The Rossettis' Fallen Women: "Two Sister Vessels" of Pre-Raphaelite and Tractarian Thought

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Abstract: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's dramatic monologue "Jenny" (1848) and Christina Rossetti's narrative poem "Goblin Market" (1862) mediate the archetypes of the fallen woman and the angel in the house within opposing Christian frameworks. This article compares both Rossettis' representations of Art-Catholicism and Tractarianism and ultimately demonstrates how their respective interpretations of feminine typology are reworked through their competing Christian narratives.

> If Eve did erre, it was for knowledge sake
> The fruit beeing faire perswaded him to fall: …
> Not Eve, whose fault was onely too much love
> (Aemilia Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*)

The concept of the fallen woman within a biblical framework has been heavily reworked throughout the course of the Victorian period. Biblical typology, as a hermeneutic principle, establishes a parallel connection between the Old and New Testament. This mode of interpretation enables a character's traits to be reimagined to suit the reproduction of the Christian narrative. In relation to feminine typology, Eve, the fallen woman, and the Virgin Mary, the angel in the house, are the two models that are perpetuated within Victorian cultural archetypes. As a literary trope, the angel in the house is the "moral beauty" and is held as "the second conscience" of her husband (Elliott 135). By maintaining the morality of the private sphere, this model parallels her own body's spiritual and physical purity. The angel is figured as blissfully ignorant of her sexual agency, which she

uses only within the context of marriage. She deifies her station as the caretaker of domestic affairs. As the keeper of the private sphere, she is both "the soul of the home" and a figure of stability within the family unit (Bachelard 32–33). Through her "detecting, clear eyes," the angel upholds virtuous stability (Ellis 21). On the contrary, the fallen woman is the metonym of feminine deviation. She is the disgraced, the discredited, and the desexed because of her distance from ethical virtue. She is a public woman; she is a type of Eve. Through this archetype, the fallen woman is an oppositional figure of the social, aesthetic, and moral Christian values of the Victorian age. She represents a moral complexity that separates the unity of the corporeal body from the immaterial soul.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Art-Catholicism and Christina Rossetti's Tractarian poetics respectively manipulate these feminine typologies. Dante Gabriel coined the term "Art-Catholic" to define his art through the relationship between the soul and the body. Remaining true to the visual nature of the Catholic aesthetic, Art-Catholicism for Dante Gabriel was not a mode of didactic representation but rather the "beauty of language, attitude, and situation" as representative of the Christian imagination (Sonstroem 28). In his representation of women, Dante Gabriel uses Art-Catholicism to reify his belief of the deep significance in the visible world. This visible world refers to the experience of intuiting the importance of the living moment, which is demonstrated in his artwork depicting the beauty of the corporeal (the body) and the heavenly (the soul). Dante Gabriel's muses, such as Fanny Cornforth, Jane Morris, and Lizzie Siddall,represent the amalgamation of beauty as both damnation and salvation.

Christina Rossetti's poetics, however, are markedly different in terms of Christian influence. Tractarianism—a High Church movement—emphasizes the importance of church ritual, liturgy, and the doctrines of analogy and reserve. These doctrines highlight the natural world as experienced in relation to Christ and as an indirect mode of experiencing the natural world. Similar to Dante Gabriel, Christina's poetry emphasizes that "the visible and invisible

worlds [are] not separated," but also consistently "emphasizes the need to read in a spiritual light" (Arseneau 80). Comparatively, Dante Gabriel's dramatic monologue "Jenny" (1848) and Christina's narrative poem "Goblin Market" (1862) mediate competing narratives of Christian influence. "Goblin Market" emphasizes the Tractarian doctrines of analogy and reserve through the dialectical relationship of Laura and Lizzie. Both sisters are interdependently transformed by their spiritual experience of the natural world. By contrast, "Jenny" uses the Art-Catholic aesthetic to explore Biblical typology through "the first common kindred link" of the prostitute and the unfallen woman (208). The speaker mediates the reader's perspective of real and idealized womanhood, establishing the importance of the visible world. Ultimately, both Rossettis' use of biblical typology and religious metaphor serve different modes of analysis. Notably, Dante Gabriel uses Art-Catholicism to portray damnation and salvation as a liminal experience of the visible world whereas Christina uses reserve and analogy as a didactic framework to demonstrate the transformation of the feminine soul in the natural world.

The opening epigram to "Jenny" distorts the distinction between the fallen and unfallen woman. Through this distortion, Dante Gabriel portrays the fluidity of feminine typology within the visible world. "Vengeance of Jenny's case" introduces Jenny as both victim and sinner of an act that requires retribution. In this way, "vengeance of" can be read as acts of vengeance being performed by Jenny or by sin itself. Mrs. Quickly cries to "never name her," signalling the beginning of Jenny's erasure as a woman in the context of poem. However, by omitting "if she be a whore" from the epigram, Dante Gabriel enables the reader to read Jenny as both an object of scorn and, potentially, of pity. "If" also signals the liminal space that Jenny typologically occupies. The reader is unaware of what the committed sin is (adultery); nonetheless, her potential for sin enables the reader's scorn as a potential attitude for the rest of the poem. This potential for sin continues in the first stanza of the poem where she "[rests] for a while" on the knee of the male speaker,

blissfully unaware of the judgement being passed onto her (4). In the opening lines, the male speaker also links her physical beauty to their romantic relationship:

> Fair Jenny mine, the thoughtless queen
> Of kisses which the blush between
> Could hardly make much daintier;
> Whose eyes are as blue skies, whose hair
> Is countless gold incomparable;
> Fresh flower, scare touched with signs that tell
> Of Love's exuberant hot bed—Nay,
> Poor flower left torn since yesterday
> Until to-morrow leave you bare (7–15)

Jenny's beauty is purified with the natural imagery of "blue skies" and "fresh flowers" through the male speaker's own projection (10–12). The speaker links her physicality to the "beauty of language" of the Art-Catholic aesthetic (Sonstroem 28). The speaker's diction, in choosing "fair," "queen," and "countless gold" enables the reader to view Jenny as having the potential for chaste beauty because he depicts her as such (11–12). In this way, Dante Gabriel demonstrates that Jenny's physical beauty veils her potential for sin. The speaker then dramatically shifts tone and establishes her as a "poor flower left torn"—a commodity of beauty (14). This change contrasts with her figuration as a "fresh flower" establishing the dialectic between the corporeal and "torn flower" as soul. Scholar Celia Marshik suggests that "the speaker is positioned within an inner standing point of perspective, allowing the speaker to express an aesthetic enjoyment" (575). However, this inner standing point of perspective is centred on the speaker's subjective gaze, not on the objective beauty of Jenny alone. In this way, Dante Gabriel portrays the language of beauty as a mode of interpretation that integrates the visible world with the idealized.

Through the Art-Catholic lens, Dante Gabriel applies biblical typology to transform the speaker's view of Jenny as both fallen and unfallen. The consistent repetition of "poor" and "grace" throughout the poem associates Jenny with an indwelling significance of liminality. "Poor shameful Jenny, full of grace" (18) paradoxically counters "Hail Mary,

full of grace" demonstrating Jenny's likeness to Eve and the Virgin Mary. Both typologies are inseparable in "shameful" and "grace," yet are also independently modifying Jenny as a whole—she cannot be identified as one without the other. The speaker's experience with Jenny is "something [he] does not know again" (42). This is another paradox that demonstrates the speaker as unable to fully capture her beauty. He "does not know" her true beauty, yet the choice of "again" suggests previous attempts to untangle her true essence. In this attempt to categorize archetypes, Marshik suggests that "[Jenny] becomes a book to be interpreted instead of an individual with her own reading" (96). Certainly, this view is mirrored not only through the speaker's aestheticization of Jenny but also in the reader's active interpretive performance. Like the speaker, the reader is unsure of how to typify Jenny:

> You know not what a book you seem
> Half-read by lightning in a dream!
> How should you know, my Jenny? …
> But while my thought runs on like this
> With wasteful whims more than enough
> I wonder what you're thinking of (51–56)

The speaker identifies his attempt to understand her as "wasteful whims," thereby establishing her identity as typologically complex. "Half-read" again suggests that Jenny cannot be fully realized through the sight of neither speaker nor reader. Within the dramatic monologue is a dialectic of speech and silence passed between Jenny and the male speaker—a dialectic of giving and withholding information. Marshik further concludes that Jenny's "content only becomes apparent when the reader analyzes her text and communicates a reading" (566). The speaker implicates his own presumptions onto Jenny's character, which enables her typological duality; the speaker can only "half-read" her, signifying his inability to see the significance of Jenny beyond the visible.

Dante Gabriel portrays the speaker typologically as both Christ and Satan in his position of power over Jenny. The speaker simultaneously "[serves] the dishes and the wine"

(88) and "thrusts [Jenny] aside" (87), actions that relay a duality of grace-like empathy and scorn typical of the figure of Christ. Dante Gabriel's narrator also mirrors Milton's Satan through a mode of introspective self-creation. Similar to Satan, the narrator determines our reception of Jenny's character through his own "conjectural" thoughts (60). He "watches [her] there," (46) gazing at her beauty and figures her against the pure. Her devolution of character from the pure to the fallen is revealed to be equally self-fashioning and transposing through the lens of the narrator's own identity. She is both pure and fallen; he is both redeemer and condemner. This reversal of roles repeats throughout the poem, shaping the speaker's perception of Jenny's actions as damned or redeemed. Linda Peterson argues that Dante Gabriel's speaker "inserts [himself] into a social question" (209) through his projections onto Jenny, thereby mimicking the public sphere's reaction to prostitution. Thus, the speaker is simultaneously a Christian socialist by applying the principles of charity and reform and a capitalist by practicing ruthlessness for self-gain. "Serving the dishes and the wine" mirrors the act of Eucharist, which serves to redeem Jenny's character through an act of grace (88). As Jenny drinks with the speaker, she is sanctified as her "weariness may pass" (95). The wine acts to hide the "shame of [hers] suffice for two," enabling them to be on equal terms (92). Conversely, the speaker embodies the "hatefulness of man" (83) through his "conjectural" (60) thoughts about Jenny. Through these thoughts, the speaker gains a position of power over Jenny as a "purse may be / the lodestar of [her] reverie" (20–21). This act is later realized in the end of the poem when the speaker "[shakes] [his] gold" into her hair, reproducing the myth of "Danaë" (379–80). The speaker gains sexual gratification from her receiving position. In this way, the speaker's role as Christ and Satan parallels Jenny's reception as damned and redeemed.

The culminating point of "Jenny" solidifies the dichotomy of the "two sister vessels" (184). Through this metaphor, the speaker's cousin, Nell, and Jenny represent the epitome of both the unfallen and fallen woman:

> For honour and dishonor made,
> Two sister vessels. Here is one.

> It makes a goblin of the sun.
> So pure—so fallen! How dare to think
> Of the first common kindred link? (204–08)

The double repetition of these lines within the poem acts as a refrain, reminding the reader that the two women are "of the same lump" of origin (182). Through this metaphor, Dante Gabriel, as the poet, fashions the characteristics of each woman through the "beauty of language, attitude, and situation" (Sonstroem 28). Dante Gabriel portrays the "potter's power" as analogous to the speaker's power over the women (181). Just as the potter, or God, shapes the one "unto honour" and "another unto dishonour," the artist shapes the deeper significance of the visible world (Romans 9.21). Jenny, as "a goblin," eschews her purity as she is "frail and lost" (218). The presence of the sun, or the Son of Man in this aspect, is unable to provide intervening grace because of her "desecrated mind" (164). Similar to Eve, she bears the burden of her sins because the Son of Man cannot intervene.

Additionally, the speaker figures Jenny's mind as a "contagious … Lethe" (165–66) evoking a post-lapsarian mindset. The Lethe is portrayed as a self-consuming "coil," mimicking the body of a serpent, representing her as Eve through her absence of virtue. This self-consumption is what makes her "night and day remember not" (170), creating despair, withdrawal, and loss of transparency with virtue.

> Like a rose shut in a book
> In which pure women may not look …
> So the lifeblood of this rose
> Puddled with shameful knowledge, flows (253–96)

Dante Gabriel reworks the earlier book metaphor through her "shut" isolation. The "puddled" rose parallels the post-lapsarian transformation through obtaining "shameful knowledge." Jenny is no longer a "fresh flower" (12) of potential purity but a disjuncture of body and soul. By contrast, as the angel in the house, Nell embodies "the conscious pride of beauty" (197). Just as the speaker fails to see the "indwelling significance" in Jenny's character, the speaker reproduces the same shortfalls in Nell. She is correlated

with “fertilizing peace,” (202) like the angel who is upholding virtuous stability for herself and others around her (Ellis 21). Nell is “[so] mere a woman in her ways” (187) while Jenny is “a woman almost fades from view” (277). Nell is merely appreciated for the beauty of attitude that she represents and provides for others. In this way, Dante Gabriel depicts Nell as the summation of moral beauty in the soul and body. As a whole, “Jenny” produces an Art-Catholic aesthetic through the representation of the beauty of language, attitude, and situation in feminine typology. Through this framework, the speaker’s perspective shapes the deeper significance of the visible in both Jenny and Nell.

Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” is an allegorical exercise of spiritual transformation. The narrative follows the sisterhood of Lizzie and Laura and highlights the ways in which Christ and the natural world manifest through each sister’s experience. As previously stated, Christina emphasizes that “the visible and invisible worlds [are] not separated” (Arseneau 63). This notion can be seen through the way in which each sister encounters the “goblins cry” and perceives them in radically different ways (2). Each sister typifies “things invisible” through their adoption of different roles (Arseneau 79). Laura is figured as Eve through her encounter with the fruits that are “[sweet] to tongue and sound eye” (30). As the goblins seduce Laura, she disregards her sister’s warnings, and instead relies on her free will to satiate her desire. Once she “[sucks] their fruit” (128), Laura begins her spiritual descent. This sequence doubles as a sexual transaction between the “golden” virgin (represented by Laura) and the animalistic goblin men (123). Pionke argues that the goblin market represents a “spiritual economy” of transaction (899). The goblin market can also be read as a pageant sequence, representing the excess of desire, forbidden knowledge, and the public sphere. Most importantly, the goblin men are characterized in a hyperbolic fashion through their animalistic qualities.

> One tramped at a rat’s pace
> One crawled like a snail …
> Brother with queer brother …

“Come buy, Come buy,” was still their cry (73–104)

This characterization of the goblins demonstrates intemperate sexuality shown through their physicality. Similarly, their lack of temperance shows through their base desire. The fruits they sell “plucked from bowers” (151) directly illustrates their victim’s ignorance in the face of sin. Through this temptation, Laura becomes aware of her fallen nature after her “heart’s sore ache” (261). Resultingly, Laura cannot “spy the goblin men again” (274). The text metaphorically casts her as Eve, cast out of “paradise,” embracing the wrath of her sin in the post-lapsarian world. Through the doctrines of analogy and reserve, Laura experiences the perils of the natural world and is redeemed through it by Christ. Lizzie, as a type of Christ, offers a model of charity and sacrifice adopted by religious female groups that Christina herself participated in with the Sisterhood of All Saints (Rappoport 86). Lizzie symbolically represents the ideal of Christ in the natural world:

Lizzie covered up her eyes …
We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits …
Their offers should not charm us
Their evil gifts would harm us (50–66)

Linda Peterson argues that the role of symbolism within “Goblin Market” is to reproduce the narrative of “Christian redemption” (218). Lizzie portrays this redemption through her physical embodiment of sacrament. Lizzie’s physical aversion to evil, “[veiling] her blushes” (35) and “[covering] up her eyes” (50) demonstrates her capacity for this purity. Moreover, she is “full of wise upbraidings,” portraying her ability to instruct her sister on Christ’s example (142). She is figured as “a lily in a flood” (409) and “a royal virgin town” (418), which symbolizes her own incorporation of chastity, temperance, and practiced virtue. Lizzie, as a “lily in a flood” (409), invokes the second coming of Christ as “she braves the den” (473) to save Laura’s soul.

Though the goblins cuffed and caught her …
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink …
Lizzie muttered not a word …

> But laughed in heart to feel the drip
> Of juice that syruppd all her face (424–34)

Casey associates this sequence as the reversal of Eve's transgression in eating the forbidden fruit (65). Adding to this notion, I posit that Lizzie's resistance to the violence mirrors the passion of Christ as he "is brought as a lamb to the slaughter … opening not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). Additionally, her sacrifice is fully realized through a Eucharistic-like ritual:

> Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices …
> Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
> Eat me, drink me, love me;
> Laura, make much of me;
> For your sake I have braved the glen (468–73)

In this passage, Lizzie's sacrifice heals Laura of her previous sins through transubstantiation. Lizzie's body becomes ritualized and the sacrifice itself is an act of grace for Laura. In her own letters, Rossetti claims the "feminine lot copies very closely the voluntarily assumed position of our Lord" (Rappoport 30–31). In this statement, Rossetti connects the doctrine of analogy with Lizzie's relationship with Laura; her role as redeemer is manifested through Christ's work and she is thereby closer to God and the natural world. Lizzie exemplifies the "moral beauty" of the angel in the house through her relation to Christ (Elliott 135). She upholds virtuous stability in her sphere through her sacrifice which symbolizes "life out of death" ("Goblin Market" 524).

Sisterhood is central to the narrative that both Rossettis establish throughout "Jenny" and "Goblin Market." Similar to the "two-sister vessels" (184) Jenny and Nell, Lizzie and Laura are "two blossoms on one stem" (187). The "two-sister" metaphor demonstrates similar points of comparison in both of the Rossettis' work. Dante Gabriel uses the visual significance of the Catholic imagination to represent the beauty of both women while Christina uses their comparison to demonstrate how each sister benefits from their relationship to the natural world. Their interpretations enable feminine typology to be reimagined through a Christian narrative. Through this narrative, the question of feminine

deviance and virtue showcases its significance within Christian morality and spiritual beauty within the natural world. Ultimately, it is through this exploration that both poets mediate a "sisterhood" of spiritual transformation.

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