

TRANS-SPECIES EMPATHY AND HUMAN SALVATION IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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Kathryn Burlinson asserted in 1999 that Christina Rossetti was not “withdrawn and conservative” but a “dissident Victorian” based largely on her “protests against the exploitation of animals” (171). Several literary critics during the past decade have taken Burlinson’s mantle to further examine Rossetti’s treatment of animals in her creative and devotional writings. With this newfound interest in Rossetti’s take on the non-human, a discussion has emerged among critics regarding how exactly Rossetti viewed humankind in relation to animals. While Rossetti cared deeply about the welfare of animals and strategically encouraged empathy and altruistic actions towards them, a close reading of her work reveals that she was primarily concerned with how human treatment of animals affects human salvation.

Burlinson portrays Rossetti as being relatively, though not completely, egalitarian in regard to animals and argues that her stance towards animals was consistent with her generally egalitarian political views. Burlinson locates Rossetti in a tradition of seventeenth-century male, religious poets who see humans as the most significant beings on earth and see nature as existing for humanity’s purposes. Yet, Burlinson cites texts where Rossetti depicts nature “as physical matter not to be exploited, conquered, or destroyed, but rather nurtured and protected” (174). Burlinson explains: “Without entirely abandoning the conception of hierarchy within the animal world..., Rossetti emphasizes that all creatures have a right to space in the world and humans have a responsibility to protect them” (177-78). Even while highlighting what amounts to a model of human stewardship towards animals in Rossetti, Burlinson concedes that Rossetti “is not always a sensitive champion for the helpless” (187). Her parabolic readings and interpretations of the animal world often blind her to the biological. Reading animals so that humans may learn spiritual lessons is often the primary goal when Rossetti evokes animals in her writing.

Nearly twenty years after the appearance of Burlinson’s essay, Jed Mayer