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

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation reads the poetry written by three British women, Felicia Hemans (1793-1835), Letitia Landon (1802-1838), and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), paying special attention to the ways they present, and recast, conventional stories of women. In many of the poems studied here, women suffer from disappointment in love: the heroine's love is unrequited, she is forsaken by her lover, or her lover dies. Hemans' and Landon's stories typically end with the heroine's death.¹ Love and death in their poems serve as metaphors to convey women's difficult relations with society, telling of women's sense of alienation and displacement. Hemans and Landon use conventional stories about women, yet at the same time occasionally deconstruct them. Rossetti takes over their theme of love, and she works on it from the viewpoint of a poet with a Christian background. Her heroines also experience displacement and loss, and, in addition, tension with prevailing Christian views of women. Rossetti adds to her predecessors' storylines of love, disappointment and death, attempting to tell stories about women's metaphorical life after death, with reference to Christian images of redemption of humanity.² Here

¹ It is possible to discuss the theme of love in the poetry of Hemans and Landon with reference to the genre of the romance, which saw revival in the Romantic period. Hemans and Landon both draw on the discourse of romantic love: it is one of the hallmarks of the genre, along with the hero's determination to rescue his love, his adventures in warfare, and chivalry. Their stories rarely end with a "happily ever after", as is the case with conventional chivalric romances. They are instead filled with violence and death; the hero often fails to rescue his beloved, and the hero or the heroine (or both) dies a tragic death. By utilizing and at the same time violently dismembering the romance, Hemans and Landon invest it with social meanings. For the genre of the Romantic romance, see Jacqueline M. Labbe, *The Romantic Paradox: Love, Violence and the Uses of Romance, 1760-1830* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), and Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986). Another theme used by Hemans is family love: love between parent and child, wife and husband, and so on.

² We see an exception in "Prince's Progress", where the heroine dies at the end. The dead heroine's lady attendants, however, take over her silenced voice to criticize the

again, my focus is to explore how she reworks conventional Christian stories of women.

Dolores Rosenblum points out the connections among the three poets in her study of Rossetti entitled *The Poetry of Endurance*. She discusses Rossetti's works in the context of nineteenth-century women's poetry, and finds there the legacy of earlier women's poetry that created "female figures who enact endurance or female voices which assert endurance". She specifically names Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon as Rossetti's precursors in this poetic tradition. The heroines in their poetry are presented as symbolic icons that reflect men's visions of women. Taking on their assigned roles as "door and gateway ... mandala or mirror for the male poet's visionary quest", these heroines are alienated from society but at the same time stand as an amazing monument with their "power to transfix".³ In their endurance, they can even find ways to overcome their alienation. Rosenblum suggests that this poetic tradition of women of endurance has religious and social significance. Such figures, evoking Christian saints who suffer for the sake of their faith, could give consolation to the oppressed in society. For they offer the apocalyptic hope that the last will become the first: an outcast in society will eventually be rewarded in heaven. Many people in nineteenth-century Britain were in need of such hope, amid the turmoil of social anxieties prompted by radical material and ideological changes (Rosenblum, 5-8). Women were no exception, and they often suffered in addition from cultural, economic, and legal limitations based on gender.

Rosenblum is right in finding a women's tradition of poetry in the works of Hemans, Landon and Rossetti.⁴ However, I propose to use

prince who arrives too late. In "After Death", the speaker of the monologue is a dead woman, and we can hear her inner voice while she lies dead in bed. The poem deviates from the conventional pattern in which a woman's death silences her. "Dream Land" and "Sweet Death" sing of sleep in death and longing for death, but they are accompanied by religious hope for new life.

³ Dolores Rosenblum refers to what French feminist Lucy Irigaray has called "mimetism" when explaining this aspect of the tradition. See Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1986), 5-6.

⁴ Along with the "specific heritage of the sentimental female poets" such as Hemans and Landon, Rosenblum names two "broader formal traditions" that fueled Rossetti's art: "the secular love lyric, which includes the song and the complaint, and the devotional lyric, which includes the prayer and the hymn" (Rosenblum, 6).

the word “resistance” to describe their works instead of Rosenblum’s word “endurance”. It is true that these three poets repeatedly portray women who endure suffering. But this does not necessarily mean that their works celebrate women’s endurance. Rather, they feature women’s covert (though often wavering) resistance to the internal and external imperatives of the passive endurance that was widely considered proper for women. The portrayal of enduring women may give consolation to the oppressed. But if this leads to approval and even celebration of endurance, it may reinforce existing gendered stereotypes in society and encourage masochism in the individual woman.⁵ I suggest that the three women poets, whether consciously or not, realized this potential danger.

Glorification of endurance and justification of women’s suffering can be seen in Christianity as well. The feminist theologian Rosemary R. Ruether explains that Christian writings have traditionally justified women’s suffering in two ways:⁶

- (1) Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit in disobedience of God. In doing so, she brought sin and death to human beings. All women are daughters of Eve, and inherit her sinful nature. They therefore deserve suffering as punishment.⁷

- (2) Even if women are guiltless of having caused the evil that befalls them, they should not complain. Since Christ suffered on the

⁵ The German theologian Dorothee Soelle, in her classic study on suffering, emphasizes the importance of the “ability to perceive the suffering of others”, suggesting that this attitude leads to the abolition of “social conditions which of necessity produce suffering” (2). She also contends that, by accepting suffering as a reality of life, one can “affirm the totality of [her] present experience, even its painful segments” (91). Nevertheless, as Soelle points out, one needs to be cautious of the problems this Christian stance of acceptance can entail (103). See Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). See also Kristine M. Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering: An Aw(e)ful Rowing Toward God* (Collegeville: The Liturgical P, 1998), 120-34, on this point.

⁶ For this summary of justifications of women’s suffering in a Christian context, I refer to Rosemary R. Ruether, “Suffering and Redemption: The Cross and Atonement in Feminist Theology”, in *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 95-107.

⁷ For the view that women, as Eve’s daughters, are sinful and inferior to men as classical orthodoxy, see also Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 94-99, 167-69.

Cross to atone for human sins, women should follow his example, humbly enduring suffering for the sake of others.⁸

This justification places women in a double bind: they are destined to suffer, whether or not they are sinful. Ruether contends that women have found it hard to resist this powerful rhetoric: “from medieval times to the present this double-bind message ... has been particularly preached to Christian women to accept not only their condition of subjugation, but also arbitrary violence visited upon them by husbands” (Ruether 2000, 95-107).⁹

Colleen Carpenter Cullinan also explains how women’s suffering is justified in traditional Christian stories. Examining what she calls “wrong stories” of Christian redemption, she warns against the “danger of glorifying suffering”. She argues that one of the most prominent and potentially destructive images of redemption is that of “Christ’s death as an atoning sacrifice”: because Christ suffered and died to atone for our sins, humans are forgiven by God. This understanding of redemption can have a terrible effect on people who suffer:

If we see the suffering of Jesus as key to how he saved us, then suffering must be a good thing, at least in this case. It is only a small leap, then – and one made explicitly by many Christians – to the claim that any suffering in our lives is a chance to follow Jesus and be like Jesus in his acceptance and endurance of the agonies of crucifixion Historically, people in power have embraced this model of redemption, and urged the suffering poor to accept their lot as a gift from God. Those who struggle to change the conditions of their lives are then charged with sinful rebellion against God [Here] we have reached a terrible distortion of God’s redemptive (healing, renewing) purpose in our lives, made more terrible by the fact that it ends not just in misunderstanding but in *actively preventing* redemptive activity in the world.¹⁰

⁸ We can find an example of this idea in First Peter 2:18-20, where slaves are advised to accept unjust beatings by their cruel masters.

⁹ Kristine M. Rankka, explaining why she focuses on women in her study on the value of suffering, also mentions the Christian tradition “in which woman is believed to cause and continue evil and suffering and thus, deserves suffering as a just punishment and a means of expiation” (Rankka, 7).

¹⁰ Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story: Women, Suffering, and Christ*

Cullinan points out further that Eve's disobedience, often contrasted to Christ's perfect obedience, has been a "continual and depressing theme in misogynic Christian literature". It is used as proof that women's nature is more sinful than men's, and therefore as "justification for male authority over 'weak' womanhood" (Cullinan, 18). Since obedience is seen as a divine virtue, women are obliged to humbly obey their husbands, just as slaves obey their owners and children their parents. So much so that "the obligation (for the powerless) to remain obedient was always seen as far more significant than the obligation (for the powerful) to act with justice" (17).¹¹

Ruether and Cullinan both recognize that Eve's sin and Christ's redemption of human beings play important roles in the process of justifying women's suffering. I suggest that Rossetti also addresses these two themes in her poetry. In Part III, I look at the way Rossetti recasts Christian views of women: Chapter 5 considers Rossetti's representations of Eve and her sin, and Chapter 6 examines Rossetti's portrayal of Christ's redemption of humanity, in both cases comparing them with traditional interpretations.

Rossetti remained a devout high-church Anglican all her life. Jerome McGann remarks that, even in her day, she "represented, in her own severe orthodoxy, a retrograde and diminishing vision" of Christianity.¹² While maintaining this "severe orthodoxy", Rossetti can be seen as taking a feminist approach to her religion, and in this sense I agree with Linda Palazzo. Palazzo, in *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology*, reads Rossetti's poetry and religious prose in the context of Victorian Christianity.¹³ Palazzo's study brings into relief

(New York: The Continuum International Publishing, 2004), 15-16. Emphasis is in the original.

¹¹ Although we may find passages in Scripture testifying to the idea of the obedient acceptance of suffering, there are also episodes in the life of Christ that attest rather to the idea that people should be relieved from pain and suffering. The passage Cullinan cites in the beginning of the first chapter of her book is a good example. This passage about Christ's healing of the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:25-34) is, according to Cullinan, a "powerful story of healing and redemption", which tells of Christ's testimony that one does not need to endure suffering but should be relieved from it (Cullinan, 5).

¹² Jerome McGann, "Introduction", in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David A. Kent (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987), 1-19, 11.

¹³ Lynda Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology* (New York: Palgrave,

the profile of the poet as a precursor of modern feminist theologians: Rossetti in her works advocates the right of women to interpret Scripture, gives voice to incipient ecological-feminist theology, and defends those women who feel they have been oppressed and marginalized.¹⁴

This dissertation is divided into three parts, each written from a different but related viewpoint: female literary figures in the past (Part I), a sense of Other and the age of imperialism and colonialism (Part II), and Christian ideas of women's sin and redemption (Part III). Part I explores a linkage between the three women poets, reading their poetry in relation to earlier female authors. Parts II and III discuss the works of each poet in more detail: Part II the poetry of the two Romantics, Hemans and Landon, and Part III the Victorian, Rossetti.

Part I traces the sources of the three women's theme of love to the figure of Corinne, a talented artist in Italy portrayed in a novel by Germaine de Staël (Chapter 1), and to the legend of the ancient Greek poet Sappho (Chapter 2). Performing their songs with the lyre, Corinne and Sappho were viewed in the nineteenth century as precursors of women poets. Chapter 1 offers a close reading of a series of poems written by the three poets in response to each other, finding there the influence of the heroine created by Staël. Referring to the historical and political background of Staël's novel, and exploring intertextuality between Staël, Hemans and Landon, the chapter discusses how the Corinne figure functions as a model for all three poets.¹⁵ Chapter 2 looks at the way the three women poets retell

2002).

¹⁴ By using the term "feminist theologian" I do not mean to say that Rossetti consciously considered herself as a feminist activist or theologian. She was not willing to participate in contemporary feminist activities, as seen in her letters to Augusta Webster declining to support the women's suffrage movement. See *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, ed. Antony H. Harrison (Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1999), II, 158-59. Instead, I simply suggest that Rossetti incorporated into her poetry her deep interest in women's conditions in society and Christianity. Although not politically active, Rossetti through her poetry conveys her thoughts on the woman question. As for Rossetti's often contradictory stance on the political and religious issues concerning gender, see, for instance, Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Writer's Life* (New York: Viking, 1995), 464-69.

¹⁵ Linda M. Lewis, noting that in the nineteenth century there were many "successors" to Staël's Corinne, offers a long list of female artist-protagonists created

the legend of the ancient Greek poet Sappho. The legend has Sappho throw herself from a cliff over her unrequited love for the beautiful young man Phaon. I outline how the legend was fabricated in ancient times and passed down to later generations, and consider potential significances in literature of the theme of a woman's death. Then I read the three poets' poems featuring Sappho's (and a woman's) death, finding there self-referential moments of women poets writing about women and about women writing poetry.

Part II (Chapters 3 and 4) concentrates on the poetry of Hemans and Landon. Chapter 3 reads Landon's "A History of the Lyre", showing how in the poem a woman artist invites her own destruction, having assimilated gendered, and imperialist, male rhetoric. The poem in part indicts the male-centered aspect of society, which views woman as Other and sees her mainly as the object of the male gaze. Chapter 4 reads Hemans' collection of poems entitled *Records of Woman* in the context of imperialism and colonialism. I suggest that Hemans' heroines are portrayed mainly as victims of imperialist oppression and colonial rule who rebel against forces that inflict suffering on them – including forces in their own patriarchal society.

Part III (Chapters 5-8) reads Rossetti's poems, examining in detail how she adds to her predecessors' theme of love and death by approaching it from the viewpoint of Christianity. Chapter 5 discusses poems that feature Eve or Eve-like women. It explores the way Rossetti defends Eve, questioning conventional interpretations of Eve as a sinful and death-bringing woman. In a dramatic monologue entitled "The Convent Threshold", a fallen woman as Eve's daughter appears as a frightening specter who seeks revenge upon a man, resenting society's gendered double standards. Chapter 6 examines some more poems about fallen women, and considers Rossetti's long narrative poem, "Goblin Market". Referring to modern feminist theologians, the chapter suggests that the poem recasts conventional interpretations of Christian redemption, by depicting a woman – figured as a female Christ – who lives a life of redemption in loving response to others' suffering. Chapter 7 turns to Rossetti's poems on

by female writers of the period, including Hemans' Properzia Rossi, Landon's unnamed "Improvisatrice", and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh. See Linda M. Lewis, *Germaine de Staël, George Sand, and the Victorian Woman Artist* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2003), 6-7.

“vanity of vanities”, a theme favored by Tractarian preachers. Despite their apparent conformity to the doctrine of renunciation, the poems betray an ideological distance from this Tractarian teaching. In a dramatic monologue entitled “The Lowest Room”, Rossetti ironically portrays a woman who adheres to the doctrine to the point of extreme self-denial. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses a poem of apocalyptic vision, “From House to Home”, with special reference to two types of Christian eschatology. The poem questions the traditional dualism between earth and heaven, which can lead to a devaluing of femininity and its life-giving qualities. Heaven is presented here as celebrating both life on earth and femininity.

Throughout the chapters, I repeatedly pay attention to the poetic genre the three women often adopt: the dramatic monologue.¹⁶ Isobel Armstrong contends that the dramatic monologue was “invented” by women poets such as Hemans and Landon as a means to express resistance to men’s objectification of women.¹⁷ Their resistance, however, is not always consistent. The three women poets occasionally portray women wavering between resistance and compliance. In the age when the three poets lived, radical new ideas about women’s place in society were emerging, and they experienced conflict between the differing perspectives of men and women, and even among women. Using the dramatic monologue, the poets found a way to present such conflict, as well as to show how social systems could oppress, degrade, and silence women.

¹⁶ I offer a brief outline of theoretical discussions of the dramatic monologue in Chapter 3.

¹⁷ Isobel Armstrong, “‘A Music of Thine Own’: Women’s Poetry – An Expressive Tradition?” in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 318-77, 325-26.