

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## The Nothing That She Says

*Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style*. Constance W. Hassett. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005. 276 pp.

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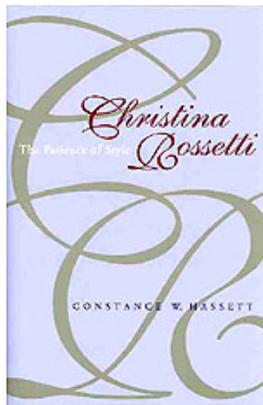
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<1> “Perhaps my secret I may say, / Or you may guess,” ends one of Christina Rossetti’s most discussed poems. Or perhaps she—and we—will not. In one of the most influential traditions in recent Rossetti criticism, her poetry is valued precisely for withholding meaning rather than disclosing it. It is within this tradition that Constance Hassett’s book belongs: what other critics have called reticence or reserve, or inexplicitness or (of course) secrecy—and what Hassett calls, perhaps a little confusingly, “patience”—is the peg on which she hangs her readings of Rossetti’s work. In fact, the book grows out of an 1986 essay which was Hassett’s own important contribution to the establishment of this tradition.<sup>(1)</sup> The poetry’s reticence demands, in turn, the reader’s patience—a quality that Hassett herself demonstrates in her scrupulous and detailed readings. So unhurried is her reading, it is surprising how much ground she covers. Her first chapter considers the theme of desire in relation to the poems of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862); then the question of poetic influence is considered with particular reference to *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* (1866); the ludic qualities of Rossetti’s poetry are explored through the rhymes of *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872); a study of Rossetti’s use of sonnet form focuses on the ambitious sonnet sequences of *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881); finally, the poems of *Verses* (1893) are considered in relation to the late prose works in which they were first published. This, then, is a wide-ranging book, and designedly so—its very structure making a claim for the worth of the nursery rhymes and for the rarely read later poems. Nevertheless, Hassett does want the reader to think of her book as held together by her response to the reticence of the poems, and this does invite some consideration of the critical tradition of which this book is surely the most refined product.

<2> It is a tradition in which such a poem as that quoted above, “Winter: My Secret,” has been taken as “singularly representative” of Rossetti’s poetry (62). The claim that one poem can represent a substantial writer’s oeuvre can hardly not be reductive, but this particular claim has had its purpose. On the one hand, “My Secret” (to give the poem its first published title) could take its privileged place in criticism of the 1980s and 1990s because—with what Hassett calls, in a characteristically pleasing phrase, its “high-volume reticence”—it did indeed foreground the interpretative demands that Rossetti’s poetry repeatedly makes of the reader. Such exacting poetry does not give up its meanings easily. Moreover, the idea of the poetry’s secrecy, and the interpretative work it therefore demands, could be useful in shaking off the kind of biographical reading that was more interested in the poet’s life than in her work (even though, paradoxically, the idea of secrecy—about a secret love, or about sexual abuse, for example—has proved no less useful for biographical speculation unsupported by evidence). On the other hand, if one poem were to stand as a synecdoche for Rossetti’s poetry, “My Secret” had the commendable quality of having no explicit religious reference. Its status was thus pivotal in the critical drive to detach what was valuable in Rossetti’s work from its load of religious ideas: those renunciatory positions that were incompatible with the dominant secular values of the institution of literary studies. The poem could be set up as representative of Rossetti’s poetry because it was, in this, so very unrepresentative. (In passing, what proportion of her poetry could plausibly bear the first title for this poem: “Nonsense”?)

<3> In that “My Secret” appeared to be explicit only about its inexplicitness, its privileged position exemplified one of the extremes towards which Rossetti criticism could push: a form of aestheticism to set against approaches, both biographical and religious, which could distract attention from the poetry’s craft. In practice, the conception of Rossetti’s poetry as being about its own secrecy could coexist (if uneasily) with the demand that such secretive poetry should engage with gender politics; but it is a mark of how problematic the poetry’s ideological load was found

to be that criticism could, at times, come close to the extreme of treating this poetry as aspiring towards the condition of the autotelic. Yet, if such a poem as “My Secret” is indeed (as it was for Isobel Armstrong in 1994) “almost a summa of [Rossetti’s] work,” it is odd that Diane D’Amico’s discerning 1999 book on Rossetti can relegate the poem to a coda where it is used to illustrate the dangers of reductive critical views of the poet’s work, and odd that it does not even make the index of Mary Arseneau’s 2004 book—for these are critics who could hardly be accused of avoiding Rossetti’s major poetry.(2) But then these are critics who would revive that tradition in which religious ideas are central to Rossetti’s thought, whereas the claim that “My Secret” held the secret of her poetry is a rhetorical ploy that has worked to facilitate the obscuration of those ideas. And any view of Rossetti criticism must take account of the fact that her present standing has been secured, in large part, by critics for whom the project of recovering and promoting Rossetti has been inseparable from such obscuration. For Jerome McGann in 1987, emphasizing the religious dimensions of Rossetti’s poetry, its value was to be found precisely in its “radical alienness”; but there are few traces of this uncompromising historicism in the work of subsequent critics.(3)

<4> The notion that religion is disabling, rather than enabling, for Rossetti’s poetry is not only wrong; it is, in my view, as wrong as it would be possible to be. Religion is intimate with her imaginative energy, and is the primary source of her intellectual reach and rigour. And yet we know that blindness can be complicit with insight. For Angela Leighton, writing in 1992, and locating Rossetti within a rich tradition of Victorian women’s poetry, “Rossetti’s morality is [often] mismatched with her imaginative desires, her ideological intentions with her verbal energies”; yet Leighton’s approach is finely attuned to the “obliquities, secrets and riddles” of the poems. The problem is that, on this approach, “Goblin Market” must become “a moral nonsense poem”; whereas (at least for some of us) it is a poem that exhibits—if on its more modest scale—a theological imagination directly comparable to, and indeed dependent upon, that of *Paradise Lost*.(4) But this particular critical tradition denied itself the possibility of recognizing the theological rigor of Rossetti’s work. One extreme, then. And, at the other extreme, is Mary Arseneau in 2004 with a determinedly moralistic reading of “Goblin Market” in which not only the reader, but even Laura and Lizzie themselves, can make moral sense of the fruity goings-on in this goblin tale. For Arseneau, Rossetti’s poetry will tell its secrets, offering “the possibility of interpretative mastery to her informed readers.”(5) That is an assertion worth questioning, but it would be difficult to question Arseneau’s centralization of religious ideas in her readings—unless we were to abandon any claim that our interpretation is concerned with meanings that would have been available to the poet herself. Nevertheless, we may feel that, if criticism is intent on gaining interpretative mastery of these poems, there is a danger that their enticing inexplicitness may evaporate. These extreme approaches are perhaps both inadequate to this intricate, demanding, poetry.

<5> The title of Hassett’s book might be taken to promise a *via media* that would link the interpretative uncertainty that many feel in reading Rossetti’s poetry with its religious load: patience is a crucial religious concept for Rossetti. When the protagonist of “The Prince’s Progress” is told that his bride “is patient for thy sake,” the phrasing is a quiet indication that her patience—and Rossetti would feel the Latin weight of the word—is to be understood as Christlike (as is Lizzie’s suffering for her sister’s sake in “Goblin Market”). Rossetti’s writing is heavy with the burden of patience: the biblical text “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick” does indeed recur like a burden. Yet, Hassett does not develop her conception of patience in this way, and is generally reluctant to probe religious ideas, although not apparently from any rigid conviction that the relation between imagination and religion must be antagonistic. This reticence does, however, raise the question of the extent to which her own exploration of reticence is itself limited. For instance, her reading of “Song” [“When I am dead, my dearest”] begins with characteristic subtlety. The speaker thinks of the time when, dead, she will not “hear the nightingale / Sing on, as if in pain:” “At mention of the nightingale, the interdicted “sad songs” are covertly reintroduced, and the ambiguous phrase “as if in pain” may say less about the sadness of the mateless nightingale than about the doubtful sincerity of the addressee’s impending grief” (31). But on reaching the poem’s last lines—“Haply I may remember, / And haply may forget”—Hassett, oddly, decides that there is to be no “haply” about this: the speaker says that “she will not remember those who survive her.” Yet there is a theological point to “haply:” these lines register uncertainty over the continuing consciousness of the soul in the intermediate state between death and resurrection. A personal uncertainty (will her dearest remember her?) shrinks before an eschatological uncertainty (whatever her feelings for her dearest, could his—or her—remembrance ever be reciprocated in this dream-land?). What started as one kind of poem becomes, thrillingly, something very different. Rossetti’s imagination—here, everywhere—is

becomes, amazingly, something very different. Rossetti's imagination—here, everywhere—is provoked, not depressed, by theology. (Linda Marshall's 1987 essay on this particular theological problem, one of the most important essays ever written on Rossetti's work, would have been of help here.)(6)

<6> In Hassett's subtle readings, the constraints of the line of Rossetti criticism to which she is most committed often start to kick in. Her interest in the "possibilities of silence" (52) leads her to Lizzie in "Goblin Market" who, mauled and mocked by the goblins, "uttered not a word" (53). But Hassett's case for the importance of silence here would be even stronger were she to explore the implications of this being resonant with Christ's silence in the gospel passion narrative (Matthew 27.12-14). Here, one of the dominant concerns of this critical tradition—for Hassett, silence is "the striking and, for a woman poet, most crucial feature" of the poetry (12)—is impeded by the very limitations of that tradition. (Blindness does not *necessarily* beget insight.) This process becomes evident in much of the book. For instance, Hassett begins by defining her term "patience" partly by use of the term "reserve" (1); but, even if Rossetti criticism is in danger of becoming too dependent upon relating her poetic procedures to Tractarian ideas of the reserve with which religious truths ought to be communicated, it is puzzling that Hassett does little to communicate the theological weight of this term. It is no less puzzling that the religious symbolism of "Goblin Market" and "The Prince's Progress" receives so little explicit discussion: Rossetti's symbolic practice—the veiled presentation of religious truths—ought to be central to Hassett's main concern. And while a valiant attempt to widen the view of Rossetti's writing career by taking in the late prose commentary on Revelation is admirable, it does not demonstrate Hassett at her most convincing. It appears almost as if Hassett thinks of Rossetti's engagement with Revelation as a late turn that demands explanation (218-9). In fact, Rossetti's assimilation of the mode of biblical apocalyptic is evident throughout her writing career; and if any explanation for *The Face of the Deep* is needed, her entire body of writing is that explanation. (We would have to go to Spenser or to Blake to find poets who take as much from apocalyptic.) These constraints, and they are those of a critical tradition more than of any one critic, are all the more unfortunate given that Hassett is far more open to religious perspectives than are many in this tradition.

<7> The most thoroughly impressive parts of this book are those in which these constraints are least felt. The chapter on influence is outstanding, even though it does expose the limitations within which Rossetti criticism so often works: while Hassett relates Rossetti to a tradition of nineteenth-century women's poetry, which is clearly important, she shares the general disinclination to explore the far greater direct importance of male precursors. Spenser and Milton and Bunyan are all absent from the index, even though "Goblin Market" and "The Prince's Progress"—to cite only Rossetti's two most ambitious poems—could not have been written without their example. And Tennyson, the poetic voice that Rossetti finds most difficult to forget, is not heard from in this chapter. Yet the greater part of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's involvement with Christina's poetry that is surely the most judicious ever written. Late in life, Christina noted "the general indebtedness of my first and second volumes to his suggestive wit and revising hand." That has been a problem for some critics who have been determined to present this relationship "in terms of ownership and hierarchy (*his* words in *her* poem)," rather than in terms of a productive collaboration in which Christina invites suggestions for revision while being prepared to reject them—a process that Hassett relates to the Pre-Raphaelite circle's "mode of authorial collegiality" (90, 85). In a compelling study of their differences over "The Lowest Room," Hassett shows us that, even when in 1875 Dante Gabriel's watchfulness for the derivative can make him tactless, Christina can consider his objection while still standing, or only slightly shifting, her ground (97-106). Hassett's own view of Christina's revisions (whether or not suggested by her brother, for which there is often not decisive evidence) is generally positive. (Compare Alison Chapman, against whom Hassett is arguing, for whom Dante Gabriel "forges simpler poetic forms out of more complicated unsettling poems." (7)) For instance, the six-stanza manuscript poem, "A Yawn," is reduced to the three-stanza "By the Sea": instead of "a first-person lament that feebly prefers the condition of the sea creatures," the revision produces a sheer miracle of inexplicitness that "pauses at the boundary shore of its new-found paradox, viz., that painlessness is a greater deprivation than pain" (113). This is close reading of true sophistication. Hassett's understanding of the relation between Dante Gabriel and Christina as one of collaboration rather than of imposition—an understanding based on a scrupulous examination of the evidence—thus enables her to respond to the ways that revision could in part produce the reticence that we value in Christina's poetry. It becomes immediately one of the essential essays for readers of her work. From now on, it will be difficult to belittle Christina Rossetti as a woman poet too weak to resist her bullying brother's interference.

<8> Hassett is most impressive when combining thorough scholarship with close reading. Her confidence that this poetry will reward the closest reading is inspiring even when we may wish to quarrel with her. It may be that some will find her mode of reading a little dated. When she writes of "At Home," that "the strange syntax of 'we shall be / Plod plod' registers as onomatopoeic, recording the splash and thud of feet on wet beach" (34), Hassett offers the kind of observation that reaches back to a mid-twentieth-century criticism that longed for words to become like their meanings. Those readers who find this merely fanciful will become impatient with this book at times, but yet their patience will be rewarded, for there is not a page which does not have valuable insights. To write on the slight rhymes of *Sing-Song* is to risk murdering to dissect. Still, how beautifully Hassett observes that in "I dreamt I caught a little owl" the child's dreams are countered by a voice which "expose[s] its own dullness," and that in "Twist me a crown of wind-flowers" a "fantasy of flight" is quashed (133-4). We know which side Hassett is on: she is incapable of dullness. Even those of us for whom this book exposes the limitations of one tradition of Rossetti criticism will want to return to it, for many years to come, for its insight and delight.

#### Endnotes

- (1) Constance W. Hassett, 'Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Reticence', *Philological Quarterly*, 65.4 (Fall 1986), 495. (△)
- (2) Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 357; Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender and Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); Mary Arseneau, *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). (△)
- (3) Jerome J. McGann, 'Introduction', in David A. Kent (ed.), *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 11. (△)
- (4) Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 135, 119, 138. (△)
- (5) Arseneau, 4. (△)
- (6) Linda E. Marshall, 'What the Dead Are Doing Underground: Hades and Heaven in the Writings of Christina Rossetti', *Victorian Newsletter*, 72 (Fall 1987), 55-60. (△)
- (7) Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 75. (△)

