

Christina Rossetti in Print: Dedications in Victorian Gift-Giving Culture

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Abstract: Christina Rossetti dedicated nearly the entirety of her body of work to her mother. Through close textual analysis and engagement with the material works, this essay examines Rossetti's involvement in Victorian publishing and gift-giving economies using a historical and theoretical framework. Giftbooks, literary annuals, and gift inscriptions are some of the forms used to explore public and private depictions of sisterly love and motherhood. Dedications connect these forms to the feminine gift economy and the role of women's work in a patriarchal literary marketplace—and demonstrate the loving admiration that persists in Rossetti's writing throughout her life.

*Time to eternity has descended,
Timeless eternity has begun.*

—Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*

When working with primary print books, the historical weight of the writing presses into your hands through the peeling bindings, time-stained pages, and the thick, dusty smell of paper. As one of the first poets to have such a beautiful, illustrated volume of her original poetry published during Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901, Christina Rossetti would appreciate the value of preserving these primary materials. Rossetti published her first book, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, in 1862, dedicating it to her mother and beginning a long legacy of dedications to her. Her commitment to her mother was first observed in the small booklet, *Verses*, that her grandfather printed privately. Rossetti included a verse from an Italian poet that referred to the little booklet as "a filial offering to mother and grandfather," even as the volume marked her "formal literary debut" (Marsh 74–75). Gift-giving pervaded the Victorian literary scene in kind gestures such as printing a book of a grandchild's poems or in

one's work to a loved one. Examination of Rossetti's primary print material exemplifies her involvement in creating a female community in a predominantly male-dominated literary world, and leads to an exploration of the role of her dedications in Victorian gift-giving culture.

Originating from the English literary annuals of the 1820s, Victorian giftbooks brought together the public and private spheres in a representation of a feminine gift economy. *A Round of Days Described in Original Poems by Some of Our Most Celebrated Poets* by the Dalziel brothers is one example of a fine art book, initially published in 1866, which helped to renew the standard for the expensive, luxurious, and outdated giftbook tradition. Rossetti published some of her poems in *A Round of Days* alongside many other popular authors. Giftbooks were intended to be kept and shown off with their lavish, colourful bindings and gold embellishments, and *Round of Days* was no exception. Inside *A Round of Days*, each illustration and poem is framed with ample space, emphasizing the artistic value of both the illustrations and the poetry. The poems inside focused on short, domestic scenes, complimenting the pastoral illustrations of everyday life; the treatment of a book as an elaborate gift through binding, illustration, size, paper, and typography posits the book itself as a work of art. Giftbooks were exchanged as part of the Christmas and New Year gift market, and the *Forget-Me-Not* (1822–1847) was one of the first literary annuals to include gift inscription illustrations. Ornate designs framed blank spaces where the buyer could inscribe a message to the recipient; these inscription illustrations merged the public and private sectors of the gift economy by allowing buyers to dedicate the book to their own loved one. In *Feminine Economies: Thinking Against the Market in the Enlightenment and the Late Twentieth Century*, Judith Still discusses Marcel Mauss's concept of "Giving [as] at once economic behaviour and legal, moral, social, religious [sic] and aesthetic behaviour" (14). Still asserts that both production and circulation are important in a gift economy, as the actions exist "alongside market exchange" (13). Similarly, purchasing a fine art book as a gift

for someone contributes to both the economic and the gift market. A gift economy requires abundance, and feminine economies (a term that Hélène Cixous coined) emphasize a model of abounding love (Still 15), excess supply, and interpersonal domains (97). Still asserts that women traditionally perform unpaid labour in several roles, where the products of their work are tied to self-sacrifice (25). Feminine gifts of labour often operate as domestic labour or acts of service, such as through writing. Gifts, as a form of this feminine labour, provided opportunities through dedications and giftbooks for women to enter the literary world and engage both with economic and sentimental values, further exemplifying the feminine nature of a gift economy.

“A lifelong song to this dear Saint of mine,” reads the last line of a Valentine’s Day sonnet that Rossetti wrote to her mother, Frances, following the thread of adoration that runs throughout Rossetti’s personal literary canon in the form of dedication (Crump 3:317). Rossetti wrote her first poem at 11 years old as a birthday gift to her mother (Marsh 33). Rossetti’s lifelong legacy of dedications to her mother began with these small gifts in her childhood and persisted through her whole academic career. Rossetti explained this conviction to her own niece years later, saying that poetic talent’s “brightest point is that it kindles a light of pleasure in your Mother’s eyes” (33). Private gifts of valentines and birthday poems to her mother represented and strengthened their close bond, especially as “interpersonal relationships determine and are determined by the values and meanings of gifts,” which Jill Rappoport explains in *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (8). Still also discusses gift exchange as a form of connection between women, arguing that “[t]he connection established between women and production which is not for exchange on the market can be seen as fostering the tradition of female self-sacrifice which has long characterized motherhood—but also daughterhood” (24–25). Rossetti’s gifts to her mother were private and did not contribute to the economic market, but they did offer value in the sense of a gift market. The self-sacrificial labour of creating something as a gift conveys a close emotional bond that subverts patriarchal expectations of exchange. Domestic exchanges, such as those between Rossetti and her mother, “establish female community as an alternative

or supplement to the patriarchal family” and lead to new structures that welcome women into the literary world by creating subversive, private spaces for them beyond the traditional market (Rappoport 10).

Rossetti, motivated by her love for her mother, proliferated poetry that she continued to dedicate to her. In *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, her first volume to be published, the dedication reads:

To
My Mother,
in all reverence and love,
I inscribe this book. (Rossetti, *GM*)

This exact dedication is replicated in Rossetti’s *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems*, which was published four years later (*PP*). In the original print copies of both books, these dedications are identical. “My mother,” set aside on its own line, is printed in the largest font (*GM* and *PP*). The dedications are large, centered on the page, and surrounded by blank space—unlike the often discreet dedications of modern novels. In this way, the simple dedications feature prominently in the front contents of the books, which are otherwise busy with full pages and large illustrations. Just like the space given to the illustrations and poems in *A Round of Days*, these dedications are presented as something of value, conveying their importance as works of art.

Rossetti’s unusually deep sense of love and respect for her mother is honoured for the last time in her final book, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse*. The 1892 book is dedicated as follows:

To my mother,
for the first time
to her
beloved, revered, cherished memory. (Rossetti,
Face of the Deep)

Believed to have been written shortly after her mother's death in 1886, this prose and poetry book reflects on Rossetti's own spiritual journey in older age through the Book of Revelation (Marsh 549–56). The spiritual element of the book, as well as the repeated mention of her "reverence" of her mother in her dedications (*GM* and *PP*), contribute to Rossetti's saintly image. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines "reverence" as "[d]eep respect, veneration, or admiration for someone or something, [especially] a person or thing regarded as sacred or holy" ("Reverence, n1.b."). Rossetti's repeated use of this word indicates the intensely intimate relationship she had with her mother. Critic Virginia Sickbert wrote about the Rossetti women's "deep and life-long attachment to each other" (386). She details how the women were even said to write for one another when the other could not due to illness (386), exemplifying the gifts of labour that Still described as "some of the most valuable gifts" (Still 25). In a book that uses the same modality and appearance—down to the colour binding and elegant embossing design—as *Goblin Market and Other Poems* despite being published nearly 20 years later, the dedication of *A Pageant and Other Poems* acts as a gift that illustrates Rossetti's faithful commitment to her mother. Almost all of her creative output was dedicated to Frances Rossetti, both publicly and privately (Sickbert 386); Rossetti's work fostered an image of a "reciprocal and equal bond between mother and daughter" that was uncommon and even radical for a time period that "emphasized the parents' supreme authority and the children's unquestioning obedience" (392), and Sickbert claims that Rossetti found "her work and love shaping and shaped by [her] mother's subjectivity" (405). Rossetti's connection to her mother was undeniable and contributed to her subversion of patriarchal roles in all areas of life.

Rossetti challenges the traditional expectations for a sonnet by writing them for her mother, claiming that sonnets are "full of love" (*Pageant*). Upon opening *A Pageant and Other Poems*, the very first thing a reader is faced with is a dedicatory sonnet committing the collection to her mother.

Petrarchan sonnets, often described as a neat and organized art form, are conventionally written from the perspective of a male speaker addressing a passive and idealized female love interest. During Rossetti's time, sonnet-writing burst onto the literary scene, leading to experiments with the sonnet form, explorations of conventional love ideals, and discussions of feminist rights. By beginning her collection with a sonnet to her mother, Rossetti joined the literary trend of challenging sonnet conventions and rejected the typical gender presumptions. Taking on the role of the speaker and addressing her mother in "[Sonnets are full of love and this my tome]," Rossetti subverts the gendered expectation of a male speaker addressing a lover. She establishes her own feminine autonomy within a traditionally masculine tradition. Furthermore, with the lines "[a]nd so because you love me, and because / I love you, Mother," Rossetti confirms that the love is reciprocated, breaking tradition once again (*Pageant* lines 9–10). Although the sonnet does adhere to typical Petrarchan structure, Rossetti does not follow the traditional rhyme scheme for the poem's entirety. In breaking the traditional rhyme scheme and the conventions of the sonnet, Rossetti embraces the sonnet as her own finely crafted gift to her mother. She makes maternal love her "loadstar" as she navigates both life and this volume's "wreath / Of rhymes" (lines 6, 10–11). The *OED* defines loadstar as "[a] 'guiding star;' that on which one's attention or hopes are fixed" ("Lodestar, n2"). Rossetti shows her gratitude to her mother for being a "quiet home," her "first Love" (*Pageant* lines 4–6), and a teacher by "devoting herself to [her mother's] comfort and never regretting the fact that her own social life was thereby restricted" (Marsh 437). Manuscript evidence shows that the sonnet was first presented to Rossetti's mother for her eightieth birthday, with an inscription saying:

To
my Mother
I offer
love

reverence
and this little volume. (Crump 2:364).

This once-private gift transitioned to the public sector as the dedication to the volume, mimicking the “[s]imultaneously private and public, generous and competitive nineteenth-century sisterhood” that Rappoport discusses (10). Feminine gift exchanges allowed for Victorian women “to claim the role of the giver,” and assert autonomy in a society that strictly constrained women and their rights (12). Rappoport says that “[p]opular writing reflected, enacted, and shaped women’s giving,” summarizing how the sonnet—a conventionally constrained form—was used to break boundaries in both a literary and feminist sense (12).

To revisit the idea of female self-sacrifice, Still argues that it is risky to associate the gift with the feminine (181). She warns against confusing men’s exploitation of women with women’s generosity, as “women give more than [men] give; women ‘work’ without getting paid” (24–25), and presents how “society is based upon the exchange of women” as a function of the economy (17). Women’s labour recalls the feminine model of the gift market. Rappoport writes that “we should understand Victorian women’s gifting as a subversive way to direct social networks and establish civic authority that otherwise remained beyond their reach” and explored how gifts and gift markets “can sustain a whole community of single women” (6). Furthering this concept of womanly sacrifice by connecting it to Rossetti’s spirituality, Rappoport theorizes that spiritual salvation can “alter the terms of [a] gift and the kind of community it creates” (89). Salvation is represented in Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” permeated with themes of sisterhood, rescue, and female solidarity.

Goblin Market and Other Poems contains two beautiful frontispiece illustrations that depict scenes from the titular poem, representing the volume’s themes of sacrifice and sisterhood through the two sisters. Analysis of “Goblin Market” reveals that Lizzie rejects Victorian patriarchal commercial practices to save Laura by using her

silver penny as a “a symbol of domestic and religious duty” (Rossetti 97), or as a gift, and Lizzie saves her sister through participation in the gift-giving tradition of female sacrifice. The frontispiece illustration of two sisters clasped in each other’s arms mirrors the close relationship of the Rossetti women. The illustrations are followed by a dedication to her mother; as records show that Rossetti was very involved with the process of organizing and editing her publications, we can assume the arrangement was recognized, if not intentional (Marsh 278). The closeness in print of the illustration to the dedication may act as evidence for a connection between sisterly love as an association with the sisterhood created by a feminine gift market. The title, albeit not the original one, also reflects the idea of a market. Rappoport argues that “as ‘Goblin Market’ suggests, the financial transactions associated with market capitalism were frequently risky business for women” (105). The publication of a volume of original work by one female author was likewise a risky business venture, but Rossetti’s *Goblin Market and Other Poems* proved a success and gave validity to other women working in literary publishing at the time.

Rossetti’s dedications collate one sentiment that is shared by all her sonnets, valentines, and other publications: her undying love for her mother. Victorian society did not favour women, but the fame and talent of the Rossetti family provided Christina Rossetti with an entry in the often-commercial world of art, poetry, and publication. Rossetti’s publications convey values of womanly love, self-sacrifice, and spirituality through her organization of the physical material in the books. Her work was frequently gifted to loved ones in manuscript form: to provide some examples, “Goblin Market” was written for her sister Maria (Crump 1:234), and the dedicatory sonnet “[Sonnets are full of love and this my tome]” was a birthday gift for her mother (Marsh 437). The culmination of the Victorian gift economy may be observed through highly stylized and expensive giftbooks—these giftbooks are analogous to modern gifts, with their binding like wrapping paper, gold embellishments

like ribbons, and elaborate inscription illustrations like gift tags on which you write a note to your intended recipient. Although once in private gifts bequeathed onto a valued mother or sister and circulated among a self-sufficient female community, Rossetti's influence continues to circulate in public discussions of "Goblin Market" and her devotional legacy. Just as *A Pageant and Other Poems* and its dedicatory sonnet to Rossetti's mother live on in treasured, tattered editions saved by university archives, so too does Rossetti's renown.

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