

THE LYRICAL “WE”:  
SELF-REPRESENTATION IN  
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI’S “LATER LIFE”

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More than two decades ago, in *Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar summarily dismissed Christina Rossetti’s poetry, particularly her religious poetry, in their analysis of her novella *Maude*. In the novella, the young poet-heroine, rejecting the choices of marriage, convent, and useful-but-neglected spinsterhood, unable to stop herself from “putting myself forward and displaying my verses,” is silenced by the overturning of her carriage and her subsequent death. Gilbert and Gubar conclude: “Maude lies passively, angelically, dutifully dead – and the living Christina Rossetti takes up her pen to spend a lifetime writing ‘Amen for us all’” (554).

The intervening years have seen a renaissance of interest in Christina Rossetti’s poetry, and few would now accept Gilbert and Gubar’s verdict on her poetic career. Nevertheless, the terms of their dismissal, the snide “Amen for us all” was characteristically perceptive. The phrase in fact suggests some of the ways Rossetti exploited elements of religious ideology to alleviate anxieties of poetic origination and to forge a new, more communal lyric subjectivity.

First, the implication of platitude in “Amen for us all” emphasizes the enabling power of allusion, an aspect of Rossetti’s work treated by Dolores Rosenblum. Rossetti works by “writing out of a collectivity of voices” (Rosenblum 20), using a wide variety of literary languages and forms, including ballad, Petrarchan sonnet, Romantic lyric, and Biblical and ecclesiastical forms in constructing her “female myth.” Rosenblum argues that this allusiveness allows creation without Romantic origination, expression without aggression (214-15). Further, as “Amen” suggests, many of Rossetti’s lyrics take the form of prayers, which allow her to present not self-in-isolation but self-in-relation, albeit vertical rather than horizontal relation. The I-Thou relation of prayer, like the mutual gaze of Christ and Christian suppliant noted by Rosenblum (113),