

THE BATTLE FOR SISTERHOOD: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S STRATEGIES
FOR CONTROL IN HER SISTER POEMS

Despite the sanctimonious ending of "Goblin Market" where we are told that there is "no friend like a sister," Christina Rossetti's vision of sisterhood is often bleak and almost always rigidly unsentimental. Her sister poems¹ are bitter battles between female voices who fight to gain control of the poem and of their own destinies. Sisters turn against sisters, cousins against cousins, in a rhetorical combat so sharp that love between women seems to be nonexistent, even impossible.

This confrontational sisterhood makes Rossetti difficult for feminist critics to read and to interpret.² Nurturing sisterhood is at the core of many works of feminist literary theory,³ yet Rossetti's dueling voices exhibit neither nurturing nor sisterhood in the modern sense. Still, a closer examination of the dynamics of the sister poems shows that they say something very special about the relationship between women. Unlike her poems to men, and her devotional poems which are often maudlin and self-flagellating, Rossetti's sister poems can be read as energetic battles between near-equals. In every case, the female voice that is weaker at the beginning of the poem gains confidence in the course of poetic argument and passes from a position of helplessness to power. It is as if these poems were the testing ground for female power, the one place where female voices can hear themselves argue, can "talk" themselves into an assurance of control. The equality of the voices provides the energy that fuels these poems, and the suspense that keeps the reader interested in these seemingly simple ballads.

These ballads provide control for Rossetti as well. Because the rhyme scheme must be at once simple and exact, because the poems divide so readily into episodes and verses, and because the style and imagery of the poems come from traditional sources, both poet and reader know what is expected of them in writing and reading these poems. In them, Rossetti is not struggling as she does elsewhere with imperfect meter or complicated rhymes. Instead, the interest of the poem centers on simple and dramatic stories whose plots can be turned and twisted for great emotional effect.

Only three of these poems will be examined in detail here. The temptation to "reinterpret" "Goblin Market" is great, but it is probably more useful to an understanding of the Rossetti canon to focus on some minor poems. "Cousin Kate," "Noble Sisters," and "Maude Clare" are all poems about competing women in which the speaker gains control as she "speaks" the poem. All these poems have surprise endings, and all can be read as strategies to gain power. Although, like many of