

## NOTES, REVIEWS AND BRIEF NOTICES

A POSSIBLE SOURCE FOR  
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S WORLD-WOMAN

## The World

By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair:  
 But all night as the moon so changeth she;  
 Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy,  
 And subtle serpents gliding in her hair.  
 By day she woos me to the outer air,  
 Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety:  
 But thro' the night a beast she grins at me,  
 A very monster void of love and prayer.  
 By day she stands a lie: by night she stands  
 In all the naked horror of the truth,  
 With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands.  
 Is this a friend indeed, that I should sell  
 My soul to her, give her my life and youth,  
 Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell?

27 June 1854

Christina Rossetti

The general approach taken by critics when discussing Christina Rossetti's sonnet "The World" is to place this poem in the literary tradition of the Loathely Lady since it depicts a woman who is fair by day, but horribly loathsome by night. Lona Mosk Packer in Christina Rossetti links Rossetti's world-woman to Dante's Purgatorio (Canto 19), to various English ballads, to Chaucer's "Wyfe of Bath's Tale" and Gower's "Tale of Florent."<sup>1</sup> More recently, Dolores Rosenblum in her essay "Christina Rossetti: The Inward Pose" adds to this list of sources the Medusa figure of Greek myth, pointing to the line "And subtle serpents gliding in her hair," and the Whore of Babylon spoken of in The Book of Revelation, seeing a connection between the imagery of this sonnet and that of a later Rossetti poem "Babylon the Great."<sup>2</sup>

All this is quite valid, but there is one other source that should be noted if we are to see in this poem all the connotations Rossetti intended -- The Book of Proverbs. There are definite similarities between Rossetti's world-woman and the strange woman so often mentioned in this book of the Old Testament. The most striking can be seen by