

## THE EDGE OF SISTERHOOD IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "THE CONVENT THRESHOLD"

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For most of her poetic career, Christina Rossetti was interested in thresholds, transitional states, and otherwise liminal spaces. In her poetry, these thresholds are generally physical locations, either in the form of the grave or the death-bed, with a speaker situated on the threshold between death and the afterlife. Rossetti's interest in this moment of transition was not just poetic; her brother William Michael described how "the point during the intermediate state after death and before the Resurrection" was a significant theological concern for her (Bell 236), and indeed, her poetic treatments of this "intermediate state" are often tinged with the suspicion that the period between death and general resurrection might be interminably long. Even more, Rossetti's poetic treatments of this state are characterized by a fear that the individual would somehow be aware of the passage of time, the separation from the natural world, and, terrifyingly, the process of decomposition. Rossetti's transitional states are closely associated with loss (of the world, of life, or of the physical body), and because of this, her liminal speakers reflect upon what they have left behind and, usually, imagine what lies beyond. It is not surprising, then, that Rossetti's "The Convent Threshold" would describe a woman paused quite literally on the threshold between the convent and the world outside it.

The poem has received little critical attention other than the discussions by two of her biographers, Lona Mosk Packer and Jan Marsh. Packer argues that the poem is spoken by "a nun [who] is forced to choose between love and the cloister, and ... her choice is the renunciation of love and the vow of celibacy" (127); Marsh notes that "The Convent Threshold" also retells the "story ... of the love between Heloise and Abelard, taken without acknowledgement from Alexander Pope's version 'Eloisa to Abelard'" (214). When we consider Rossetti's tendencies in her other liminal poems to depict a speaker transiting from one state to another – usually from life through death and then the afterlife – we can assume that the speaker of "The Convent Threshold" is not