

## CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *MONNA INNOMINATA*: THE AMATORY LOVE SONNET SEQUENCE AS PALIMPSEST

Sharon Bickle

What is immediately noticeable about Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* (1881) is the dense network of intertextuality with which she assaults the reader. Dantean and Petrarchan epigraphs in their original, untranslated Italian preface each of the fourteen sonnets which comprise the larger "sonnet of sonnets" and, as William Whitla notes, themselves represent allusions to other, older literary figures and works (103). The Medieval troubadour tradition is invoked in a prose introduction and biblical imagery and references feature prominently throughout. Rossetti places a lengthy allusion to the biblical figure of Esther centrally at the volta of her love sonnet sequence. The intertextual material is not synthesised into a seamlessly new text; rather it obtrudes through the text, as strikingly unassimilated as the clash of Italian language epigraphs with English poetry. Examined in this way, the sequence is structured as a layering of competing texts, visually and textually suggesting the original medieval definition of the palimpsest.

Around these eruptions are the texts created by Rossetti herself: not a single text with a single voice, but a prose introduction with a semi-historical perspective, the song of the monna innominata herself, and the invisible poetry of the male poet-lover with which the female poet interacts to produce a dialogue in which the reader hears only half of the conversation. Rossetti presents us with a female text in the female poet-lover's song that is not seamlessly coherent, but rather punctuated with these other texts and eruptions which, I want to suggest, are clearly gendered. It is in the interaction between male and female gendered texts, metonymically represented within the sequence by the figures of the male and female poet-lovers, that Rossetti asserts her emergent female poetic voice.

The idea of reading Rossetti's sonnet sequence as a palimpsest was introduced by Antony Harrison in his *Christina Rossetti in Context* (1988). Originally a medieval term, a palimpsest is a manuscript from which an earlier text has been completely or partially effaced in order to be overwritten by a new text (Baldick 158). Harrison applies Claus Uhlig's idea that forms and genres progress toward metaliterature by an increasingly self-conscious use of intertextuality (149). This process creates within texts a palimpsest which reveals historical tensions and works against the idea of a single coherent text. Harrison, however, defines Rossetti's use of intertextuality as parodic, arguing that Rossetti uses "parodic reworkings of literary palimpsests, their forms and themes" (149) to highlight problems with contemporary social values.<sup>1</sup> For Harrison, Rossetti uses intertextuality to transvalue the texts she adopts through an "ornamental but weighty Victorian bricolage" (160). What Harrison does not see, and what I would

<sup>1</sup>Indeed, Harrison goes so far as to claim that Rossetti provides a notable exception to Uhlig's view that literary works which draw consciously on intertextual links are unconcerned with "social reality" (149).

like to propose in this paper, is that Rossetti's use of these different traditions is not a process of appropriation but negotiation. Rossetti creates an intraliterary space within which the voice of her emergent female poet can modify and is modified by the male-dominated tradition of the sonnet sequence itself.

At the centre of this argument is the notion that *Monna Innominata* is predominantly dealing with negotiation between gendered texts. Rossetti grounds her originary, overwritten texts—the poetry of Dante and Petrarch (represented vestigially in the sequence by the epigraphs) and the troubadour tradition which is contextualized in the introduction—in male-dominated legitimacy. In their untranslated Italian and individually attributed to the great men, the epigraphs are clearly separate from the female text. The introduction creates a sense of the history and authority of the sonnet form: Dante is referred to as “‘Altissimo poeta,’ the highest poet” (Whitla 87), and Petrarch is “a great ‘tho inferior bard.’” Barrett Browning, dead for the past twenty years, is invoked as “the Great Poetess of our time,” but having included Barrett Browning with the great male sonneteers, Rossetti both admires and dismisses her as a specific exception. Barrett Browning is isolated from the company of the great men, and equally from the *donne innominate*, by her emphasis on “feeling.”

In contrast to the male-dominated sonnet tradition of the underlying texts is the suggestion that Rossetti is uncovering a latent community of female poets. The introduction sets up the idea of a “bevy of unnamed ladies” who may have shared their lover's poetic talent, setting its own unnamed lady—*Monna* instead of *Donna*, a word which Betty Flowers interprets as “a shortened form of ‘madonna’” (16) with its religious overtones of motherliness—at their head, and hints at a hidden historical continuity of women poets. This sense of continuity is reinforced by the interaction between the speaker of the introduction and the female poet-lover of the sequence. While the gender of the introduction's speaker is not made explicit, it has been generally assumed to be the voice of Rossetti, but beyond this the speaker clearly identifies with the plight of the women of the sonnet sequence. Rossetti's implied purpose in the introduction, to imagine “many a lady as sharing her lover's poetic aptitude,” and the actualising of the line “had such a lady spoken for herself” in the sequence suggests the relationship with the *monna innominata* is a kind of translation: the woman who cannot speak is interpreted through the voice of poet who does. This act of translation, as well as suggesting a continuity of female poetry, also sets up an intraliterary space in the way that translated texts belong to the time of neither translator nor original writer, but rather indeterminately to both.

Rossetti, therefore, sets up a juxtaposition of male and female gendered texts which underlie the sequence. It is ironic that she gestures in the introduction towards the idea of a possible female poetic tradition overwritten by prevailing male authority, yet *Monna Innominata* constructs a male text overwritten by a female text. These overlaying texts are metonymically represented within the sonnet sequence by the figures of the male and female poet-lovers. Presenting the male lover of the sonnet sequence as a poet creates an illusion of two lovers, two beloveds, and two artists. That this invisible male poet-lover is the inheritor of Dante and Petrarch is suggested at a

very basic level by the maintenance of nominally conventional gender positions: the one who woos is male and the one wooed is female. Further, when the octave of the larger sonnet charts the female poet-lover's progress from disillusionment to confrontation with the male poet-lover at the ineffectualness of his expressions of love, this reflects on a personal scale the action of the female text interrogating the traditions of the underlying male texts and finding them lacking. In the sestet of sonnets, the finality of the male poet-lover's absence graphically represents the failure of the love sonnet tradition—its inability to encompass maturity and old age. Thus the love relationship described in *Monna Innominata* recreates the larger confrontation which occurs between the gendered texts, as well as fulfilling the wider contradictory purpose of constructing a successful sonnet sequence.

The of sonnets deals, in terms of narrative, with the female poet-lover's disillusionment with her lover. However, the interrelationships which these sonnets set up with the male sonnet tradition through the epigraphs, and metonymically through the male poet-lover, focus this dissatisfaction into criticism of the tradition itself. The epigraphs delineate conventional reality, and the figure of the male poet-lover extends this and provides a link between the convention and the female text.

The epigraphs of the first three sonnets invoke the conventional truisms of the sonnet tradition: absence makes the heart fonder, true love is found at first sight, and reality is better than the dream. Sight, traditionally the privileged sense, is given particular emphasis in the Dantean epigraphs which preface the first two sonnets. These refer to a vision of two angels in Canto VIII of the *Purgatorio* in which Dante declares he "let hearing from my ears be banned, / Absorbed in gaze" (7-8), and calls upon the audience to "Sharpen thy sight well, reader"(19). Dante's epigraph in sonnet 2: "It was the hour which thaws the heart," is the first line of this Canto, and Petrarch's epigraph further ties in the first sight of the beloved: "I called to mind how I beheld you first."

By inference, the reader discovers in the first sonnet that the female poet-lover is situated within this conventional framework through her relationship with the male poet-lover. The octave of this sonnet deals with desire for the lover's presence, but at the volta this becomes a disturbing declaration of the male poet-lover's defining centrality as she declares that "one man is my world of all the men / This wide world holds; O love, my world is you" (7-8). The suggestion that he defines her world, that he is some kind of master creator is brought to fruition at the end of the sonnet, where she notes: "Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang / When life was sweet because you called them sweet" (13-14). Unravelling this, it seems that life was sweet because the songs were sweet—because he called them so. Life and the constructed song are associated and, it seems, manipulated by the male poet-lover. The life of love is one constructed by the male poet-lover, its sweetness fashioned by his word. Indeed, there may even be a whisper of the God-like when the female poet-lover speaks of the "heavenly days on which we meet" (12). Thus it is through her relationship with the male poet-lover that the female poet-lover situates herself within the sonnet convention, and through the epigraphs that the male poet-lover's inferred positioning is given the authority of male-dominated tradition.

It is from within this web of interrelationship that the female text questions the fundamental tenets of the sonnet sequence. Ambiguity is present even in the conventional desire for the lover's presence in sonnet one. She declares: "Come back to me who wait and watch for you:—" / Or come not yet, for it is over then, / And long it is before you come again" (1.1-3). The ambivalent subject of the second line makes it unclear whether the pleasure lies with the lover or with the waiting. In sonnet two she does not remember the first meeting, and undermines the importance of the conventional moment, asserting that: "it might be / Summer or Winter for aught I can say" (3-4), and later reflecting: "It seemed to mean so little" (12). Far from retrospectively imagining love at first sight, she deliberately admits the gap of time between the forgotten first meeting and the realisation of love. Sight, the privileged sense of the epigraphs, has betrayed her: "so blind was I to see, and to foresee" (6), and the power of the gaze as knowledge is questioned. The volta of the sonnet comes late, at line twelve, completing the overthrow of sight as the most important sense as the speaker's desire to recall is revealed, not as the first sight, but the first touch.

Overt criticism of the male-poet lover begins to emerge in sonnet three as the advantages of a dream companion lead to the conclusion, in the sestet, that if absence is the defining characteristic of the relationship, then contrary to Dante's declaration in the epigraph: "Oh shades, empty save in semblance," dream is the more satisfying state. She declares: "Thus only in a dream we are at one, / Thus only in a dream we give and take / The faith that maketh rich who take or give" (3.9-11). This criticism is forcefully carried into confrontation in the blatant competition of the octave of sonnet four:

I loved you first: but afterwards your love  
 Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song  
 As drowned the friendly cooings of my dove.  
 Which owes the other most? my love was long,  
 And yours one moment seemed to wax more strong;  
 I loved and guessed at you, you construed me  
 And loved me for what might or might not be—(4.1-7)

The references to "song" and "friendly cooings" suggest this competition is not about love but about its artistic portrayal in each poet's work, contrasting the relative merits of intensity and endurance. The emphasis is on the slippage of meaning between the lovers; she guesses at him but he "construes" her, interpreting or translating. She questions his role as sole interpreter of their love.

This questioning leads to a redefinition of love in the sestet, significantly positioned at the end of the first quatrain of sonnets, which posits love as a perfect knowing of each other:

For verily love knows not 'mine' or 'thine';  
 With separate 'I' and 'thou' free love has done,  
 For one is both and both are one in love:  
 Rich love knows nought of 'thine that is not mine';  
 Both have the strength and both the length thereof,  
 Both of us, of the love that makes us one. (8-14)

Rossetti has specifically divided rich or free love from literary love with its mine/thine, I/thou binaries, the language they both use as poets. She points out the shortcomings of poetic love in adequately encompassing the emotion, "weights and measures do us both a wrong" (4.8), and sets up an ideal "real" love in the extremely eloquent image of "rich love." As the female speaker reveals the contrived nature of the male poet-lover's brand of artistic love, her revelation echoes back along the chain of association. In confronting the male poet-lover, the female poet-lover directly attacks the authority of the sonnet tradition by questioning the definition of love at the very heart of the male text.

The very presence of the epigraphs within the sequence continually reminds the reader that there is an artistic dialogue taking place which partakes of the criticisms raised by the female text. Whitla notes that all of the epigraphs deal with literary figures or characters (103); and Susan Conley has pointed out that Rossetti's introduction centres Dante and Petrarch within a "literary discourse on fame" (375). That discourse, represented by the male poet-lover, is exposed by the female text as deeply flawed. In this way the female poet-lover's disillusionment with her lover identifies a wider problem with literary love itself, which is presented as mere semblance. This is achieved through the relationship established with the epigraphs, but more strongly by the metonymic relationship with the male poet-lover.

The questioning of the male poet-lover, and by association the male text, continues into the second quatrain of sonnets. In these sonnets, however, Rossetti examines the role of woman in terms of her literary vocation of serving her lover, and clearly finds it wanting. In contrasting the relative merits of serving a lover with serving God, the sequence builds towards its volta in which biblical tradition is gendered to provide a model of the woman who redeems in Esther.

Sonnets five, six and seven follow a similar structure, beginning with declarations of love which then turning toward the narrowness of woman's vocation within the confines of the sonnet structure and the greater benefit of God's love in the sestet. In sonnet five, the female poet-lover questions the limited role assigned her which is summed up by a redundantly repetitive and cyclical return to the phrase: "To love you." In sonnet six, in an argument laden with rhetoric, the female poet-lover expands on this, and derives from the assertion that "I love, as you would have me, God the most" (6.2) the logical conclusion that "I cannot love you if I love not Him, / I cannot love Him if I love not you" (13-14). Sonnet seven continues with a thrust and parry kind of support for the argument adopted in sonnet six, in which the female poet-lover seemingly retreats from the octave's triumphant assertions on heavenly love: "And who has found love's citadel unmanned? / And who hath held in bonds love's liberty?"

(6-7) at the volta: “My heart’s a coward tho’ my words are brave” (8). Yet this retreat becomes false modesty as she concludes by reinforcing her argument with the superiority of “his Book” over the male lover’s art.

The octave ends with the Esther sonnet in which the biblical figure of Esther adds another layer to the palimpsest. In the bible, Esther is a beautiful young Jewish girl who is brought to the palace of the King who falls in love with her literally on sight and makes her Queen. Called upon to stop a planned massacre of her people, Queen Esther appears unannounced before the King to plead with him. Esther’s words as given in the sonnet are almost exactly the same as they appear in King James’s Bible: “and so I will go in unto the King, which is not according to the law; and *if I perish, I perish*” (Esther 4.16; my emphasis). This should have resulted in her death, but the King is again struck by her beauty and grants the Jews the right to protect themselves. While the words are not rendered entirely accurately within the sonnet, Esther’s use of direct speech clearly flags the use of another voice in the text, one that will not be assimilated into the sequence.

Esther’s voice offers an alternative to the limited vocation of woman within the sonnet sequence. Her story is an odd focus for an amatory love sonnet sequence: it is not a love story, and thematically it deals with redemption on a wide scale. Esther acts out of love for her people, not her husband. In this way she becomes a model for the woman who serves God. Unlike the drama of desire that is carried out in the traditional sonnet sequence, Esther’s desire exceeds the limits of the sonnet sequence, opening up the possibility of a female vocation beyond the unattractive limitations of the sonnet sequence. In the final tercet, Rossetti foregrounds the higher purpose that will be revealed in the sequence’s sestet: “If I might take my life so in my hand, / And for my love to Love put up my prayer, / And for love’s sake by Love be granted it” (12-14). In the distinction between love and Love, Rossetti, through mere capitalisation, implies a significant widening of meaning of the term. In this way biblical tradition, represented by the figure of Esther, becomes gendered as female within the sequence, and is set up in opposition to the limitations of the male text. The redemptive female becomes the model through which the female poet-lover works to claim a space for herself as poet.

Esther’s redemptive qualities are specifically linked in the sonnet to the sense of her beauty as something which she herself authors. This is particularly noticeable in the grammatically ambiguous phrase “she made her fair”—made her, not made herself. Direct intervention in her own depiction is continually reinforced, and there is not a single passive verb describing her: she smiles, puts on, takes, spreads abroad her beauty, traps, vanquishes and builds. In making herself, and in making her face, Esther has a powerful role in authoring herself. This role is strengthened by the performative nature of her own speech: Esther’s bravery is as much in her statement as in her actions. Rossetti’s syntactical rearrangement of the biblical order of Esther’s speech, “I, if I perish, perish” (8.1) instead of “If I perish, I perish,” (Esther 4:16) brings to prominence the self-referential “I” as the first word of the sonnet. It is through the figure of Esther that the idea of the female poet and the redemptive woman come together and provide Rossetti with a model for the emergent female poetic voice.

In the sestet of the sequence, the narrative describes the female speaker abandoned by her lover and left to a lonely old age. This absence of the male poet-lover represents the sonnet tradition's preoccupation with youth and beauty and its inability to accommodate these changed conditions of life. The reliance on youth is made explicit in the sequence in sonnet twelve, which is prefaced by Petrarch's "Love comes in the beautiful face of this Lady." In this sonnet the female poet-lover recommends her lover seek out other women, an action which is rendered acceptable in the sestet supposedly because of the closeness of the lovers. Yet the image used at the end of the octave rather suggests that she is actually closer to the other woman than to the male lover: "Yea, since your riches make me rich, conceive / I too am crowned, while bridal crowns I weave, / And thread the bridal dance with jocund pace" (6-8). The female poet-lover and her subsequent replacement blend together under the bridal crown, two of a replaceable and indistinguishable parade of potentially endless youthful female faces.

In terms of the sequence as palimpsest, while the epigraphs are still present in the sestet of the sequence and still operate as elements of an obtruding male text, the withdrawal of the male poet-lover radically changes the composition of the text. A large component of what I have suggested relates to the removal of the male text and the sense of a created vacuum palpable in the sequence. The female texts that remain (the voice of the female poet-lover, biblical allusion which I have argued becomes gendered through the figure of Esther, and the voice of the female translator) are still identifiable as a palimpsest, but the central interplay is gone. This allows, for the first time, a higher degree of coherence to emerge.

In the sestet of sonnets—the sonnets in which the male poet-lover is gone—Rossetti's speaker leaves behind the domestic concerns which characterise the larger octave to dwell upon the importance of faith. This change is heralded by two images of abandonment in sonnet nine; the octave describes her lowest point as thinking of him in the first quatrain gives way to an awareness of her own lack: "so apt to fall, / . . . so apt to shrink, so apt to flee, / Apt to lay down and die (ah, woe is me!)" (5-7). In the sestet, however, this impoverished secular love is enriched by the recognition of a spiritual component:

And yet not hopeless quite nor faithless quite,  
Because not loveless; love may toil all night,  
But take at morning; wrestle till the break  
Of day, but then wield power with God and man. (9.9-14)

The contrast between octave and sestet—the male poet-lover's love and the love that is neither hopeless nor faithless—anticipates the larger sestet's displacement of the power of the male poet-lover's love in favour of a new definition of love which is inextricably bound up with faith and God.

In sonnet ten, the association of love and faith is emphasised again as faith is personified in the octave as a runner in a vertical race:

Faith runs with each and rears an eager face,  
Out runs the rest, makes light of everything,  
Spurns earth, and still finds breath to pray and sing.  
While Love, ahead of all uplifts his praise. (10.3-6)

Time “flies,” hope is tired, life “waned,” but faith accompanies each and, interestingly, as opposed to the speaker’s fate at the start of sonnet nine, none are abandoned. While faith “outruns the rest,” love is “ahead of all,” which raises questions about which is the more elevated—faith or love—and whether there is indeed any difference between the two.

The contrast between the limitations of the male poet-lover’s love and God’s more powerful love becomes more obvious as the female speaker is revealed as marginalised by the male poet-lover in sonnet eleven, in which Rossetti proclaims that it is his words which will live on, not hers:

Many in aftertimes will say of you  
‘He loved her’—while of me what will they say?  
Not that I loved you more than just in play,  
For fashion’s sake as idle women do. (1-4)

In this sonnet Rossetti sets up a distinction between speaking and being heard. Implicit in her reasoning is that preference will be given to the male opinion, suggesting that woman is more ignored than silent. Rossetti expands upon the theme of the ineffectualness of literary love that she introduced in the first four sonnets of the poem, with her accusations that he “construes” her. She deconstructs the male poet-lover’s power and reveals him to be a false authority—the true authority is God, the biblical God of sonnet thirteen, “Without Whose Will one lily doth not stand, / Nor sparrow fall at his appointed date” (3-4). Against this omnipotence, Rossetti’s male poet-lover is consciously exposed, “helpless to help and impotent to do, / Of understanding dull, of sight most dim” (11-12). He has the authority of the masters, Dante and Petrarch, but the female voice continually refutes his power. In this way Rossetti questions the power of the male poet-lover to exceed the limitations of his position, to render insignificant the ravages of age and physical decay.

Sonnet thirteen also provides the implied answer to the repeated question of the final sonnet: “Youth and beauty gone, what else remains?” The sequence ends with a sense of enclosure, and of condemnation of woman as artwork and her use within the sonnet sequence tradition:

The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,  
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;  
The silence of a heart which sang its songs  
While youth and beauty make a summer morn,  
Silence of love that can not sing again. (10-14)

Her song complete, the female poet-lover lapses into silence, yet ironically the entire sestet of the sequence charts the ascendancy of the female text as the male text falls into silence. Even the desolate silence of the female poet-lover at the end of the sequence must itself be questioned, coming as it does after the assertions of God's strength in the penultimate sonnet. This questioning, I want to suggest, arises from the voice of the translator, and it is finally Rossetti's voice that supersedes even that of the female poet-lover. Thus even while the female poet-lover sings her last song and expires in silence, the promise of the introduction—that female poetic aptitude will emerge—is fulfilled and we are left with a surprisingly successful sonnet sequence.

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