

I Feel Your Honoured Excellence, and See / Myself Unworthy of the Happier Call': Christina Rossetti and the Thematics of Love and Renunciation

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Abstract

Christina Rossetti's writings include subtle critiques of nineteenth-century society's treatment of women. It is recognized that Rossetti was no radical feminist – in fact she explicitly rejected the idea of women's suffrage. However, her work does explore relationships between women, the restrictions imposed upon women, the difficulties facing the female writer and gender ideology. Some critics also argue that her religious verse offers new readings of the Christian scriptures, with a uniquely feminist understanding, and that her work in general offers a critique of the treatment of women in her age despite the fact that she did not overtly challenge the social order. The present paper seeks to offer an account of Rossetti's poetry of love which is remarkable for its affirmation of the poetic self and its disparagement of facile relationships. Her poems also perceptibly show the way in which disenchantment primarily leads to despair and thereafter demonstrates a transcendence in the condition of the libido when it rises in oneness with Christ. They are more often than not followed by a thematics of renunciation. The anxiety of the woman poet, hence, has its roots in an impassioned renunciation of self-assertion, conventionally necessitated by lyric poetry, along with a self-effacing abjuration to subside in poetic seclusion and concealment.

Keywords: Authorship, Christina Rossetti, Love, Poetry, Renunciation