguing that it is presented as something to be avoided, or at the very least not assumed to be a route to happiness and personal salvation.

'No Thank You, John'

An exasperated response to a marriage proposal is an unusual poetic topic in nineteenth-century English literature. Published in 1862, Christina Rossetti's speaker's blunt refusal in 'No Thank You, John' might seem odd, but equally, is amusing to the reader. The title itself is polite but thereafter things only get worse for John. Melvyn Bragg observed in the excellent *In Our Time* discussion of Rossetti, that the opening line, 'I never said I loved you John', marks the 'beginning of a devastating poem'. Victorian etiquette manuals advised that a woman should not trifle with a man's affections. They counselled that any rebuff should be given kindly, and that the woman should gently withdraw from the man's company. However, Rossetti's speaker, perhaps like some other Victorian women in similar circumstances, behaves differently. 'No Thank You, John' concludes with an offer of friendship. The sense that the speaker is resolute, knows her own mind and would like to be treated as an equal seems to be

its point. She offers a handshake at the end: a distinctly unsentimental but mutually respectful gesture.

Written as a dramatic monologue but using the regular rhythmic form of a ballad to suggest the rather predictable weariness of the situation and her reiterated explanation, Rossetti upends the traditional poetic narrative of a lovelorn male suitor, and we are shown the woman's perspective. The refusal of a marriage proposal suggests a degree of agency and power. This agency, exercised by a female speaker, is particularly striking given that, for many women at the time, their best chance of elevating their social standing and gaining financial security was through marriage. Arguably, 'John' is used in an everyman sense, like a 'Dear John' letter. It was the most common first name for men; therefore, the poem may not concern a specific individual who was on the receiving end of Rossetti's impatience. A possible reading is that the institution of marriage itself is placed under the reader's scrutiny. In fact, the poem seems to suggest that marriage is an onerous prospect. Dismissively alliterative, there are some interchangeable women, 'Meg or Moll', who might take John if he is desperate. We gather that as her interlocutor, John has pleaded that she has no heart, to which her riposte is that no offence can therefore be meant or taken, for if she lacks 'heart' he should 'Use [his] own common sense' and conclude that she is not interested. The idea that she might change her mind or grow to love him is considered futile.

Some critics have drawn attention to the loose evidence which might suggest that the poem is based on Rossetti's rejection of a proposal from the painter John Brett who was on the fringes of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the mid-1850s. His portrait of Rossetti, which was in progress at the time as a possible betrothal gift, was inexplicably halted and remained unfinished. Peacock feathers, a symbol of God's all-seeing omniscience, remain incompletely sketched in the background. Rossetti gave contrary accounts of the poem's genesis saying on the one hand John did not exist, while later asserting that the 'original' John was obnoxious. In the end, evidence of Rossetti's clear tact and sensitivity in her letters and early biographies suggest that the poem cannot be reduced to a rather public message to Mr Brett and that, more importantly, her point was a broader one.

'Maude Clare'

Also published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, Rossetti's 'Maude Clare' offers further exploration of love and marriage. It was written in her first year of volunteering at the St Mary Magdalen Women's Penitentiary at Highgate for prostitutes and unmarried mothers. She did not keep a diary, so we do not know what she made of her experiences, but the poem offers a similarly sober view of marriage to 'No Thank You, John'. The titular Maude Clare, a 'fallen woman' character, who has shared an inferred intimate relationship with the groom, Thomas, is dismissive of the new marriage, refusing to see it (and him) as worthy of celebration.

John Millais' original accompanying illustration suggests its medieval setting, the 'action' of the poem happening on the liminal threshold of a church with a crowd of onlooking villagers. All eyes are on the proud Maude Clare, described in the poem as a 'queen', with a 'lofty step and mien'. Her ironic triplet, 'blessing' the newly-weds' table, hearth, and bed, suggests her all-pervasive scorn for their future life together. Here is a weak, stuttering man not worth bothering with, ashamed of himself, and not fit for the plucky Nell who is surely woefully misguided. Maude Clare 'washes [her] hands' of Thomas whose love proved to be 'paltry'. Some critics have given credence to the fact that Nell has the last word in the poem and deduced that this somehow salvages a more sympathetic view of marriage. Problematically though, Nell acknowledges that Maude Clare has more wisdom. We might infer that Nell is simply satisfied with an economic salvation she needs. Either way the suggestion is that Thomas does not genuinely love his new bride, and the union is beginning inauspiciously.

'Goblin Market' and 'Soeur Louise de la Misericorde'

Throughout her life, Rossetti was driven by religious faith, but in the traditions of those in her circle who engaged with serious religious scholarship and a probing of conventional thinking, she appears to have used this piety to question, rather than accept, societal conventions. Retreat from a world of sensuous plenitude, most famously represented by the tempting goblins in 'Goblin Market', is often enabled by a life of religious contemplation and quietude in her poetry, rather than by life as a wife and mother. Lizzie's self-sacrifice



Credit: World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

in the poem, in which she endures the vicious assault of the goblins to secure the salvation of her sister, Laura, positions Lizzie as both Christ-like but also disruptive in the 'marriage market': one woman has secured the escape of another. Similarly, in the dramatic monologue 'Soeur Louise de la Misericorde' based upon the life of Louis XIV's spurned mistress, the nun's release from desire and the heady world of court leaves her regretting the possibility that she might have 'strained up higher', had she not been embroiled in that dizzying world of sex and romance. Retreat from marriage and sexual relations followed by a contemplative seclusion, often signals closure in Rossetti's poems.

At some point in the late 1850s, following on from her volunteering, Rossetti became an associate sister of the St Mary Magdalen order at Highgate. Her uniform of dark cloth with white collar and cuffs and a white lace cap and veil was austere. Her appearance prompted her to become the subject of a cartoon by Max Beerbohm in which her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti asks, 'What is the use, Christina, of having a heart like a singing-bird and a water shoot and all the rest of it, if you insist on getting yourself up like a pew-opener?' Perhaps this misses the point that Rossetti did not fashion herself as potential marriage material. Given the final 'moral' of 'Goblin Market' that,

there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather

Rossetti's sisterly black 'uniform' might be another indication of her unadorned and unconventional rejection of marriage and the marriage market, and her view of female solidarity as being a more fulfilling alternative. There is nothing dogmatic about Rossetti's poetic critique of marriage, after all in 'Goblin Market' the poem concludes with a brief afterthought which mentions that Lizzie and Laura both eventually become wives, but the assertion of choice and agency in that 'market' was unflinching throughout the poem. For Rossetti, divine love and 'marriage' to Christ is pre-eminent, while earthly marriage is avoided at all costs.

Dr Lindsey Stewart teaches English at Newstead Wood School, Orpington.



Credit: World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

emagArchive

- Female Voices in Christina Rossetti's Narrative Poems, *emagazine* 42, December 2008
- 'Winter: My Secret', emagplus for *emagazine* 49, September 2010
- Spiritual Conflict in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti, *emagazine* 80, April 2018
- Christina Rossetti – Proto-feminist Poet? *emagazine* 75, February 2017
- Christina Rossetti – Painting in Words, *emagazine* 71, February 2016
- Christina Rossetti – Hunger, Sex and Devotion *emagazine* 103, February 2024