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

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CHAPTER 8

"All loving, loved of all": Blessed Women in "From House to Home"

As tho' one pulse stirred all, one rush of blood
  Fed all, one breath swept thro' them myriad-voiced,
They struck their harps, cast down their crowns, they stood
  And worshipped and rejoiced.

Each face looked one way like a moon new-lit,
  Each face looked one way towards its Sun of Love;
Drank love and bathed in love and mirrored it
  And knew no end thereof.

Glory touched glory on each blessed head,
  Hands locked dear hands never to sunder more:
 These were the new-begotten from the dead
  Whom the great birthday bore.

Heart answered heart, soul answered soul at rest,
  Double against each other, filled, sufficed:
All loving, loved of all; but loving best
  And best beloved of Christ.

(lines 177-92)[1]

Christina Rossetti's "From House to Home" is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker relates her inner religious experience to her listener, whom she calls "my friend". The speaker tells of her visions of the Last Judgment and Heaven, where she experienced the redemption of humans – especially of women. The poem reflects certain beliefs about Christian eschatology in the mid-Victorian

[1] "From House to Home", in *CPCR*, vol. I, 82-88. The poem was composed in 1858.

period.[2] Christian eschatology has not always looked favorably on women's redemption. Rosemary R. Ruether contends that Christian eschatology has been ambiguous in its interpretations of femininity. On the one hand, it condemns femininity as a symbol of earthly sensuality, considering women to be materialistic and impure. On the other hand, it celebrates femininity as a symbol of reproduction, considering women to be the foundation for spiritual rebirth (Ruether 1993, 245-49). How does Rossetti handle these ambiguities of Christian eschatology in "From House to Home"?

This chapter examines the way the poem questions the aspect of Christian eschatology that undervalues women, constructing a text that ultimately celebrates femininity. In the following pages, I first sketch the ideas of heaven and earth in the Victorian age and consider the poem with reference to them. I then proceed to examine the poem from the perspective of two different forms of Christian eschatology.

Heaven and Earth

Lance St. John Butler observes that there is "ubiquitous" doubt about Christianity in Victorian literature.[3] But it is also true that there are expressions of straightforward Christian belief in salvation and eternal life. For instance, the Victorian period saw a great popularity of Christian hymns, which often sang of hope for heaven.[4] As Michael Wheeler explains, for many Christians at the time heaven was the "reward of the blessed; it [was] the goal, the fulfillment, the

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[2] Christian eschatology is the part of theology dealing with death and the final destinies of the soul and humankind. It concerns teachings on death, judgment, heaven and hell. As Michael Wheeler explains, it was "a highly controversial subject in the Victorian Age. … In the absence of definite and coherent teachings on judgment, heaven, and hell in the New Testament, a wide range of doctrinal positions, each based on a few individual texts, were defended on sectarian lines". See Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), xii.

[3] Lance St. John Butler, *Victorian Doubt: Literary and Cultural Discourses* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 9-27.

[4] For the rise of hymn-singing in the nineteenth century, see Ian Bradley, *Abide with Me: The World of Victorian Hymns* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1997), 1-23. Hymn-singing was promoted especially by Anglican High Church clergymen.

consummation of the Christian's 'lively hope'" (Wheeler, 119). Heaven without pain and suffering was referred to as one's "long home"[5] or simply "home", the final destination after the long journey of earthly life.[6]

Such a celebration of heaven may lead to the dualistic notion that life in heaven is totally opposite to life on earth: heaven is filled with joy, whereas life on earth is replete with suffering. This dualism, in turn, encourages an attitude of contempt for the realities of earthly life, and it may also foster the devaluation of women, who are conventionally associated with the earth and its fertility. Ian Bradley in his study of Victorian hymns articulates this concern. Noting that Victorian hymns tend to contrast the "blissful state of those who dwell [in heaven]" and the "miserable existence of those left toiling on earth", he asks: "does this amount to a dangerously escapist dualism in which this world is seen as a wholly evil place which it is the Christian's business to have as little to do with and get through as quickly as possible?" (Bradley, 119)[7]

"From House to Home" contains some lines reminiscent of such dualism.[8] The speaker states that, while heaven ("home") offers eternal joy and peace, the earth ("house") is a "delusion", which offers us only temporary pleasures:

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[5] See Ecclesiastes 12:5.

[6] In the nineteenth century there was an increasing interest in human love and home as the consummation of this love: the home was thought to be the foundation for heavenly life. To go to heaven was to move from one earthly home to another home, both filled with love. See Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 228-9.

[7] There is no single answer to this question. Bradley gives some examples of hymns which serve to disprove the suspicion of "escapist dualism". He states that there is no denying that some hymns sing of the evilness of the world. Still, as he argues, it is also true that some hymns celebrate earthly matters, and promote the idea of positive participation in worldly affairs, all the more because life on earth is brief. See Ian Bradley, 119-20. According to Michael Wheeler, "the binary opposition earth/heaven … takes on the sense in some Victorian hymns of mutual interaction and continuity (earth *and* heaven)" (emphasis original; Wheeler, 147).

[8] Although it may not be intended for church-singing, "From House to Home" partakes of the nature of hymnody: like many Victorian hymns, it praises God and sings of heaven and the mysteries of death and life. Michael Wheeler discusses the poem, along with other Victorian poetry of "sacred and profane love", after considering Victorian hymns. See Wheeler, 155-56, 161-63.

The first part [of earthly paradise] was a tissue of hugged lies;
The second was its ruin fraught with pain:
Why raise the fair delusion to the skies
But to be dashed again?

(9-12)

Therefore, O friend, I would not if I might
Rebuild my house of lies, wherein I joyed
One time to dwell: my soul shall walk in white,
Cast down but not destroyed.

Therefore in patience I possess my soul;
Yea, therefore as a flint I set my face,
To pluck down, to build up again the whole –
But in a distant place.

(201-8)

This idea of "vanitas mundi", as seen in Chapter 7, is rooted in ancient Christian tradition and was preached in the Victorian period by Tractarian thinkers, especially E. B. Pusey. It is therefore no wonder that Rossetti, who was strongly influenced by Pusey, has her speaker voice the same idea. However, this rejection of earthly life is not the main theme of the poem. Rather, the poem tactfully deconstructs this negative message from within and calls it into question. The speaker's surface message of vanitas mundi is overturned by the monologue's unstated but powerful message that life on earth and femininity should be valued. Let us explore this implicit message below.

The earthly paradise that the speaker envisages within her "soul" has two main characteristics. The first is its femininity that nurtures all living things. The "ruler" of the earthly paradise is a woman: the speaker herself. Here are found animals traditionally thought to be adorable – squirrels, lambs, doves and pigeons. What attracts our attention is that there are also species often considered repugnant – reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates:

My heath lay farther off, where lizards lived
In strange metallic mail, just spied and gone;
Like darted lightnings here and there perceived
But no where dwelt upon.

Frogs and fat toads were there to hop or plod
  And propagate in peace, an uncouth crew,
Where velvet-headed rushes rustling nod
  And spill the morning dew.

All caterpillars throve beneath my rule,
  With snails and slugs in corners out of sight;
I never marred the curious sudden stool
  That perfects in a night.

(29-40)

Why are these "uncouth" animals, typified by "frogs and fat toads", chosen to illustrate the woman's paradise on earth? It may have been prompted partly by Rossetti's special affection for funny creatures,[9] but this is not the only reason.

Kathryn Burlinson suggests that Rossetti's representations of non-human life are "both poetically and culturally significant", since her treatment of primitive nature serves as a "counterculture" against "prevalent socio-scientific practices and ideologies". Historically, toads have usually figured in literature as repugnant creatures. They have even been associated with women's greedy sexuality. They are known as witches' pets, and women keeping toads as pets have been feared and subjected to witch-hunts.[10] "From House to Home" does not present toads with these negative, and often gendered, connotations. Instead, it portrays them as innocent and pure creatures. As Burlinson puts it, here we see Rossetti refusing "to conform to a cultural tradition that locates both toad and woman as 'other', as sexually polluted and polluting" (Burlinson, 175).[11]

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[9] One can find descriptions that illustrate Rossetti's sympathy with such creatures in *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*. Rossetti asks a rhetorical question, sympathizing with them: "is it quite certain that no day will ever come when even the smallest, weakest, most grotesque, *wronged* creature will not in some fashion rise up in the Judgment with us ... ?" (emphasis original). See Christina Rossetti, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (Bristol: Thoemmes P. and Tokyo: Edition Synapse, 2003), 129. Also see pages 61-62, 81-82, 121-22.

[10] Kathryn Burlinson, "'Frogs and Fat Toads': Christina Rossetti and the Significance of the Nonhuman", in Arseneau, Harrison and Kooistra, 170-193, 170-75.

[11] Rossetti's portrayals of animals can be considered to be an early form of eco-feminism, which promotes the conservation of nature as a whole from the viewpoint of women who nurture lives for the future. Rossetti's ideas on animal protection led to

The second characteristic of the earthly paradise in the vision is its affinity with heaven. The speaker "commune[s]" with a man "like an angel", day and night. He has an "aureole round his head" and "wings to scale the air". His eyes are "spirit-discerning … like flames of fire", and "deep as the unfathomed endless sea", they "[fulfill] my desire" (lines 45-55). The word "commune" has a religious implication of receiving the Eucharist, and the phrase "eyes … like flames of fire" refers to the eyes of the Son of God or Christ described in Revelation 2:18.[12] The days the speaker spends with this holy lover symbolize a life on earth blessed by Christ.[13] In a word, "From House to Home" in its presentation of earthly paradise celebrates femininity with its loving and life-nurturing qualities, and portrays salvation as being available to women on earth. Women do not need to postpone all pleasures to the heavenly bliss of the afterlife.

This blissful earthly paradise, however, disappears one night, all of a sudden. The lover, calling the speaker to "Come home, O love, from banishment: / Come home to the distant land" (75-76), flies away. With him the paradise disappears, and turns into a bleak winter wilderness.[14] Left alone, the speaker lights her candle and tries in vain to find him.[15] Suffering exceeding pain and despair, she loses consciousness. Then in her dream she has a vision of a beautiful woman bringing about the Last Judgment and the advent of the Kingdom of God. The woman is suffering: she is standing on thorns and her feet are bleeding.[16] The speaker (in her dream) feels as if the

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the antivivisectionist convictions of her later years. See Burlinson, 181-87.

[12] "And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass" (Revelation 2:18).

[13] A close affinity between the earthly paradise and heaven also appears in descriptions of the songs the speaker sings with the Christ-like man (lines 53-54), the sense of elevation the speaker feels as she is "lifted up" (62), and the imagery of light in "fire", "flame", and the "sun" (13-20). These images find their counterparts in the description of heaven in the latter part of the poem, strongly suggesting a connection between earth and heaven, instead of a split between the two.

[14] This refers to Eve's lost paradise, and the speaker of "From House to Home" can be considered as another of Rossetti's Eve figures. For Rossetti's Eve figures, see Chapter 5.

[15] This refers to the five wise virgins who wait for their bridegroom with lamps and oil in Matthew 25:1-13.

[16] In the portrayal of the bleeding woman, we may see a reference to Christ on the cross, who was mocked and given a crown of thorns.

bleeding woman were her double, and gazes upon her, utterly mesmerized:

> Her eyes were like some fire-enshrining gem,
> Were stately like the stars, and yet were tender;
> Her figure charmed me like a windy stem
> Quivering and drooped and slender.
>
> (121-24)

> She bled and wept, yet did not shrink; her strength
> Was strung up until daybreak of delight:
> She measured measureless sorrow toward its length,
> And breadth, and depth, and height.
>
> (133-36)

Then a "cup" is sent from heaven to the woman. When she finishes drinking the bitter cup, earth and heaven are reborn all at once.[17] "Multitudes" of people are then resurrected, and celebrate each other, worshipping God. Among the blessed people who sing a "new song", the speaker finds the bleeding woman who drank the cup (193-96).[18] The speaker who lost her earthly paradise thus dreams a redeeming vision of her double, who receives salvation in heaven.

If we read this story only from the perspective of the dualism of earth and heaven, our interpretation would be that the poem ends up canceling its earlier celebration of earth and femininity. However, if we read the poem further from the perspective of Christian eschatology, we find that earth and heaven are not opposed; rather, they are in harmony, and femininity is celebrated throughout the poem. Let us now analyze the vision of heaven in "From House to Home", from the perspective of two types of Christian eschatology.

Heavenly Vision in Two Types of Christian Eschatology

Broadly speaking, Christian eschatology can be divided into two

[17] Cf. the "cup of salvation " in Psalms 116:13.
[18] For a "new song", see Revelation 14:3.

types. Rosemary R. Ruether names them "historical eschatology" and "personal eschatology" (Ruether 1993, 252-58). According to historical eschatology, the advent of God's kingdom and the general resurrection of all mankind come at the final stage of history on earth. In contrast, personal eschatology assumes that it is the individual soul that gains eternal life, when it leaves the body at the time of death. This concern with individuality leads to the idea that the journey of the soul on earth is the key to gaining eternal life: earthly life itself should be valued. Personal eschatology assumes that the soul can transcend earthly bounds while the person is still alive on earth. Therefore, Ruether calls this type of eschatology "eschatology of space". Historical eschatology, in contrast, she calls "eschatology of time" (Ruether 1993, 243-45, 252-58).

Historical eschatology, with the traditional story of the general resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, and the eternal Kingdom of God, is still retained as the orthodox theory. Nevertheless, in the history of ideas there has been a shift in emphasis over time, from historical eschatology to personal eschatology. As Ruether puts it, the "eschatology of space ... has triumphed over the eschatology of time" (Ruether 1993, 245). In the world of English hymns this shift in thinking started in the eighteenth century. The shift was gradual, and the two types of eschatology often coexisted in one and the same text. By the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of personal eschatology had become dominant.[19]

Rossetti wrote "From House to Home" exactly at the midpoint of the nineteenth century, and the two types of eschatology coexist in her poem. One can see historical eschatology in the poem's description of the end of time. The speaker of the poem, in her dream, sees "that day" come, "earth and heaven" reborn, and "multitudes" of the resurrected standing up in bliss (lines 161-66). This description refers to the Last Judgment and the general resurrection of all the dead.[20] At the same time, the poem presents personal eschatology. In the same

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[19] Lionel Adey, *Hymns and the Christian "Myth"* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1986), 138-39.

[20] It is no wonder that the poem entails historical eschatology, for Rossetti was directly influenced by a type of historical eschatology called "premillennialism", which was widespread in England in the mid-nineteenth century. For this influence, see John O. Waller, "Christ's Second Coming: Christina Rossetti and the Premillennialist", in *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 73 (1969): 465-82.

dream of heaven, the speaker witnesses a woman (her double) released from suffering and attaining eternal life. With this emphasis on the individual soul, the dream offers an allegorical drama of the soul's journey.

Historical eschatology, with its assumption that eternal life is achieved only at the final stage of history, encourages a dualistic way of thinking that separates earth and heaven. This dualism can lead to resignation, despair, or passivity, since the belief that heaven lies in a distant future does not give immediate answers to present problems. Earthly life, as a result, can be undervalued, and with this comes the devaluation of women who nurture living things on earth (Ruether 1993, 329-30). In contrast, personal eschatology encourages us to think that the soul can experience heaven as a reality that is happening here and now.[21] Life on earth itself is then the foundation for heaven: it is no longer something to be slighted, but rather to be valued as essential to attaining salvation. "From House to Home" invites such a positive evaluation of earthly life, by presenting the drama of the personal soul no less powerfully than the drama of the Last Judgment and the general resurrection. Let us now have a closer look at how the poem does this. I want to pay special attention to two dominant images in the poem, "innumerable moons" and "ascent".

As noted above, the earthly paradise in "From House to Home" celebrates femininity for its loving and life-giving qualities. The salvation of the woman seen in the speaker's heavenly vision intensifies this celebration. Once suffering from lost love, the bleeding woman is now in heavenly bliss, joyfully singing a song along with "multitudes" (165) of blessed people:

> Heart answered heart, soul answered soul at rest,
> Double against each other, filled, sufficed:
> All loving, loved of all; but loving best
> And best beloved of Christ.
>
> I saw that one who lost her love in pain,
> Who trod on thorns, who drank the loathsome cup;

[21] The presentation of heaven as here and now is not uncommon in Victorian literature. Michael Wheeler points out that Victorian hymns and poetry often describe heaven in the present tense instead of the future tense, intensifying the significance of heaven in the here and now. See Wheeler, 136-74.

The lost in night, in days was found again;
The fallen was lifted up.

They stood together in the blessed noon,
They sang together thro' the length of days;
Each loving face bent Sunwards like a moon
New-lit with love and praise.

(189-200)

What is striking here is the imagery of multitudes of "moon[s]" (181, 199) standing for the faces of blessed people who "bent Sunwards" toward Christ. Mythologically, the moon has often been associated with femininity and maternity. In the context of Christianity as well, the moon symbolizes femininity. For the moon represents the church that reflects the light of Christ, and the church in turn has traditionally been seen as Christ's bride.[22] Further, animals closely associated with the ever-changing moon include amphibians and metamorphosing creatures such as snails and caterpillars; this association recalls the "uncouth crew" living peacefully under feminine rule in the earthly paradise of the poem. Thus, the moon imagery in the heavenly vision reminds us of the earthly paradise, where a woman blessed with Christ's love nurtures all living things under her maternal protection. The imagery serves to confirm the celebration of femininity in the earthly paradise.

Another dominant image in the poem's heavenly vision is that of "ascent".[23] This indicates that the poem here describes the eschatology of space, where life on earth can rise to limitless heights. The bleeding woman is now lifted with a chain reaching down to her from heaven, which stretches "sheer up thro' lightning, wind, and storm" (137-40). When the woman drinks the bitter cup sent down from the heights, earth and heaven are suddenly "rolled up like a scroll" (161). The woman and the blessed people accompanying her then keep ascending to yet higher levels:

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[22] See the entry for "moon" in de Vries.

[23] I would like to thank Professor Seishi Matsuda for directing my attention to this point, when he commented on my presentation at the 56th Conference of the English Literary Society of Japan (the Regional Branch of the Chugoku and Shikoku District), held in October 2003.

They sang a song. A new song in the height,
  Harping with harps to Him Who is Strong and True:
They drank new wine, their eyes saw with new light,
  Lo, all things were made new.

Tier beyond tier they rose and rose and rose
  So high that it was dreadful, flames with flames:
No man could number them, no tongue disclose
  Their secret sacred names.

(169-76)

The repetition of one-syllable words such as "tier", "rose" and "flames" effectively presents the souls of the blessed women as if they were spewing up out of a volcano.[24] The heaven the monologue's speaker envisages is a place where the overwhelming power of women's souls manifests itself. Contradicting the speaker's own surface denunciation of earthly life, the monologue celebrates the earth and femininity, by combining the drama of the eschatology of time with that of the eschatology of space.

Gospel for Women and the Silence of the Monologue's Listener

In "From House to Home", women are symbolically redeemed in heaven. But who are these redeemed women? They play the "harp" and sing a "new song" in heaven.[25] Their sacred names are kept "secret" and remain a mystery:[26]

They sang a song, a new song in the height,
  Harping with harps to Him Who is Strong and True:

(169-70)

No man could number them, no tongue disclose

[24] Flame traditionally symbolizes the soul and religious fervor. See the entry for "flame" in de Vries.
[25] For the imagery of harp and song, see Revelation 14:2-3, 15:2.
[26] On a secret new name, see Revelation 2:17, 3:12.

Their secret sacred names.

(175-76)

Still, it may be possible to see here an allusion to the ancient Greek poet Sappho, as Margaret Linley suggests. Sappho is known to be a poet who sang with the lyre, but the bulk of her work has been lost, and we are left with only one complete poem and fragments of poems. Legend has it that Sappho was lost in the sea: she made a fatal leap after suffering disappointment in love. The story sadly parallels the unfortunate fate of her works and posthumous reputation.[27] The souls of women singing with the harp in "From House to Home", then, may allegorically represent the recovery of the lost Sappho, and the revaluation of numerous women poets who, like Sappho, have suffered oblivion in the history of literature.[28]

After describing her heavenly vision, the speaker of the poem declares that she is ready to "pluck down" and "build up again the whole". We can expect that she will create her earthly paradise "again", only to be dashed "again", and build up her heavenly vision "again" to retrieve it (207-10). The violent images of destruction and reconstruction indicate the anger of women who have been forced to suffer and labeled as sinful and inferior. The speaker's determination to "build up" over and over again suggests that she will keep talking about the story of women's redemption, despite all difficulties. She speaks in the way of a prophet, repeatedly preaching the value of femininity and spreading the gospel of love for women: there is a land for blessed women where "all loving, loved of all".

Toward the end, the monologue reminds us of the presence of the auditor: the speaker addresses him (or her), "O friend" (201). The auditor remains silent until the end. Theoretically, in a dramatic monologue the auditors may be persuaded by the speaker's argument, but it is also possible that they reject it. In Dorothy Mermin's view, the monologue's auditors potentially have the power to oppose the

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[27] For Sappho and Rossetti's poems on Sappho, see Chapter 2.

[28] Margaret Linley makes the intriguing comment that Rossetti's "From House to Home" is a rewriting of her "What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her". See Margaret Linley, "Lyric's Drama and Sappho's Conversions", ch.1 in "'Truly A Poetess, and A Good One': Christina Rossetti and the Category of the Poetess", Doctoral Dissertation (Queen's University, Canada, 1995), 96.

monologue's speaker:[29]

> They can remain unpersuaded, unmoved, hostile, or just indifferent …. They can refuse to listen, they can even walk away. (Mermin 1983, 9)

How, then, does the monologue's auditor respond to the speaker in "From House to Home"? Is he (or she) persuaded by the monologue's hidden message that life on earth and femininity should be highly valued? Is he moved in any way by the speaker's implicit resistance to women's suffering on earth? Or does he oppose the idea of women's redemption? Is he sympathetic, hostile, or indifferent? The poem gives us no clues as to his response, so ultimately we do not know.

Presenting women's claim for earthly redemption in the form of a dramatic monologue where the auditor's response is suspended, Rossetti shows she knew that, in her own time, women's resistance could still encounter indifference and disapproval. However, the silence of the listener suggests more than that. It suggests that the poet keeps asking for a response – until we as readers respond in place of the silent listener. The monologue calls for us to join in the questioning.[30] Our answers may vary. We can refuse to listen and walk away. But we can also stop and listen, giving close attention to women's suffering and resistance, to which Rossetti gives powerful voice.

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[29] For the power of the listener in the dramatic monologue, see Chapter 7.
[30] For the reader's commitment in the dramatic monologue, see Chapter 3.