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Recasting women's stories : in the poetry of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and Christina Rossetti

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Citation
Takiguchi, T. (2011, May 10). *Recasting women's stories : in the poetry of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and Christina Rossetti*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17621

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

PART III
Christina Rossetti's Recasting of Christian Stories

CHAPTER 5

"Repent with me, for I repent": Eve's Conscious Self-evaluation and Unconscious Self-revelation

Rossetti's Eve Figures

Rossetti often portrays Eve and Eve-like women who have committed a sin, and suffer as a consequence. These poems may appear to conform to the conventional notion of Eve as responsible for causing the fall of humans, but they implicitly cast doubt upon this notion and defend Eve.[1] A number of Rossetti's Eve poems take the form of a dramatic monologue. Rossetti takes over the form from her precursors, Hemans and Landon, and explores further the genre's possibilities to show conflict between different viewpoints. This chapter pays special attention to the way Rossetti's Eve poems upend the monologue's utterances, by making use of the gap between the speakers' conscious self-evaluations and unconscious self-revelations.

The narrative form of the short piece entitled "Eve" is a variant of

[1] For the conventional Christian justification for women's suffering, see Introduction to this study. Diane D'Amico points out that, although Rossetti follows the traditional idea that Eve committed a sin of disobedience against God, she does not present her as a vicious seducer but portrays her with compassion. See Diane D'Amico, "Eve, Mary, and Mary Magdalene: Christina Rossetti's Feminine Triptych", in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David A. Kent (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), 177-79.

the dramatic monologue.[2] At first Eve narrates in first person, initiating the monologue. But later an unnamed speaker takes over as third-person narrator of the poem, describing Eve and the natural world surrounding her from an outsider's perspective. As a result, two different viewpoints appear in the poem in turn: first that of Eve, and then that of the omniscient third-person narrator.

In her monologue, Eve weeps outside the gates to Paradise. She was banished from the Garden of Eden, because she "plucked bitterest fruit" to give to Adam. She laments that her "sin" has brought death into the world, and blames herself for her son Cain's killing of his brother Abel. She keeps reproaching herself, convinced of the gravity of her sin:

> As a tree my sin stands
> To darken all lands;
> Death is the fruit it bore.
>
> (lines 5-7)

> I, sad mother
> Of all who must live,
> I, not another,
> Plucked bitterest fruit to give
> My friend, husband, lover; –
> O wanton eyes, run over;
> Who but I should grieve? –
> Cain hath slain his brother:
> Of all who must die mother,
> Miserable Eve!
>
> (26-35)

However, the picture of Eve we gather from her monologue does not necessarily coincide with Eve's own negative self-evaluation. In the second stanza, Eve recollects when she and Adam tended their garden together. This reminds us of their inherently loving, life-giving nature. In the following stanzas Eve affectionately addresses Adam, "my brother … my friend, husband, lover" (19, 30) and laments his fall, disregarding her own misery: "Hadst thou but said me nay, … I might

[2] "Eve", in *CPCR*, vol. I, 156-58. There are "auditors" to Eve's monologue: "each piteous beast" sympathetically responds to her misery.

have pined away; / I, but none other: / God might have let thee stay / Safe in our garden" (18-23). Eve's lament, without her knowing it, foregrounds her benevolence as a mother and wife.[3] Eve's monologue shows a gap between her conscious self-evaluation as a destructive, death-bringing woman and her unconscious self-expression as a caring, life-giving woman.

After Eve's monologue, the third-person narrator starts to speak. When this happens, the virtuous image of Eve is further accentuated. The narrator calls Eve "our mother" (37), and, instead of accusing her of her sin, looks upon her with warm affection. In accordance with the narrator's sentiment, "each piteous beast", hearing Eve's weeping voice, responds sympathetically to her sorrow:

> Greatest and least
> Each piteous beast
> To hear her voice
> Forgot his joys
> And set aside his feast.
>
> The mouse paused in his walk
> And dropped his wheaten stalk;
> Grave cattle wagged their heads
> In rumination;
> The eagle gave a cry
> From his cloud station;
>
> (40-50)

The beasts' unanimous response signifies that Eve brings about bonds of love in all living things. The third-person narration focuses on Eve's creative (not destructive) power of love, telling a redeeming story of Eve. The warm tears of Eve and the beasts stand in sharp contrast to the virulent grin of the serpent, which appears in the last four lines:

> Only the serpent in the dust
> Wriggling and crawling,
> Grinned an evil grin and thrust

[3] These lines subtly make a claim from Eve's viewpoint that it is not only Eve but also Adam who committed "sin", because he did not say "nay" to her tempting of him.

His tongue out with its fork.

(67-70)

This ending of the poem subtly suggests that what brought death and sorrow to the world is not Eve's sin but rather the serpent's malice, and that Eve is not so much a sinner as an innocent victim.

A variant of the dramatic monologue, the poem illustrates a major characteristic of the genre. According to W. David Shaw, "a [dramatic] monologue's unconscious self-revelations are usually more important than the meanings its speaker is conscious of expressing".[4] In other words, the reader (and the implied auditor) of a monologue learns more than what its speaker thinks he or she is saying. In this sense, a dramatic monologue often involves a kind of dramatic irony.[5] Eve's monologue in Rossetti's "Eve" exhibits a disparity between Eve's conscious self-evaluation and her unconscious self-revelation. When the third-person narrator later defends and celebrates Eve, it is suggested that the celebration of Eve is the more important meaning of the poem. Rossetti, via dramatic irony, upends the poem's utterances.

The speaker of "Shut Out",[6] another Eve figure, cannot forget her lost Paradise. She wants to peer inside through iron bars for a view of the garden she tended so carefully. But the gatekeeper, or "shadowless spirit", prevents her from doing so. He ignores the speaker's entreaty to let her have just a single flower bud or twig from her garden, and

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[4] W. David Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1999), 12. Robert Langbaum makes a similar point in his classical study of the dramatic monologue (Langbaum, 146). The point is one of the three defining features of dramatic monologue Shaw mentions: "As a species of talking verse, it is a poem of one-sided conversation in which a speaker, not to be confused with the poet, addresses a silent auditor. Secondly ... a monologue's unconscious self-revelations are usually more important than meanings its speaker is unconscious of expressing. A third feature of the genre is the speaker's unpredictable apostrophes or swerves of voice" (Shaw, 13).

[5] The same dramatic irony occurs in Hemans' dramatic monologues, such as "Properzia Rossi" and "Arabella Stuart", discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, respectively. Rossi does not realize that her poetic inspiration comes to her when she invokes her own soul as her Muse, and Arabella does not realize that her monologue stands as a sharp criticism of her beloved husband. In both cases, the monologues' unconscious self-revelations are more important meanings of the poem than the speakers' conscious self-expressions.

[6] "Shut Out", in *CPCR*, vol. I, 56-57.

mercilessly takes mortar and stones to build a wall. Eve is then left "blinded with tears" (22). The image of a shadowless spirit building a wall is surreal and malicious, and highly unlike the guardian of the "delightful" (24) garden. This indicates that the Eve figure in "Shut Out" represents a woman unjustly alienated from the joys of life, and that the spirit alludes to cruel circumstances which withhold all earthly pleasures from her.

Another woman lamenting her lost Paradise is the speaker in "A Daughter of Eve".[7] She also recognizes her sin and blames herself:

> A fool I was to sleep at noon,
> And wake when night is chilly
> Beneath the comfortless cold moon;
> A fool to pluck my rose too soon,
> A fool to snap my lily.
>
> (1-5)

The phrases about the speaker plucking her rose too soon and snapping her lily can be seen as an allegory for lost virginity before marriage.[8] The speaker's garden, whose harvest would have symbolized the joys of life, bears no fruit when autumn comes. Because she committed a sin (sex before marriage), she is being punished. "Stripped bare of hope and everything" (13), she sits alone "with sorrow" (15). This pathetic daughter of Eve is a fallen woman, a character type often featured in Victorian art and literature. The religious theme of Eve's sin and the loss of Paradise is used in Rossetti's poems to address the contemporary issue of women transgressing the social rules concerning sexuality.

In "Eve", contrary to her negative self-image, Eve is presented to the reader as an innocent, life-giving mother. In "A Daughter of Eve", we see the same discrepancy between the speaker's conscious self-evaluation and her unconscious self-revelation. The speaker of the poem considers herself to be a sinful woman. However, the monologue's pathetic self-revelation implicitly tells us that she is not

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[7] "A Daughter of Eve", in *CPCR*, vol. I, 208-9.

[8] This allegory is also seen in "An Apple-Gathering", in *CPCR*, vol. I, 43-44. I discuss the poem in Chapter 6. For a clear interpretation of the poem as a story of a "fallen woman", see Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1999), 94-117.

an object of scorn but rather an object of pity. In order to explore further this discrepancy in Rossetti's portrayals of the fallen woman, let us now turn to a longer dramatic monologue that features another daughter of Eve, who committed a "pleasant sin" of premarital sex.

"The Convent Threshold"

In "The Convert Threshold" a woman determined to enter a convent as a nun addresses her former lover.[9] The poem starts with the ambiguous lines:

> There's blood between us, love, my love,
> There's father's blood, there's brother's blood;
> And blood's a bar I cannot pass:
>
> (1-3)

It is not clear whether the speaker is referring to an incestuous love affair between the speaker and her lover, or to a blood feud between the two families.[10] In either case, these lines suggest that there has

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[9] "The Convent Threshold", in *CPCR*, vol. I, 61-65. Although it is clear that the speaker is addressing her former lover, the reader does not know if he is actually listening to her while she speaks. It is possible to see the poem as the speaker's soliloquy with nobody close to her, or as a letter she writes to her lover. From line 130 we may surmise that it is a poem in epistolary style: "I cannot write the words I said".

For a study that regards the poem as the "imbrication" of different styles and genres, such as dramatic monologue, heroic or Gothic epistle, courtly love, Romantic poetics, and Christian poetics, see Susan Conley, "Burying the Medusa: Romantic Bloodlines in Christina Rossetti's Gothic Epistle", in *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry*, ed. Barbara Garlick (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002), 97-115. It is also possible to think that the poem, like Rossetti's sonnet sequence "Monna Innominata", belongs to the genre of epistolary literature in which the letter-writer is a nun, such as *Lettres Portugaises Traduites en Francais* (Paris, 1669) and *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717) by Alexander Pope.

[10] I am indebted to Kathleen Jones, who suggests that these lines may be a reference to "an incestuous love affair" or "a blood feud similar to the story of Heloise and Abelard". See Kathleen Jones, *Learning Not to Be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 86. Jan Marsh also suggests that these lines hint at a "more unmentionable sin than murder, namely a submerged Byronic incest theme". He points out the possible influence on the poem of *Eloisa to Abelard* written by Alexander Pope (Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, 214).

been some kind of disgraceful or brutal affair involving their families.

There is indeed a suggestion that the speaker is one of those "fallen women", outcasts in society often seen in Victorian art and literature. Her sin is presented with the striking image of a scarlet "stain" on her feet and in her heart:

> My lily feet are soiled with mud,
> With scarlet mud which tells a tale
> Of hope that was, of guilt that was,
> Of love that shall not yet avail;
> Alas, my heart, if I could bare
> My heart, this selfsame stain is there:
>
> (7-12)

This association of a fallen woman with pollution and contagion was not uncommon in the period, and the speaker appears to subscribe to this negative view of fallen women.[11] However, the image of pollution is later replaced by that of bruises, via the "scarlet" color of blood. This replacement leads to the association of fallen women with religious martyrs who suffer physical tortures, an association that serves to purge the taint of sin/pollution from fallen women.

The speaker, from early in the monologue, sees a vision of heaven. She looks up to the "far-off city" (18) where "the righteous" (21) dwell. There, the residents live happily and peacefully in a fertile land, supping, sleeping at ease, and singing hymns with the angels. While still on earth, though, they suffered terrible tortures as "the offscouring of the world" (27): they were martyrs, who "bore the Cross" like Christ. Having endured suffering on earth, they are now blessed in heaven:

> They bore the Cross, they drained the cup,
> Racked, roasted, crushed, wrenched limb from limb,
>
> (25-26)

While the speaker yearns for the blessed state they live in, we are subtly led to identify her with these martyrs. The speaker, seeking

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[11] I consider representations of fallen women in Victorian literature and Rossetti's poems further in Chapter 6.

desperately "the sea of glass and fire" (6, 13),[12] appears as if she were going to get bruises, and her lily feet "soiled with [scarlet] mud" start to look as though they were bleeding. The monologue suggests that she, like the martyrs, is an innocent victim enduring undeserved punishment.[13] This almost cancels out the speaker's conscious view of herself as a sinner.

After talking of her yearning for heaven, the speaker repeatedly – nearly obsessively – urges her former lover to seek heaven with her:

> You looking downward, what see you?
> Milk-white, wine-flushed among the vines,
> Up and down leaping, to and fro,
> Most glad, most full, made strong with wines,
> Blooming as peaches pearled with dew,
> Their golden windy hair afloat,
> Love-music warbling in their throat,
> Young men and women come and go.[14]
>
> You linger, yet time is short:
> Flee for your life, gird up your strength
> To flee; the shadows stretched at length
> Show that day wanes, that night draws nigh;
> Flee to the mountain, tarry not.
>
> (30-42)
>
> The time is short and yet you stay:
> Today while it is called today
> Kneel, wrestle, knock, do violence, pray;
>
> (46-48)

The speaker initially appears to express her wish for her lover's well-being in heaven. However, as her words become increasingly violent, they turn into a harsh rebuke:[15]

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[12] For "the sea of glass", see Revelation 4:6,15:2.

[13] For the association of martyrs and blood, see also the poem entitled "Martyrs' Song": "Be it flood or blood the path that's trod, / All the same it leads home to God" (*CPCR*, vol. I, 182-84, lines 3-4).

[14] Note the similarities between this description of what the speaker thinks her lover sees on earth and what Arabella Stuart (the eponymous heroine of Hemans' poem) thinks her lover is doing at a banquet. See Chapter 4 of the present study.

[15] In Hemans' "Arabella Stewart", too, the heroine wishes for her husband's well-

> You sinned with me a pleasant sin:
> *Repent with me, for I repent.*
> Woe's me the lore I must unlearn!
> Woe's me that easy way we went,
> So rugged when I would return!
>
> (emphasis added; 51-55)

The speaker states that she and her lover are equally sinful, because they committed the same sin. Demanding sexual equality, she urges him: "Repent with me, for I repent". This is an outright complaint about the inequity of patriarchal society, in which strict sexual laws apply only to women, exempting men from punishment. It is unfair, the speaker implicitly insists, that only women are required to repent and to relinquish all earthly pleasures.

The speaker's resentment gains momentum as her "livid lips" (66), like those of a vengeful spirit, keep crying, "repent":

> I turn from you my cheeks and eyes,
> My hair which you shall see no more –
> Alas for joy that went before,
> For joy that dies, for love that dies.
> *Only my lips still turn to you,*
> *My livid lips that cry, Repent.*
> Oh weary life, Oh weary Lent,
> Oh weary time whose stars are few.
>
> (emphasis added; 61-68)

Although the speaker turns her face from her lover, her livid lips, separated from her body, still turn to him and speak. The crying lips without a face are the powerful self-revelation of the fallen woman, denouncing the injustice of man and society. They present her as a horrible, vengeful specter.

A series of ghostly scenes comes to a climax in the speaker's description of her own dream, in which she appears as a revived corpse: her lover, seeking her, violates her grave and finds her. In this dream, with her "plenteous hair" (112) drenched by cold dew, she

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being, while her words betray her inner grudge against him. See Chapter 3 of the present study.

murmurs from inside the grave, "Find you a warmer playfellow, / A warmer pillow for your head" (119-20). The speaker's lover staggers at the sight of her dead body crushed into the "sodden earth" (123). This living corpse, driving her lover to mental disorder, reflects the speaker's unconscious wish for revenge:

> You wrung your hands; while I like lead
> Crushed downwards thro' the sodden earth:
> You smote your hands but not in mirth,
> And reeled but were not drunk with wine.
>
> (122-25)

Toward the end of the poem, the speaker's emotions become even more intense:

> For all night long I dreamed of you:
> I woke and prayed against my will,
> Then slept to dream of you again.
> At length I rose and knelt and prayed:
> I cannot write the words I said,
> My words were slow, my tears were few;
> But thro' the dark my silence spoke
> Like thunder …
>
> (126-33)

The speaker confesses to having mixed emotions of love and hatred. Although she says that she "prayed", what exactly she said in her prayer remains secret: "I cannot write the words I said" (130). This suggests that she uttered shocking words, perhaps curses against her former lover. The force of her words is conveyed by the bold enjambment and the startling oxymoron in lines 132-33: "my silence spoke / Like thunder". Like thunder, her anger exploded.

Tormented by intense emotions, the speaker again appears to resemble a martyr who suffers torture in captivity. Finally, her face changes drastically in the course of one night:

> … When this morning broke,
> My face was pinched, my hair was grey,
> And frozen blood was on the sill
> Where stifling in my struggle I lay.

(133-36)

The relentless image of sudden aging, or possibly of death, indicates the level of pain the woman has to endure. She has to relinquish all earthly pleasures, suppressing her inner indignation. This, along with the images of livid lips without a face and the revived corpse, speaks powerfully of the depth of the woman's grudge.

In the last stanza, the speaker quietly speaks of her hope for reunion with her beloved in heaven. This heaven is an ideal long home for people who suffered on earth: a place where those who parted shall meet, a safe and protected haven. Leaving behind all the pain and sorrow, people shall live peacefully with love:

> When once the morning star shall rise,
> When earth with shadow flees away
> And we stand safe within the door,
> Then you shall lift the veil thereof.
> Look up, rise up: for far above
> Our palms are grown, our place is set;
> There we shall meet as once we met
> And love with old familiar love.

(142-48)

This comforting vision of heaven, however, does not erase the speaker's grudge, nor does it exorcize the specter of the fallen woman. On the contrary, it intensifies the horror of the specter: the speaker's sudden change of tone from horror to holiness is sinister, giving us the shivers. The concluding couplet (147-48) sounds deeply ironic and threatening. It appears to say that the lovers will meet in heaven as they met as innocent young lovers. But it also implies that they will meet as they met in the grave in the speaker's dream. And when they meet, she will love "with old familiar love" – that is, with her persistent, mixed feelings of love and hatred. The specter of the fallen woman lingers on, paradoxically coexisting with the beautiful vision of heaven as a place of eternal comfort.