Christina Rossetti

Hunger, Sex and Devotion

Dr Zaynub Zaman examines the connections between Rossetti's countercultural religious beliefs, and her transgressive depictions of female sexuality, hunger, and sisterhood. She suggests that these display an intense interest in reviving Medieval rituals and ideas about sex and worship for a Victorian readership.

Christina Rossetti – Devotion, Desire, and Devouring

The critical consensus is that Christina Rossetti's religious beliefs are key to understanding her experimental verse. But what does this mean for a student of her poetry? This article will introduce you to some crucial elements of Rossetti's Tractarian faith – a radical departure from the Evangelism of her mother, Frances, and skirting dangerously close to the Roman Catholicism of her Italian father, Gabriele's side of the family. As I will show, Rossetti's religious commitment to Tractarianism brought her into contact with Medieval rituals, doctrines, and especially mystical expressions of devotion. Thus, I propose a new context for understanding Rossetti's poems: Medieval mysticism.

Tractarian Movement – Modern or Medieval?

From its inception the Oxford Movement (or Tractarian movement) and its proponents courted controversy. So-called because it started with a group of theology students from Oxford University, who wrote provocative pamphlets (or 'Tracts'), challenging the established Anglican church, the Tractarians sought to revive the increasingly divided Church of England

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by restoring, medieval, Catholic practices and beliefs that had been ousted centuries earlier by the Protestant Reformation. They wanted to bring back rituals such as baptism, confession, partaking in the Eucharist (consumption of bread and wine as body and blood of Christ), Catholic doctrines such as the Communion of Saints and need for grace to attain salvation, as well as the wearing of Catholic vestments for priests in Church. While such alterations to worship may seem inconsequential, for a largely anti-Catholic public, these were explosive ideas that for many Victorians threatened to bring the Church of England back under what was seen by many as the heretical, corrupt, and sexually perverse influence of Rome.

Unlike Roman Catholics, the Tractarians did not accept the authority of the Pope. They believed that the events that took place during the sixteenth-century Reformation did not endorse Protestantism but signalled a need for a Reformed Catholicism that rejected the errors of the papacy. Christina Rossetti, like many Tractarians, saw the Anglican Church in its Catholic identity as the true, original Christianity of the Fathers of the Church (making Rome a deviant branch). Poetry was also central to the movement. As Dinah Roe observes the Tractarians viewed poetry's

> oblique, indirect operations as a parallel for God's relationship to the world and mankind. Like poets, God spoke to the world through metaphor, communicating His lessons in parables.

So Rossetti was a part of a movement with a poetic sensibility, focused on scholarship, and which encouraged women to participate in teaching and spreading the Gospel. It emphasises reading and understanding the Bible as the Word of God, which Rossetti took on through her daily reading of the Bible and prayer.

Mystical Guides

From 1843 onwards, Rossetti regularly attended Christ Church in Albany Street, a 'leading church in the movement', which was funded by Edward Bouverie Pusey (one of the movement's leaders and probably the strongest theological influence on Rossetti). At Christ Church, Rossetti would hear Pusey preach in ecstatic tones. So affective were his sermons that they may have contributed to Rossetti's breakdown in 1845, aged fifteen, which her doctors diagnosed as 'a kind of religious mania'. Through Pusey's teachings Rossetti learns about mystical fathers like Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa – theologians whose ideas are being repurposed by preachers for a Victorian audience. As Emma Mason observes, part of the appeal of these mystical figures was their understanding of God not as a remote being wholly separate from the world but

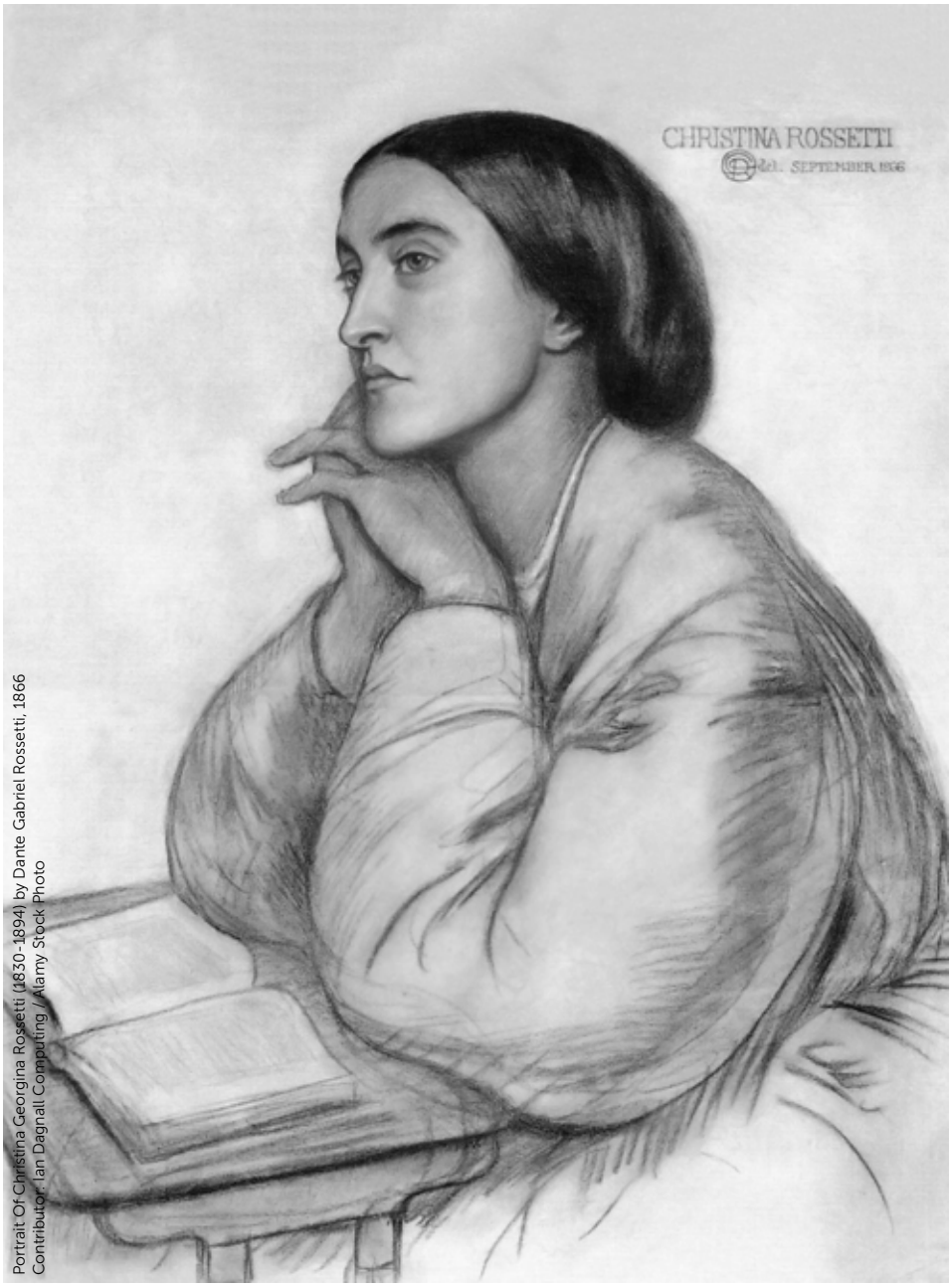
> the mystical oneness of the divine whereby God is embedded in the created order and all things are present in God.

God exists within time, space and crucially within mankind.

By harnessing mysticism, the Tractarians offered believers a way to reach God in Church, particularly through the mystical rite of Holy Communion. Pusey, like all Tractarians, viewed this service at which worshippers consume consecrated bread and wine as them really eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ. This did not mean that Christ was physically present in the bread and wine, but Pusey argued that Christ's resurrected presence was 'truly and really' present

> and in a spiritual and ineffable way, His Body and Blood!'

For Pusey, Christ's spiritual presence can be intuited as 'Sacramental, supernatural, mystical'. This suggests that an invisible, divine presence dwells within man (in the eating and drinking) and without us in the Sacrament. Indeed, Rossetti also held this view, and this sense that inanimate objects have a hidden divinity confirmed her belief that all things, physical and spiritual, become one in God. Mystical ideas about Holy Communion shaped Rossetti's depiction of eating and drinking in her poems because she often depicts food and drink as a source of temptation and yet as we will see eating and drinking is also treated as a holy moment (a site of sacrifice and communion with God).



Portrait Of Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830 -1894) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1866
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Reach Out and Touch Faith!

Rossetti's poems express a mystical desire to equate earthly love and God's love, often in bodily, even sexual terms, as thirsting or hungering for the body of Christ. For example, in 'The love of Christ which passeth knowledge' we get both a reimagining of Christ's sufferings on the Cross conflated

with a model of female desire. The speaker expresses frustration, suffering and longing in tones of a neglected lover:

> Who else had dared for thee what I have dared?
> I plunged the depth most deep from bliss above;
> I not My Flesh, I not My spirit spared:
> Give thou Me love for love.
> For thee I thirsted in the daily drouth,
> For thee I trembled in the nightly frost:
> Much sweeter than honey to My mouth:
> Why wilt thou still be lost?

Rossetti plays on the title's allusion to Ephesians 3.19

> And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filed with all the fulness of God

as the poem both portrays Christ's crucifixion as a sign of His unsurpassable love for mankind while it mediates on the idea that a believer (in imitation of Christ) may sacrifice everything in their voracious longing to be close to Christ and so briefly share in (but not fully receive) His divine love which is 'sweeter than honey'.

Goblin Market

Of course, a desire to consume the body of Christ (or commune with God) has more than a sexual meaning for Rossetti and this duality is central to her experimental style. Her mixture of vibrant, sensual images with an almost cloistered reserve creates an intriguing instability of meaning that has challenged as well as intrigued readers and critics alike.

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Goblin Market epitomises Rossetti's transgressive playfulness. In her narrative poem, two sisters are tempted to buy the fruit of each goblin. Laura gives in while Lizzie resists. As a result, the surrendering sister, indicative of a moral or sexual fall, starves and almost dies from the pain of eating the fruit. Salvation only comes when Lizzie faces up to her own temptation (the goblins) who, realising she cannot be persuaded to buy their fruit, violently try, and fail to force-feed her instead. (Their vicious attack has been compared to an attempted rape). On returning home, Laura licks off the fruit juice with which the goblins have brutally stained Lizzie's face. It is in this act of sisterly affection that the poisonous juices become miraculously transformed into a 'fiery antidote' that returns Laura to her former well-being. The poem ends with the advice that there is 'no friend like a sister', and, though we get a sense that Laura and Lizzie probably grow up to become happily married women, the poem itself never provides us with this heteronormative image. Quite deliberately it seems, in a poem full of eroticism and religious imagery, Rossetti resists presenting the reader with any approving images of men.

Feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have seen in Rossetti's poem a narrative of female defiance against male authority:

> Rossetti does [...] seem to be dreamily positing an effectively matrilineal and matriarchal world, perhaps even considering the strikingly sexual redemption scene between


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the sisters, a covertly (if ambivalently) lesbian world.

Moreover, Cora Kaplan claims that the poem

> undoubtedly remains an exploration of women's sexual fantasy, which includes suggestions of masochism, homoeroticism, rape or incest.

Goblin Market oscillates between fairytale and sexual fantasy, nonsense poem and cautionary tale, religious parable, and socio-economic allegory but it evades easy resolution into any one interpretation. The fruit may symbolise the saving grace of the Eucharist, and there is a strong case to be made for this reading. Eating the goblin's fruit (which symbolises indulging in sins of the flesh: gluttony, lust, love of worldly things) only stops being fatal for Laura through the agency of an intercessor (Lizzie) whose self-sacrifice mystically transforms the fruit juices into a source of salvation. Thus, the stain of sin becomes the wine of redemption. Hence, Lizzie operates as a Christ-like figure, whose sacrifice sanctifies all material bodies, and makes the act of eating or drinking a sacred experience which mystically transforms the fruit and Laura, stressing the interconnectedness of all things by bringing Laura into closer communion with the natural world and God.

The fruit has also been interpreted variously as representing original sin, prostitution, sexual desire, imperial capitalism, or masculinity, and yet all of these are traded off through the poem's fluidity of meaning. Rossetti persistently undermines the moral framework her poem sets up. She presents the reader with a binary opposition of the wayward/faithful sister only to undermine it by depicting a shared voyeuristic obsession with looking. As they both hear and imagine:

> Plump unpecked cherries,
> Melons and raspberries,
> Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
> Swart-headed mulberries,
> Wild free-born cranberries [...]

Lizzie may resist eating the fruit but she like the narrator is always 'peeping' at temptation and those that give in to it. This suggests that the gratification she derives is not in the eating but by living vicariously through her sister. Lizzie urges

> [...] 'O Laura, come;
> I hear the fruit-call but I dare not look:
> You should not loiter longer at this brook:

What Lizzie fears is that looking may not be enough for her. Temptation is never far away from her thoughts, which is reinforced by her continual awareness of the call of the goblin men. Yet she keeps it at a distance 'Day after day, night after night' watching her sister suffer until the urge to 'share' in her sister's 'cankerous care' becomes too strong.

Rossetti compels Lizzie to confront her own temptation and test of faith. It is a test Lizzie has masterfully deferred, which becomes a type of self-sacrifice. Lizzie leaves the safety of her home to become actively involved in the spectacle of the goblin market, to claim agency and freedom which she shows holds its dangers and rewards because the goblin men

> Tore her gown and soil'd her stocking,
> Twitch'd her hair out by the roots,
> Stamp'd upon her tender feet,
> Held her hands and squeez'd their fruits
> Against her mouth to make her eat.

Ultimately Lizzie passes her test and saves her sister from physical and moral starvation. Indeed, her act of self-sacrifice allows her, in a sense, to walk in Christ's footsteps, achieve a closer proximity to divine suffering, and act as an agent of divine mercy. Thus, perhaps Rossetti's poem is making a different kind of moral point, that is less to do with original sin or sexual desire and more to do with overcoming a fear of allowing oneself to be tested, to trust in one's own faith and inner strength to withstand external opposition and the virtue of being more than a passive spectator, to fully claim one's own autonomy and moral agency. Ultimately, to become a better Christian.

In her dramatisation of the push and pull of devotion, desire and devouring we find Rossetti's poetry at its most dynamic. Her verses oscillate between the medieval and modern, the erotic and devotional, the orthodox and unorthodox, and between the ecstasy and agony of human life.

Dr Zaynub Zaman completed her PhD in English from University of Liverpool in 2020, researching the presence of Medieval mysticism in the works of Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She is currently writing her monograph on Victorian Medievalism, and is interested more broadly in the relationship between literature (including literatures of the global south) and religion in the nineteenth century.

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