

THE AESTHETICS OF RENUNCIATION IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *SING-SONG*

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An illustrated book of nursery rhymes, *Sing-Song* marks Christina Rossetti's first foray into children's literature. After publication in 1872, it immediately received critical and public acclaim. Ford Madox Brown praised the successful collaboration of Rossetti and Arthur Hughes: "the poems are about Christina's finest things, and Hughes the first of living book-illustrators" (Rossetti, *Family Letters* 207). Mary F. Thwaite described it as "perhaps the best of the many charming nursery rhyme books of the nineteenth century," and invited comparisons with William Blake when commenting on Rossetti's children's poetry in general: "There had been nothing of the quality of her lyrics for the young since *Songs of Innocence*" (qtd in Sickbert 385, 407).¹ Also acknowledging the Blakean dialectic in Rossetti's depiction of both nature and human life, Roderick McGillis observed that "there is a dark side to the pastoral innocence of *Sing-Song*" (221). Critics have shown the influence of Blake, Edward Lear, and Lewis Carroll on *Sing-Song*, noting how different the four poets are from so much of the verse for children that is generally marked by moral earnestness. Even Robert Louis Stevenson's celebrated *A Child's Garden of Verses* includes poems entitled "Good and Bad Children" and "Whole Duty of Children." Rossetti's realistic and restrained representations differ from the sentimental approach, as she refrains from reinforcing morals while making a conscious effort to promote an empathetic understanding of the world. Her "nonsense" poems display light gaiety and humour, an imaginative sympathy, and an all-inclusive love for nature and people. Her approach is distinct, for instance, from the poems of Lear, the best-known poet of literary nonsense, who presents people and incidents distant from children's daily experiences, and writes nonsensical limericks intended primarily to cause surprise.

Virginia Sickbert's perceptive analysis shows the complexity of Rossetti's engagement with Victorian social conventions. Rather than exploit the stock themes of children's poetry,² Rossetti "transforms common themes and genres