3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies
Vol 31(1), March 2025 http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2025-3101-14

Reorienting Christina Rossetti's Christian Feminist Poetics in "The Convent Threshold" and "A Royal Princess"

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ABSTRACT

Initially reduced to a display of sexual frustration by Postmodern critics, Christina Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation found a place among scholars in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century as a praiseworthy representation of her spiritual strength and critique of patriarchal standards. Still, these scholars saw Rossetti's renunciation as a passive, inward-looking virtue reflective of her own self-abnegating and reclusive way of life. This study revisits Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation to argue that Rossetti's use of female self-sacrifice is not meant to be read as passivity but as a powerful force that can liberate women from oppression by patriarchal forces and empower them. Additionally, this study uncovers how Rossetti conceived an active and heroic female self-sacrifice that not only exudes spirituality but also has emancipatory potential for women in the temporal life. This is done through the analysis of two understudied poems, "The Convent Threshold" (1862), which features a renunciatory fallen woman and "A Royal Princess" (1866), which features a Christlike martyr. The poems are analysed through the lens of feminist theology to foreground Rossetti's feminist revisionist use of typological symbolism. This study thus contributes to the body of knowledge by examining Rossetti's poetics of female self-sacrifice from novel perspectives and through lesser-studied works while suggesting its importance to our understanding of female self-sacrifice in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Christina Rossetti; female self-sacrifice; renunciation; feminist theology; liberation

INTRODUCTION

Christina Georgina Rossetti was a gifted Victorian writer and lifelong devout High Church Anglican. However, her journey towards religious maturity was marked by struggles with Pusey's Tractarian doctrines, which promoted asceticism, especially for women. Consequently, Rossetti learned to engage in her own feminist hermeneutics to develop her unique understanding of the Bible and God's view of women. Rossetti's feminist revisionist theology is demonstrated throughout her poetry, in which she frequently writes about the Woman Question. Rossetti was highly aware of "the social, political, and economic inequalities suffered by women during her own age", the most common targets of her criticism being "marriage as a form of female bondage,

women being treated as objects of desire, and the double-standard within male/female relationships" (Spaise, 1997, p. 54, 67).

Nevertheless, for decades, Rossetti's reputation as a poet was reduced to that of a self-effacing, sexually repressed woman because of her reclusive lifestyle and frequent emphasis on renunciation in her writing. This misrepresentation had its beginnings even in her own time, with her brother William Michael's attempts to construct an idealised image of Rossetti after her death, in which her life of "self-sacrifice, simplicity, personal suffering, and lack of egoism" were lauded as feminine virtues, to the extent of actively repressing the mood and content of her previously unpublished poetry (Spaise, 1997, p. 53). Although late-twentieth-century scholars began to recognise Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation as a display of her spiritual strength and critique of patriarchal standards, they read Rossetti's renunciation as a passive, inward-looking virtue reflective of her own self-abnegating and reclusive lifestyle instead of in active challenge against patriarchal standards (D'Amico, 1999; Palazzo, 2002; Rosenblum, 1986). Such attempts to restrain the poet's artistic vision and radical voice are compounded in the present as scholarship tends to focus on only a handful of her more than one thousand poems.

In order to situate Rossetti's treatment of female self-sacrifice as a prominent aspect of her feminist aesthetics, her role as a poet whose works reflect the conflation of patriarchal and religious ideology needs to be contextualised within nineteenth-century British literature and the use of female self-sacrifice as a colonialist literary trope. For Rossetti's contemporary audiences, as well as our own as (predominantly) Asian scholars of postcolonial literature, the *sati* (the term refers both to the Hindu practice of immolating widows with the deceased husband and the widow herself) is a familiar emblem of subaltern silence, embodied in the figure of the Indian woman as muted native subject. In a similar vein, Pillai, in her examination of the Malayan Indian coolie experience, notes how such labourers were frequently "edged in by prescriptions of subalternity" through representations that reinforced their "meekness and malleability to colonial manipulation", lodged within "the scripts of empire that stage the drama of the encounter between imperial control and its subordinate labour force" (2008, p. 151). Like the Indian coolie, the *sati* exists as a figure in "the larger drama of empire" (Pillai, 2008, p. 156), and her appearance in British literary texts and travel narratives of the later eighteenth century "forecloses any possibility of [Indian] women's agency, thus providing justification for 'civilising' colonial interventions" (Mani, 1987, p. 130). In such orientalist writings, the *sati* is also problematically likened to "the Englishwoman's sacrifice of herself to marriage and domesticity, thus negating the Indian woman's actual pain and death in the interests of female community and sorority" (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 20). This pervasive colonialist trope was also applied to Southeast Asia (Aljunied, 2005, p. 14; Boon, 1976, pp. 80-82), including the notion that it flourished in Lombok and Bali after it had disappeared from India (Thompson, 1928, p. 127). Closer to home, while colonial Christianity brought modernisation to Asia, its reinforcement of the ideology of domesticity also contributed to the oppression of Asian women through their socialisation into gendered roles and subordinate status (Cruz, 2014, p. 360). Likewise, Mananzan (2004, p. 8-9) points to the use of Christian texts to cultivate "guilt, subservience and obedience" among Asian women and condition them to have "a victim consciousness".

It is against this backdrop of ideas of female self-sacrifice circulating within the nineteenth-century English literary tradition and contemporary debates on Christianity and feminism in Asia that we offer our revisionist reading of Rossetti's poems. It builds upon the most recent innovative reading, Taft (2013), which expands D'Amico (1999), Palazzo (2002), Arseneau (2004) and Roe's (2007) arguments of Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation as a positive display of spiritual strength,

and addresses misconceptions posed by these Rossetti scholars. Rejecting views of Rossetti's devotional works as "melancholy lyrics" (Smulders, 1996, p. ix) and lacking "liberating aspects" (Armstrong, 1993, p. 358), Taft shows Rossetti's renunciation to be "energetic Christian activity" (2013, p. 312). Whereas Taft focuses on Rossetti's later religious verses, this article examines Rossetti's secular poems to argue that Rossetti does not present self-sacrifice as passivity but, through a feminist revisionist use of typological symbolism, presents female self-sacrifice as a powerful force that has the potential to empower women and liberate them from oppression by patriarchal forces. Specifically, Rossetti imagines an active and heroic form of female self-sacrifice that both exudes spirituality and has emancipatory potential for women in the temporal life. Further redressing imbalance in extant scholarship, this study examines two understudied poems, "The Convent Threshold" (1862) and "A Royal Princess" (1866), showing how they present the empowering potential of renunciation and female self-sacrifice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theme of renunciation is a leitmotif of Rossetti's secular and devotional works. It usually centres around suffering, surrender to God, and renunciation of earthly desires. Rossetti's renunciatory writing is comparable to her contemporary, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's. Nevertheless, where Barrett Browning experimented with a masculine voice in writing political poetry, Rossetti maintained a feminine poetic voice of renunciation and surrender throughout her career. Reception of Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation could be divided into three categories, namely that of early, New and Postmodern, and present-day critics. Rossetti received positive reception from her contemporaries and early twentieth-century critics, such as Arthur Symons, Edward Gosse and Paul Elmer More, for her humble display of faith through her renunciatory writing (D'Amico, 1999, p. 2, 5).

However, Rossetti fell out of favour with New Critics like T. S. Eliot and John Crowe Ransom, who preferred Hopkins' intellectually superior religious verses (McGann, 1983). With the advent of psychoanalysis, Postmodern critics of Rossetti's work in the mid to late-twentieth century, such as Lucas (1940, 1960), Packer (1963) and McGann (1983), quickly dismissed Rossetti's renunciation of worldly pleasures as stemming from sexual frustration. A turning point in scholarship occurred when Gilbert and Gubar (1984, p. 574) coined the term "aesthetics of renunciation" to describe Rossetti's renunciation of a "poetic/sexual life of self-assertion". Despite uncovering Rossetti's gendered political struggle as a woman poet, they left the most lasting impression of Rossetti as a self-abnegating woman poet. Rosenblum (1986) reframes Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation as the "poetry of endurance", where she sees Rossetti's renunciatory aesthetics not as a denial of self-expression but as a way of creating endurance or permanence for her identity as a woman poet. Casey (1991) is an exemplary work that further identifies Rossetti's female self-sacrifice as redemptive and heroic. However, these studies are limited in their scope: Gilbert, Gubar and Rosenblum focus on Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation as only a reflection of her identity as a poet, and Casey's reading is limited to Rossetti's severely overstudied "Goblin Market".

Later, scholars further challenged the postmodern image of Rossetti as morbid and sexually repressed to recover the feminist potential of her writing and provide more positive and meaningful readings of Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation. D'Amico (1999), Palazzo (2002), Arseneau (2004) and Roe (2007) have shown how renunciation symbolised Rossetti's

praiseworthy display of spiritual strength to her Victorian readers and should be read accordingly. Still, in these studies, Rossetti's renunciation remains a passive virtue that does not achieve more than being "a symbol of women's suffering and spiritual endurance" (Palazzo, 2002, p. 22). Moreover, these scholars tend to pay attention to poems such as "The Prince's Progress", "In the Lowest Room", and "From House to Home", apart from Rossetti's religious works, leaving the rest of her secular canon largely neglected.

More recent work has also not helped to redress this critical oversight. Hu (2011) demonstrates how Rossetti's presentation of renunciation in her devotional poems signals deep adherence to Tractarian teachings that view suffering as essential to the development of the Christian faith. Studies of Rossetti's faith, such as Mason (2019), Mason (2020), King (2021) and Taft (2022), are limited to Rossetti's devotional works. Other recent scholarship seeks to provide new perspectives on considering Rossetti's life and works by emphasising queer readings, such as Figgins (2023), Edwards (2021) and Reed (2020). While novel, these risk providing inaccurate readings of her work uncongenial to her character as a devout Anglo-Catholic. By contrast, attention to largely neglected parts of the Rossetti canon reveals that there is still much to explore about Rossetti's feminist poetics and the persistent theme of renunciation. As noted above, this study builds on Taft (2013) to shed fresh light on Rossetti's secular verse.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The poems selected for analysis are linked together by their use of typological symbolism, a major element in Pre-Raphaelite literary and pictorial art also commonly found in Rossetti's writing, which coincided with the revival of biblical typology in the nineteenth century. Thus, Landow (1980) stresses the necessity for interpreting Victorian works of art from a biblical typological perspective. Typological symbolism is "a Christian form of biblical interpretation which purports to find divinely intended anticipations of Christ in the laws, people, and events of the Old Testament" (Landow, 1978, p. 247). The Victorians used their methods of interpreting the bible to understand secular issues like "theories of evolution, contemporary politics, literary characterisation, painterly symbolism, and other areas of thought apparently far distant from theological studies" (Landow, 1980, p. 15). However, for the Pre-Raphaelites and Rossetti, who adopted their techniques, typological symbolism was treated as a means of "creating imaginative pictures of sacred subjects — of Christ's life, events in the life of the Church, [and] events in the life of an individual Christian" (Peterson, 1994, pp. 216-217). Instead of symbols in the bible, they experimented with objects or "moments from real life [to] point to spiritual meaning" (Peterson, 1994, p. 210). Yet, Peterson (1994, p. 220) reminds us that while Rossetti adopted Pre-Raphaelite techniques, as she was closely related to the Brotherhood, seeing that her two brothers are its members, Rossetti rejects and subverts their patriarchal conventions, particularly the "tendency to associate male figures with biblical types" to engage in feminist revisionary ways of using biblical types and allusions. This article thus draws inspiration from Peterson's (1994) exposition of Rossetti's unconventional types of Christ— a female Christ in "Goblin Market" and a tardy hero as an ineffective Christ figure in "The Prince's Progress" (1866)— to further explore Rossetti's feminist theology which is the key factor motivating her use of typology. As such, this study adopts the lens of feminist theology to examine Rossetti's poetics of female self-sacrifice in "The Convent Threshold" and "A Royal Princess". The selected theoretical framework is indebted to Palazzo (2002), which compares Rossetti's ideas and thoughts about religion and women's position

explicated through several poetry volumes and devotional works alongside contemporary feminist theologians' writings such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether's to examine the development of Rossetti's feminist theology.

Ruether (2013, "Feminist Theology" section) defines feminist theology as a branch of Christian theology that "applies feminist critique and reconstruction of patriarchal gender paradigms that associate males with superiority and dominance, and females with inferiority and being auxiliary". While this article employs present-day feminist theology to analyse the poems, it is significant to remember that the organised construction of feminist theology started in the nineteenth century, suggesting that its dominant thoughts would have had a bearing on Rossetti, thus justifying the suitability of the selected framework. Feminist theology in the nineteenth century largely began with biblical interpretation to reject women's subject position justified as Eve's punishment. Although women then were forbidden to write in the masculine genre of theology, that did not hinder them from presenting their theological ideas and reinterpretation of "the nature of God and of Christ, the relationships between God and humans, and the Scriptures" in nontraditional forms including letters, novels and poems (Melnyk, 1998, p. xii). Among these pioneering feminist theologians in their own right are Rossetti, Barrett Browning, Charlotte Yonge, Anna Jameson and Ellice Hopkins, who engaged in feminist revisionist ways of interpreting the scriptures through their writing.

Feminist theology embodies an active struggle to reclaim hermeneutical practice and revelation of the divine from "Christian traditions and theologies which stimulated and perpetuated violence, alienation, and oppression" (Fiorenza, 1975, p. 612) towards women in order to promote "the full humanity of women" (Ruether, 1983, p. 18). The emancipatory aim of feminist theology mimics this article's purpose of interpreting Rossetti's similar goals by presenting female self-sacrifice as socially and spiritually liberating and empowering for her protagonists of "The Convent Threshold" and "A Royal Princess". Feminist theology also provides an adequate framework for analysing Rossetti's use of biblical imagery and typological symbolism that contribute to the effectiveness of her female self-sacrifice.

ANALYSIS

"THE CONVENT THRESHOLD"

Published in *Goblin Market And Other Poems* (1862), "The Convent Threshold" is a dramatic monologue concerning a woman's journey of repentance from sexual sin. The poem is written as a spiritual allegory describing the Christian journey in the likes of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), a work familiar to Rossetti since her youth and which "may have served as an inspiration for the discursive emblematics of her own volumes" (McAlpine, 2020, p. 87). Like *Pilgrim's Progress*, the poem employs the biblical image of pilgrimage, which recalls the Israelites' exodus from Egypt to Canaan and the metaphorical Christian journey before arriving in heaven as described in the New Testament, to chart the speaker's gruesome spiritual pilgrimage from repentance to arriving at the completion of salvation. Rossetti engages in subversive typological symbolism as she uses a woman as the normative to represent the individual Christian and links Christians with a sexually transgressive figure who is condemned by most of Victorian society. By doing this, Rossetti forces a reconsideration of contemporary views of the outcast figure of the fallen woman and the ideals of femininity and purity intertwined with these.

The poem opens much like *Pilgrim's Progress*, with Rossetti's speaker having already renounced her sins and set her mind on the spiritual pursuit of God. Employing a technique common in Victorian writings, Rossetti (1862, p. 119) does not name the speaker's sin but uses emblematic language to indicate its sexual nature: her "lily feet are soiled with mud / With scarlet mud". Since John Ingram (1869) highlights that white lilies are a symbol of purity, the suggestion is that the speaker has lost her virginity. The reference to scarlet draws on biblical symbolism of scarlet as an unremovable stain from Isaiah 1:18, thereby emphasising the seriousness of the speaker's transgression.

The speaker, repenting of her sin, sacrifices all attachment to her lover: "I turn from you my cheeks and eyes, / My hair which you shall see no more" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 122). Whereas turning her face away symbolises turning away from sin, the withholding of her hair from her lover signifies her desire for chastity. According to Marsh (1987, p. 23), "loose, luxuriant hair was an emblem of female sexuality in Pre-Raphaelite painting", such as in Waterhouse's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (1893) and *Lamia* (1905), which portray his temptresses with their locks wrapped around their victims. The speaker further speaks of her guilt and desire to be removed from her guilt, namely, "To wash the spot, to burn the snare" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 119). The iambic tetrameter creates a sense of urgency as the stresses fall on the words: "wash", "spot", "burn", and "snare". She also "choose[s] the stairs that mount above, / Stair after golden skyward stair, / To city and to sea of glass" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 119). Ludlow (2014, p. 87) highlights that the act of climbing the "skyward stair" represents a "spiritual ascent" since the stairs reference the ladder connecting the heaven and earth in Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:12. The city and sea of glass allude to biblical places in revelation symbolising the eschatological and ecclesial future when creation will cease sinning and all will be made new. In other words, more than repenting of her sins, the speaker anticipates the eschatological future wherein she will be utterly cleansed and purged of her sinful desires instead of striving to deny herself these desires.

Significantly, Rossetti does not portray the speaker's journey as one of immediate restoration. Instead, the dramatic monologue portrays an agonising process filled with internal struggles, symbolising the Christian's struggle before arriving at the point of perfection and highlighting the speaker's act of self-sacrifice. Following her declaration to pursue righteousness, the speaker moves in and out of moments of unconsciousness and consciousness, spiritual determination and agony. In her conscious moments, the speaker stands firm in her assurance of the heavenly dwelling awaiting her. However, in a subsequent stanza, the speaker wavers in her decision and wonders "[h]ow long until [her] sleep begin[s]", or until she can rest from agonising over her sin and her atonement is complete (Rossetti, 1862, p. 122). A few lines later, she again laments, "Oh weary life, oh weary Lent" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 122). A period of reflection and preparation for Easter Sunday, Lent, was observed by Victorian Anglicans through fasting and abstaining from various forms of pleasures. By likening the persona's process of self-sacrifice to Lent, Rossetti highlights its punishing nature and the persona's longing for a salvation which, like Easter, has not yet arrived.

The speaker is also tormented by her enduring affection for her lover as he appears to her in a lucid dream, and she struggles all night with her desire. She rejects him and tells him, "Find you a warmer playfellow/ A warmer pillow for your head / A kinder love to love than mine" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 125). Yet, she, who was on her way to "mount the kindled stair" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 120), is "crushed downwards through the sodden earth" when it seems he is angered by her rejection (1862, p. 125). Thus, despite her resolve in waking hours to turn away from her sinful past, the speaker appears trapped in her subconscious by sinful desires that weigh her down. She

wavers between her recollection of him and her spiritual resolution, alternating between dreaming of him and praying when she wakes. As Leighton (1989, p. 116) argues, all this is necessary before the novice can arrive at the threshold, "not only of a convent but of consciousness; it is a consciousness tormented by white and black, heaven and hell, the 'skyward stair' and the 'scarlet mud'". She must struggle with her resolution and repressed fears and desires before she can achieve complete liberation.

These struggles highlight the speaker's perseverance and reveal that a fallen woman has the capacity for spirituality. In this, she resembles other fallen women who display spiritual strength through their penitence, including Gaskell's Ruth, Hardy's Tess Durbeyfield and Eliot's Hetty Sorrel. However, Auerbach (1980) argues that these heroines' spirituality does not actually lead them to redemption as their deaths demonstrate there is no possibility of triumph in life for them. By contrast, Rossetti's novice has her life spared and receives redemption as she crosses the symbolic convent threshold. In this, Rossetti resists the harsh Victorian convention that demands death from the fallen woman as atonement for her sin and the anxieties surrounding female sexuality, which underpin this trope. Rather, Rossetti imagines female self-sacrifice as the catalyst which can completely lift her heroine into a state of purity and holiness and transform her into an honourable bride.

Rossetti also subverts the dichotomy of Victorian middle-class women who are pictured as either Madonna or Eve, the "Angel in the House" or fallen woman and suggests a fluidity of feminine identities where one can easily become the other. Smulders (1991, p. 166) argues that Rossetti's novice becomes a "'representative woman' like Eve, and in so doing … overcomes the difference between pure and impure women [to show that all], Madonnas as well as Magdalens, possess a fallen nature". Yet, since the novice has sacrificed her sinful desires, the speaker as a "representative woman" also redeems womankind from Eve's concupiscence and proves another side to Smulder's statement —Magdalens possess the same potential for purity as Madonnas.

The speaker's repentance and spirituality further subvert the dichotomy of man and woman as good and evil. Ruether (1983, p. 94) explains that patriarchal Christianity sees women as having "'greater aptness' for sin and … lesser spirituality" to conclude that "women can never as fully represent the image of God as man, who [represent] the rational and spiritual part of the self". However, many of Rossetti's poems about fallen women highlight the faults of the male perpetrators to disprove the patriarchal notion that women are more culpable to sin and to shift the focus from the fallen woman's guilt to shared responsibility. Similar to these, "The Convent Threshold" casts both the man and woman as sinners, but it further stresses the sinfulness of the man. Dense imagery conveys the sensual pleasures that attract her lover as he views the interaction of young men and women who are "wine-flushed", "blooming as peaches", and possessing golden hair and "love music" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 121). By contrast, the speaker displays spiritual superiority by envisaging heavenly joys and is invested with spiritual authority. She acts as a prophet urging her lover to repent. Thus, instead of being a sign of passivity, renunciation allows the speaker to gain spiritual power and reverse the roles of subordination and domination typically delegated to women and men, respectively. Specifically, by asking the man to "flee to the mountain, tarry not", the speaker echoes the words Jesus spoke in Matthew 24:16 to warn the people about God's judgement (Rossetti, 1862, p. 121), thereby assuming holding divine authority.

Nevertheless, this transfiguration into a position of spiritual power comes at the price of her femininity. Analysing Rossetti's earlier poem, "Repining" (1847), Palazzo (2002, p. 6) demonstrates that Rossetti was well aware of "High Church Anglicanism's insistence that for women with spiritual fulfilment comes the necessity for an often brutal stripping away of

specifically female attributes". "The Convent Threshold" goes even deeper into the need to sacrifice one's femininity by using the analogy of a novice leaving behind all earthly attachments before entering the convent for a celibate life. Convents stripped women of their womanhood by demanding that "for a woman to develop in spirituality, she must put off womanliness, … [and] renounce her sexuality" (Jantzen, 1995, p. 53). In short, a state of spirituality is achieved when a woman "transcend[s] her womanly characteristics and [becomes] 'manly'" through celibacy (Jantzen, 1995, p. 53). Familiar with Anglican sisterhoods, Rossetti presents the speaker the next morning with a "pinched" face, grey hair, "And frozen blood…on the sill" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 126). Her deathlike state resembles that of Laura from "Goblin Market", whose "hair grew thin and grey; / she dwindled" when she could no longer eat the goblin fruit (Rossetti, 1862, p. 15). As Palazzo (2002) observes, Laura can no longer participate in life-giving female activities and has lost her womanhood as a result of her fall. Similarly, the novice experiences decay and loses her femininity. Her damaged hair and face ensure that no physical feminine beauty tainted by sexuality remains. Ruether notes that male eschatology believes that women can be liberated from the "sin-prone part of the self" (1983, p. 93), which femaleness represents if they are stripped of their womanhood, thereby "escaping the female realm of sexuality and procreation" and becoming "free from finitude and mortality" (p. 144). Similarly, Rossetti's speaker apparently becomes truly holy and separated from her sin when she crosses the convent threshold to begin a celibate life void of her femininity. If Ruether appears to agree here with male eschatology, the subsequent lines instead present an unorthodox eschatology. Faced with the loss caused by her self-sacrifice, the speaker consoles herself by imagining a future heavenly matrimony where she will be transformed into a bride and her lover, the groom. This contradicts the bible, which says that "in the resurrection [people] neither marry nor are given in marriage" (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Matt. 22:30). This controversial ending is rationalised in Roe's (2007, p. 102) explanation: "Rossetti, in the spirit of the New Testament, anticipates love as a resolution to all the conflicts engendered by the Fall". The theme of love is pervasive throughout the poem, as all the heavenly beings in the speaker's dream, from the Angels to the grotesque being, speak of love. The beast in her dream concludes at the end of his search that "love is all in all" (Rossetti, 1862, p. 125). The purpose of the imagined heavenly matrimony is thus to drive home the central message that love overcomes everything, as the sexual erotic love that was sacrificed would be restored in the eschatological future as a divine and pure love.

By depicting a love that outlasts the temporal, Rossetti brings our attention to the fallen woman's capacity for a pure form of love and, by extension, a high degree of spirituality. Moreover, Rossetti draws our attention to the transformative power of love and its potency as the force that will transcend earthly life and remain in humanity's eschatological hope. Rossetti also restores hope for the fallen woman by challenging her contemporary readers to entertain the possibility that, just as Christians hope for redemption, the fallen woman likewise can be redeemed and made perfect even in her love through self-sacrifice.

"A ROYAL PRINCESS"

Published first for a social cause and later in *The Prince's Progress, And Other Poems* (1866), "A Royal Princess" is a dramatic monologue spoken by a fictional medieval princess. She talks about the loneliness and repression that comes from her position and the ruthlessness of her father, the King, towards his people. While the kingdom is on the brink of a riot, the princess, moved by her compassion for the people and her desire to speak up, decides to sacrifice herself. In this poem,

Rossetti engages in a critique of the Victorian feminine ideal, which encourages weakness and passivity, and introduces female self-sacrifice as the solution to female inactivity. Rossetti models the poem after Pre-Raphaelite medieval traditions by portraying her speaker as a hybrid figure combining a courtly lady and a damsel in distress, the two most common figures representing the medieval feminine ideal in Pre-Raphaelite art and literature (Marsh, 1987). Nevertheless, the poem deviates from the arc of a traditional chivalric romance since the speaker's distress does not stem from that which usually plagues a damsel like beasts or evil foes. It is instead caused by her confinement that results in extreme oppression and lack of freedom and agency to speak. The use of dramatic monologue instead of ballad form shifts the traditional male point of view in chivalric romances to the female so that the female experience becomes the central focus. The dramatic monologue is also a brilliant avenue of self-assertion and agency for both Rossetti as a female poet and her silenced fictional speaker.

Throughout the poem, Rossetti exposes the unpleasant realities of the feminine ideal often overlooked by Victorians sympathetic to the Middle Ages. Whereas women are put on pedestals in the chivalric ideal, Craik (1860, p. 29) warns that these women are actually reduced to "dressed-up dolls [and] pretty playthings"; such objects, while "petted and caressed" are also vulnerable to abuse and risk being "flung out the window, as [the] lords and masters may please". Rossetti's speaker is indeed like a doll and plaything, "decked with jewels, gilded, drest" and put on an expensive "ivory chair" (Rossetti, 1866, p. 123). These descriptions show that the princess is a mere object in the patriarchal medieval world of her father's creation, comparable to the jewels and ivory throne (Psomiades, 1993). She is thus judged by her economic worth rather than personal value. The ivory also reflects the material value of the pedestal and, by extension, the high value accorded to the one seated upon it. In fact, Rossetti (1866, p. 124) draws attention to the princess' external behaviour when she is seated ("there I sit uplift and upright") to demonstrate the propriety of the princess' behaviour. In this, the princess resembles the Victorian "Angel in the House", who is likewise elevated and worshipped for her propriety and purity. Yet, this exaltation only raises her status, not her humanity. As an object, the princess is denied autonomy both in speech and action. She likens herself to "[a] poor dove, that must not coo —eagle that must not soar" (Rossetti, 1866, p. 123). As doves are known for their gentle nature, this comparison evokes the gentle and silent ideal Victorian woman. Able to fly at higher altitudes than most other birds, the eagle that "must not soar" is prohibited from behaving in accordance with its nature. In other words, Rossetti implies how women must subdue their abilities, regardless of how capable they are, never to rise above a man's place and authority.

The speaker also presents her predicament as a damsel in distress locked up within four walls, having no freedom or prospect of chivalric rescue. The four guards on each side of her, more than protectors, are symbolic agents of patriarchal control, ensuring her passivity and limiting her movement. The princess also has her internal identity and self-image controlled because "all [her] walls are lost in mirrors" (Rossetti, 1866, p. 124). Since mirrors reflect the "self" of the person looking into them, the mirrors that surround the princess symbolise her self-image or identity. These mirrors force her to check and maintain her courtly appearance, that she would constantly remain as divine and non-human like the sun and the west. The mirrors dictate reality for the princess as they did for Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, who is also trapped in a tower. They also recall the mirrors representing patriarchal control in Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio" (1904). These mirrors do not reflect the princess "as she is, but as she fills his dream"— the dream/imagination of the patriarchal creator of her medieval world represented by the Victorian male artist who (re)constructs the Victorian medieval world and its chivalric ideal (Rossetti, 1896,

line 14). Gilbert and Gubar (1984, p. 17) call such images "mythic masks [that] male artists have fastened over her human face to lessen their dread of [women's] 'inconstancy'" in conforming with the ideals they imagine; the only way of escape is for the woman looking into the mirror to "examine, assimilate, and transcend the […] images […] which male authors have generated for her". Indeed, the princess, though trapped, is not under an illusion. The "seeking face" suggests she is constantly trying to bridge the two halves of herself and to escape her imprisonment (Rossetti, 1866, p. 124). As she "trace[s]" her reflection, she is seeking for and (re)creating her true identity, to see past the idealisation of herself as sun and west, until the illusion is broken and she finds herself looking "old and haggard in the face" (Rossetti, 1866, pp. 124, 126). This dreadful but human vision of herself is necessary before she can assert her identity.

Confined within the four walls symbolic of the private sphere, the princess is also limited in its activities. She participates only in trifling things that do not serve the kingdom nor ease the ongoing famine, such as "touch[ing] her harp", "work[ing] on the last gold stitch into [her] veil of state", or having her "woman stand and read some unimpassioned scene" (Rossetti, 1866, pp. 130, 131). By restricting her speaker to these menial domestic tasks, Rossetti critiques the Pre-Raphaelite tendency to limit female subjects to the private sphere. This gender stereotype is observable in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's depiction of Mary in *The Girlhood of Mary* (1849), which departs from earlier medieval and Renaissance traditions portraying Mary reading the scriptures and instead depicts Mary embroidering a lily, thereby reducing Mary to domestic tasks in line with Victorian gender ideology (Peterson, 1994). While also confined to this scope, Rossetti's speaker conjures up rhetorical questions that subtly mock these menial domestic activities, thus critiquing the meaninglessness of the activities that women are limited to, which cover up the reality of female confinement to inaction.

Another facet of the brutalities of female confinement to the domestic sphere is the isolation it causes. The princess laments, "Alone by day, alone by night, alone days without end?" (Rossetti, 1866, p. 124). Her loneliness is made worse as she pines for a lover, and Rossetti uses this loneliness to foreground the bleak and lonely lives of Victorian women. Hendry (2019, p. 2) notes that loneliness, a common trait among women in Victorian novels, stems from "the need for female agency" caused by the lack of "common understanding, social mobility or love on equal terms to men". But here, the princess does not eventually receive love or liberation from a man, thereby suggesting a relationship between this poem and Rossetti's "The Prince's Progress", in which Rossetti rejects a state of waiting to be rescued by a man. The princess in "The Prince's Progress" is "condemned to inaction and emotional atrophy unless 'woken' by marriage" (Marsh, 1994). Likewise, Bowles (2005, p. 119) describes her as "merely a type — the woman who waits", symbolic of the Victorian woman who awaits marriage and fulfilment in a domestic life. Expanding on Bowles's (2005) and Henwood's (1997) recognition of the connection between these two poems, "A Royal Princess" can be seen as extending Rossetti's central message in "The Prince's Progress", with the speaker of "A Royal Princess" as a counterpart to the unfortunate princess in "The Prince's Progress". Through her engagement in courageous self-sacrifice, Rossetti shows that there is an escape from female inactivity that does not involve a man's love or rescuing act. Instead, as Henwood (1997, p. 93) observes, the speaker of "A Royal Princess" is rendered an active role comparable to Rossetti's most courageous heroine, Lizzie, "turn[ing] her powerlessness into power".

When the people suffering from starvation finally rebel, the princess decides to intervene. She chooses martyrdom to liberate her people and to win herself the agency to speak, namely to "rend bare [her] heart and show" with actions instead of words what she has to say (Rossetti, 1866,

p, 133). Her self-sacrifice is thus not a form of passivity but an intended escape for herself and the people trapped by the unjust patriarchal and feudal structure. The speaker further quotes Queen Esther in the bible, who was ready to sacrifice herself by going to see the King unannounced, although it was against the law. Determined to plead for the lives of her people after an order had been imposed to execute the Jews, Queen Esther said, "[A]nd if I perish, I perish" (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Est. 4.16). Echoing this, Rossetti's princess states, "I, if I perish, perish", knowing that she may be harmed or killed in the commotion (Rossetti, 1866, p. 133). As Fass (1976, p. 40) observes, the princess mimics Esther in risking her life by "taking … the initiative and abandoning her passive role as a woman". Essentially, the greater sacrifice would be for the speaker to flout her prescribed position as a woman, just as Esther violated her role as a Queen to approach the King, aware that her predecessor Vasthi was deposed for defying the King's orders and transgressing her role as Queen.

The poem's ambiguous ending does not promise the grandeur or reward for female self-sacrifice typically glorified in mid-Victorian domestic novels and conduct books. However, the speaker's self-sacrifice is not futile, as the association with Esther imbues this self-sacrifice with power. To Rossetti, Esther's figure holds intense feminine spiritual power. Rossetti's sonnet sequence "Monna Innominata" (1881) displays a subversive image of Esther as "sensual and strong, … [having] a purpose other than love and is … an instrument of divine will" (Rennert, 1999, p. 267). Sonnet 8 opens with the same words found at the end of "A Royal Princess" — "'I, if I perish, perish'" — and legitimates Esther's use of Eve-like feminine beauty to carry out God's will. It describes Esther as using her feminine charm of "perfumed hair", "pomp of loveliness", and "beauty" to attain the greater good of saving her people, thereby becoming God's divine instrument (Rossetti, 1881, p. 52). Moreover, in her devotional commentary *Face of the Deep* (1892), Rossetti describes Esther as an image of the Church Triumphant and a vessel for God's strength. The allusion to Esther in the poem thus hints at the redemptive potential of self-sacrifice. Just as Esther becomes a saviour chosen by God to save the Jews, the princess transforms into a female saviour who becomes a vessel of God. Her self-sacrifice is elevated to a spiritual status as an act sanctioned by God as she says, "In the name of God I go" (Rossetti, 1866, p. 133). Consequently, her act of female self-sacrifice is given both liberating potential and spiritual significance.

As the princess speaks of her goal to "show / The lesson [she has] learned which is death, is life," she echoes the contrasting terms of life and death that Rossetti has at multiple times associated with Esther (Rossetti, 1866, p. 133). Esther is described in "Monna Innominata" as "bride of life or death" (Rossetti, 1881, p. 52) and in *the face of the Deep* as a representation of the truth that "'He that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal'" (1892, p. 326). Death, in this case for the princess, has a double-layered meaning: one refers to her possible literal death, another is the death or denial of her comfort and inaction. As such, she recognises that her death will result in life, for her people literally and for herself figuratively. The eternal life that she will gain does not refer to immortality but a life of fulfilment that is beyond her confined and meaningless existence. This fulfilment is derived from engaging in the meaningful pursuit of liberation that is also a spiritual act, given the speaker's belief that her self-sacrifice is sanctioned by God. Her martyrdom becomes more than a means of fulfilling temporal pursuits or even liberation from patriarchal oppression. It is now a spiritually empowering act. Concerning the spiritual significance of martyrdom, Ruether (1983) writes:

> Martyrdom … was seen as both the highest act of resistance against the evil power of the state that represented the Kingdom of Evil and also the closest possible identification with Christ. The martyr literally was seen as becoming another Christ in the act of suffering for Christ.
>
> (p. 179)

The speaker, in her sacrificial act, becomes a type of Christ even as she models herself after Esther. She, like Esther, resembles Christ in his weakness when he laid down his life. Rossetti (1892, p. 499) assures victory for association with the weakness of Christ when that weakness "include[s] a voluntary element", which is the sacrifice of one's will "in concert with the Divine Will". As the princess has justified God's sanctioning of her sacrifice, it can be deduced that her sacrifice would have been a spiritually powerful act. Moreover, since her sacrifice is engaged for the liberation of herself and her people from the cruelties of the patriarchal and feudal order, the act bears more liberating potential than that of the female characters of other Victorian female poets like Hemans and Barrett Browning. Melnyk (2003, p. 145) recognises that although Hemans' and Barrett Browning's sacrificial women emulate Christ in their suffering, their sacrifice is problematic since they "[give] up [their lives] in order to save one man and to maintain the patriarchal order". In contrast, Rossetti's speaker's sacrifice rejects a continuation of the patriarchal order.

Therefore, in this poem, Rossetti subverts the image of weakness and passivity as the feminine ideal and presents women as having the potential to overcome inactivity by engaging in meaningful sacrifice. This sacrifice transcends the domestic realm and is independent of a man. It also bears liberating and salvific potential. Moreover, by engaging in such sacrifice in accordance with God's will, the agent of self-sacrifice takes on the strength and victory of Christ.

CONCLUSION

This study has unpacked the nuances in Rossetti's poetics of female self-sacrifice to demonstrate how Rossetti rejects the association of female self-sacrifice with weakness and passivity. We have shown how Rossetti reimagines a presentation of self-sacrifice that transcends inward-looking self-denial and renunciation to create a heroic form of self-sacrifice that is as powerful as it is spiritual. The framework of feminist theology has enabled us to comprehend how Rossetti uses female self-sacrifice to respond to the challenges that patriarchal tradition presents towards women's positions, which are invariably linked to religion.

That Rossetti's protagonists gain temporal and eternal (spiritual) rewards for their acts of self-sacrifice not only shows Rossetti's spiritual strength but also enhances our appreciation of her visionary feminist aesthetics. Her brilliant poetic imagination is proven as she is able to offer a genuine liberation that no longer perpetuates the patriarchal order in the temporal. She portrays female passivity as capable of being overcome independently of patriarchal agents and, more importantly, suggests that women have the potential to save themselves. These insights are useful not only in revealing the nuances and complexities of her feminism but also in encouraging contemporary readers in contexts like Southeast Asian nations to interrogate the culture of female self-sacrifice upheld by patriarchal systems and religious institutions in their continued quest for gender justice.

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