

Christina Rossetti's "Maiden-Song"

The Regal Power of Humility and Patience

When Christina Rossetti published her second volume of poems, *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, reviewers singled out "Maiden-Song" for special comment: its "melody and beauty with which melody itself can be described" would draw readers to the whole volume;¹ this poem of three young maids in springtime was "so filled with the freshest melody and purest, gayest innocence that the happy lays of Blake's singer, 'Piping down the valleys wild, / Piping songs of pleasant glee,' were hardly happier or purer."² Subsequent commentary offers a similar interpretation. Rossetti's first biographer, Mackenzie Bell, describes the poem as a "sprightly lyric . . . full of joy and unshadowed by grief."³ William Michael Rossetti, as editor of his sister's poems, provides a note that refers to "Maiden-Song" as "a simple lighthearted poem—a kind of cross between the tone of a fairy-tale and that of a nursery-song, each of them sweetened into poetry."⁴ Lona Mosk Packer points to the poem's "note of genial tranquillity," contrasting its "radiantly serene" tone to the "bitter realism and subdued fury" of "A Triad," another Rossetti poem about women and love.⁵ For Lionel Stevenson, "Maiden-Song" is "Rossetti's freshest and gayest fairy tale of love," and he concludes a "little girls' make-believe of grandeur has seldom been so charmingly captured in rhyme."⁶

This emphasis on sweet sound and innocent sense is characteristic of much Rossetti criticism. It has even led some critics to conclude that Rossetti's poetry, although of high lyrical quality, is nevertheless lacking in intellectual depth. Stuart Curran concludes his article on Rossetti's lyric voice by referring to the lines of "Sleeping At Last" as "lines that reveal her very best: shallow, melodious, totally at ease with themselves, and, as ever, unpretentious."⁷ Stevenson actually sees the lyrical quality as dependent upon what he regards as her poetry's lack of substance: "Christina Rossetti's poetry comes closer to the pure lyric mode than that of any other

Victorian, male or female, for the obvious reason that it contains a minimum of intellectual substance."⁸ Fortunately, recent articles on Rossetti such as Jerome McGann's "The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti"⁹ indicate that there is a revival of interest in her work underway that promises to counter such reductive views.

To contribute to this reconsideration, I should like to argue that in "Maiden-Song" Rossetti offers far more than a pleasant-sounding description of pretty maids. Indeed, by combining the secular imagery of the fair maid of fairy tale and ballad with the religious imagery of the Bride of Christ and the City of the New Jerusalem, Rossetti creates a complex metaphor for the self that functions on three levels: as we read of Margaret, her sisters, and their "marriage mirth," we see imaged forth the self as it relates to the darker underside of its own nature, the individual as she relates to the larger community (including both family and mortal lover), and the soul as it relates to the Divine Spouse of Souls. Moreover, in weaving this rich pattern of metaphor, Rossetti fashions a striking variation on the theme of the waiting woman, a figure so often found in nineteenth-century poetry and painting, and especially popular among the Pre-Raphaelites of her immediate circle.¹⁰ In Margaret, we see depicted a waiting woman whose humility and patience actually make her a vital part of the world; she is not powerless and passive, withdrawn into a barren world of shadows with nothing to do but wait for a lover to bring her life. On the contrary, Margaret is a source of light and life, a royal figure equal to a king.

In the very first stanza, Rossetti¹¹ sets Margaret apart from her sisters (5-9):

One was tall Meggan,
And one was dainty May,
But one was fair Margaret,
More fair than I can say,
Long ago and long ago.