

“Like two pigeons in one nest”: Salvific Sisterhood in Christina Rossetti’s Poetry

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Abstract

Bird-related imagery abounds in Christina Rossetti's poetry, notably in her most famous work, *Goblin Market* (1862), a poem highlighting the power of sisterly love. The salvific nature of sisterhood on display in this poem appears elsewhere throughout Rossetti's oeuvre; I argue that Rossetti mediates her conception of sisterhood through the Classical myth of Procne and Philomela, two sisters who transform into birds when escaping to freedom.

My first chapter explores the many factors influencing Rossetti's vocabulary of birds as sisterly figures, drawing on childhood nursery rhymes and poetry by her own father. I track Rossetti's development as a poet through her positions as a sister and daughter in the Rossetti household, focusing on her poem "*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*" (1865). My second chapter provides an analysis of *Goblin Market* that showcases Rossetti's understanding of sisterhood as a powerful, salvific force that can lead to freedom. My final chapter broadens Rossetti's definition of sisterhood to include artistic sisters; one such sister, the focus of "In An Artist's Studio" (1856), is Elizabeth Siddal, whom the Rossettis commonly referred to as a dove. The contrast between the passive dove and the active swallow is on display in "Songs in a Cornfield" (1864) and "The Lowest Room" (1856), with the latter also focusing on the plight of the woman writer.

I argue that the recurring vocabulary of sisterly birds is shaped by Procne and Philomela, about whom Rossetti likely read in Thomas Keightley's *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy* (1831), especially regarding the freedom with which sisterhood provides the women in each poem. Procne and Philomela's transformations into a nightingale and a swallow allow them to liberate themselves from the masculine limitations placed upon them. In Rossetti's poetry, regardless of whether this bird-like freedom is familial, personal, or artistic, in her lexicon, it is attributed to the strength of sisterhood.

Résumé

La poésie de Christina Rossetti est pleine d'images d'oiseaux, notamment dans son œuvre célèbre, *Goblin Market* (1862), un poème soulignant le pouvoir de l'amour entre sœurs. La nature salvatrice de la sororité exposée dans ce poème apparaît ailleurs dans l'œuvre de Rossetti; je soutiens que Rossetti transmet sa conception de la sororité à travers le mythe classique de Procné et Philomèle, deux sœurs qui se transforment en oiseaux lorsqu'elles s'échappent vers la liberté.

Mon premier chapitre explore les nombreux facteurs influençant le vocabulaire de Rossetti sur les oiseaux en tant que figures fraternelles, en s'appuyant sur des comptines d'enfance et sur la poésie de son propre père. Je retrace le développement de Rossetti en tant que poète à travers ses positions de sœur et de fille dans la maison des Rossetti, en me concentrant sur son poème « *Italia, Io Ti Saluto !* » (1865). Mon deuxième chapitre propose une analyse de *Goblin Market* qui met en valeur la compréhension de Rossetti de la sororité comme une force puissante et salvatrice qui peut conduire à la liberté. Mon dernier chapitre élargit la définition de la sororité de Rossetti pour y inclure les sœurs artistes; l'une de ces sœurs, au centre de « *In An Artist's Studio* » (1856), est Elizabeth Siddal, que les Rossetti appelaient communément une colombe. Le contraste entre la colombe passive et l'hirondelle active est mis en évidence dans « *Songs in a Cornfield* » (1864) et « *The Lowest Room* » (1856), ce dernier se concentrant également sur la situation critique de la femme écrivain.

Je soutiens que le vocabulaire récurrent des oiseaux sœurs est façonné par Procné et Philomèle, dont Rossetti a probablement lu dans *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy* (1831) de Thomas Keightley, en particulier en ce qui concerne la liberté que la sororité offre aux femmes dans chaque poème. Les transformations de Procné et Philomèle en rossignol et en

hirondelle leur permettent de se libérer des limitations masculines qui leur sont imposées. Dans la poésie de Rossetti, que cette liberté d'oiseau soit familiale, personnelle ou artistique, dans son lexique, elle est attribuée à la force de la sororité.

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Introduction

Christina Georgiana Rossetti once wrote to her brother William: “I wish it were something better, but don’t despise the love even a sister has to offer” (CGR 124 to WMR in Harrison 1: 139). The letter dates back to 1860, following the abrupt end of William’s engagement to Henrietta Rintoul; in this time of overwhelming despair, Christina¹ employed the greatest tool at her disposal: her sisterly love. The power of sisterhood is on display throughout Rossetti’s oeuvre, most famously featuring in her 1862 poem *Goblin Market*, wherein she highlights the bond between sisters as a salvific force. This poem is one of many that focuses on sisterhood and explores the ways in which women can harness its power to accomplish great things. Born in 1830 to parents of Italian-English descent, Christina Rossetti was the youngest of four children: Maria Francesca, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael all became accomplished artists in their own right. Rossetti’s position as the last in a line of talented family members not only provided her with ample sources for artistic inspiration but furthermore primed her for entrance into the Victorian literary scene.

In 1848, a group of English artists created the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a collective whose purpose was to encourage a return to the qualities and practices of Quattrocento Italian art. Visual elements of this style included bright colours, complex imagery, and deeply detailed backgrounds. Among the Brotherhood’s founders were Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, and the group as a whole prioritized engaging with the work of previous artists through the practices of history painting and mimesis. The group founded a periodical, *The Germ*, for which William served as editor, and registered their discussions in the *Pre-Raphaelite Journal*. As both founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the sons of an Italian exile

¹ In instances when I am referring to different Rossettis in the same sentence, I have chosen to refer to Christina Rossetti as simply ‘Christina’ to ensure clarity. Any use of ‘Rossetti’ in the text refers exclusively to Christina Rossetti, except for within citations for others’ work.

living in London, Dante Gabriel and William were both concerned with transformation, and their work reflects this interest. As the Brotherhood grew, adding more members and expanding their theoretical and artistic horizons, they began to affect the literary scene in London. Jan Marsh's *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (1994) explores the ways in which the Rossetti brothers' work with the PRB influenced Christina's early writing career. Instating Dante Gabriel as de facto leader of the group, the Brotherhood often met at the Rossetti family home at 50 Charlotte Street, London, wherein "a glow of general exhilaration seems to have been cast over the whole band, in which Christina was also caught" (Marsh CR 87); though the Rossetti parents and daughters were left behind when the men retreated upstairs to officially mark the commencement of their meetings, Christina was nevertheless able to reap the benefits of casual conversation with these influential artists. Furthermore, "though she could not join in directly, her vicarious participation was considerable, especially since neither Gabriel nor William were accustomed to excluding women from general conversation" (Marsh CR 88), and they often considered Christina as not only their blood sister, but their unofficial 'Pre-Raphaelite Sister'.

The fact that Rossetti's participation in the events and discussions of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood remained unofficial is crucial in understanding the social standing in which female artists found themselves in Victorian London. Elsie B. Michie's *Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference, and the Victorian Woman Writer* (1993) offers a clearer description of women's navigation of the literary scene at the time. Victorian culture at large focused on the existence of two separate societal spheres, one masculine and one feminine: the life of a writer strictly belonged to the former, while a domestic life fit into the latter. While it was considered inappropriate for a woman to attempt to breach the boundaries of the feminine sphere, artistic success was dependent to a considerable extent on involvement in the masculine

sphere. Michie acknowledges that “in the nineteenth century to become a professional writer was to enter a territory implicitly defined as masculine” (Michie 2): women writers faced the challenge of successfully balancing their involvement in both the masculine and feminine spheres of their societies, ensuring that they were ‘masculine’ enough to offer their writing some public credibility but ‘feminine’ enough to nevertheless not be accused of shirking their duties as women in favour of joining the literary world. Like Rossetti, many women writers found a way into artistic communities by allowing the men around them to act as guides: “the figures who surrounded and influenced them as they wrote, the individuals who functioned as mentors, literary role models, and gatekeepers to the world of publishing, tended to be men, either family members or literary professionals, often both at once” (Michie 2). The fact that Rossetti’s own home was the physical hub of so much work automatically offered her access to a world that was strictly off-limits for the vast majority of Victorian women.

Though she was physically kept from the meetings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and left to “dominoes, chess and other sedate pursuits” (Marsh CR 88), Rossetti’s brothers’ first-hand involvement provided her with rare opportunities to showcase her talent and fast-track her work to distribution in the public sphere. Angela Leighton, in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing against the Heart* (1992), calls attention to the positive encouragement that Rossetti received from her brothers, most notably from fellow poet Dante Gabriel, “who first urged his sister to publish her poems in *The Germ*, who made emendations to her work and read her proofs, who managed, and sometimes mismanaged, her financial dealings with publishers and who remained her closest, though not always her best, literary confidant” (Leighton 148). Dante Gabriel often acted as editor of his sister’s poems, encouraging her to pursue her talent and hone her skill. He did not see her as a rival in the literary world or the sales market, but rather a fellow

writer with whom he was in friendly, familial competition. If there was any rivalry between the two, it was one healthily and playfully shared by siblings. As is evidenced by his willingness to involve her in his own project, *The Germ*, Dante Gabriel was supportive of Christina's literary endeavours, but her particular position neither exempted her from facing the overall challenges of a female poet nor negated the more common fate of Victorian women writers, who were generally doomed to silence and obscurity.

Though some men were willing to share their literary resources with the women in their lives, there was—and there still remains—a significant gap between artistic opportunities for male and female writers. Regardless of the extent to which men were aware of and actively participating in creating this gap, women writers constantly faced injustice and inequality at the hands of gatekeeping male figures in artistic spaces. Dante Gabriel sending Christina's poems to *The Germ*, for example, did not negate his general exclusion of her from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood itself. Two things can therefore simultaneously be true: while certain men helped women writers break into the patriarchal Victorian literary sphere, they nevertheless benefited from the exclusionary and misogynistic system that built this sphere: “although these male mentors were supportive, encouraging the women artists they lived with or whose work they published to write, each man also stood in and, in some sense, stood *for* a literary realm that excluded the nineteenth-century woman writer because of her gender” (Michie 3). As a result, even the most supportive of male writers continued to disregard their female colleagues purely based on gender, regardless of their artistic talent or capabilities.

At a party hosted by the poets Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning in 1856, Dante Gabriel was so unimpressed by Barrett Browning's conversational skills amongst members of the PRB and current Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson that he wrote to William Allingham:

“‘What a delightfully unliterary person Mrs B. is,’ Gabriel told Allingham, describing how she had left Tennyson with her husband, William and himself ‘to discuss the universe, and gave all her attention to some certainly not very exciting ladies in the next room’” (DGR to WA 8 Jan 1856 qtd. in Marsh *CR* 175). The division between the male and female spheres is strikingly evident here: as far as Dante Gabriel was concerned, Barrett Browning had a choice between asserting herself as a fellow literary figure by engaging in a philosophical discussion with the men, or retreating to a room occupied only by women, who must have exclusively been conversing about trivialities. Her choice cemented her place in not only society, but in the artistic world; to Dante Gabriel, though she may have been a writer, she was first and foremost a woman, and her choice of peers reinforced that fact. Marsh sarcastically points out what Barrett Browning’s decision meant for Victorian female poets at large: “here was a lesson for Christina: lady poets, however gifted, should put their duties to dull guests above the pleasures of discussing the universe with the Poet Laureate. Sadly, unlike their brothers, the Misses Rossetti were not invited to meet Tennyson and Browning—or they might have enjoyed withdrawing with Mrs B. and the other ladies, to talk about the universe too” (Marsh *CR* 175). Dante Gabriel’s inability to conceive of an equally interesting conversation happening between women is indicative of the male writer’s standing in Victorian literary spheres insofar as it relates to the female writer’s; however talented or intelligent a woman may have been, she was nevertheless a woman, and would therefore always be second-best to the men.

The dangers women writers faced when publicly contributing to literary spheres are indicative of a larger cultural understanding of Victorian femininity. Society deemed women the fairer of the two sexes; they were delicate, sensitive, and fragile, and therefore required shelter from the dangers of the outside world. According to Victorian men, a woman belonged in the

home not only because of the safety it provided, but because it was the place in which she would be of the most use: in the home, a woman could provide care to those dependent on her, such as her husband and children, as was her true purpose. *Of Queens' Gardens*, a speech given in 1864 by Pre-Raphaelite Brother John Ruskin, identifies the core differences that Victorian society believed existed between men and women. Whereas man “is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender[, whose] intellect is for speculation and invention” (Ruskin 20-1), woman’s “intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” (Ruskin 21). What separates the masculine sphere from the feminine for Ruskin are their respectively external and internal natures: a woman’s life is best spent indoors, whereas a man must venture outdoors, for he is adventurous in a way that a woman is not. The privacy afforded women works to silence them, preventing them from impacting the world around them: Ruskin asserts that a woman “is to be taught somewhat to understand the nothingness of the proportion which that little world in which she lives and loves, bears to the world in which God lives and loves” (Ruskin 28). Though she may have dominion over her private, feminine sphere, she must be aware of her inability to influence the public, masculine one.

Coventry Patmore’s narrative poem *The Angel in the House* (1854) is a literary example that showcases the general cultural perception of a Victorian woman’s societal standing. The poet-speaker of Patmore’s text reflects on his idealized version of a wife, and in creating her, details the qualities that he—and many fellow Victorian men—believes all women should aspire to have. Patmore’s speaker’s overall outlook, reflective as it is of a larger societal one, is that women exist to serve those around them: “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure” (Patmore Book I, Canto IX, I.1-2). Working against archetypes of this nature, Victorian women writers strove to represent themselves, and their fellow women, on their own terms,

subverting notions of being “too gentle” (Patmore Book I, Canto IX, I.9) or “pitying” (Patmore Book I, Canto IX, I.12) and instead highlighting their strength. Many contemporary critics argue that “Victorian women’s poetry [...] grows out of a struggle with and against a highly moralised celebration of women’s sensibility” (Leighton 3) for this very reason. Much as artistic sisterhoods responded to the male gatekeepers of cultural spheres, women’s writing rejected the false importance placed on female propriety in favour of literary creation.

Given the gender bias that Victorian women writers inherently faced in literary realms, they often began to seek collaboration with one another instead of with men. Sharing resources, providing commentary on one another’s texts, and publicly supporting work done by fellow women allowed female writers to form their own artistic communities with one another. In response to their exclusion from male spheres, women reinforced their femininity in their work by turning to one another as colleagues: “the extent to which isolated women writers might derive support from friendships with other female intellectuals has often been underestimated. They did not enter London literary society on the same terms as men, but they wrote to each other, sent copies of their books, and sometimes arranged meetings which led to friendships” (Hurst 58). By considering one another as not only fellow writers, but fellow female writers, these women were able to form more intimate connections with each other that ultimately benefited them both personally and professionally. In response to the exclusion they faced at the hands of men, many Victorian women writers sought community with one another by accepting the difference that male writers claimed existed between the genders and using it to their advantage.

In a letter to Dante Gabriel, Christina Rossetti famously wrote: “here is a great discovery, ‘Women are not Men,’ and you must not expect me to possess a tithe of your capacities, though I

humbly—or proudly—lay claim to family likeness” (CGR to DGR Apr 1870 qtd. in Marsh *CR* 390). Though she is writing ironically when comparing herself to her brother and his artistic success, she nevertheless calls attention to the difference between men and women that Dante Gabriel invests in given his earlier description of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. As Dinah Roe identifies in *The Rossettis in Wonderland: A Victorian Family History* (2011), Rossetti simultaneously writes from the positions of woman, poet, and sister: “this statement, full of contradictions and conflicting emotions, is classic Christina Rossetti. She is both humble and proud, complementary and derogatory, sarcastic and sincere. Her poetic ambition is obvious, but is clearly in conflict with her conservatism, and her beliefs about her duties as a woman and a sister” (Roe 264-5). Rossetti is one of many women writers who responded to exclusively male groups like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood by reinforcing their respective sisterhood.

Jan Marsh’s work regards the groups of women surrounding the men of the PRB as their own artistic community, made up of writers, painters, and models; Marsh dubs these women the ‘Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood’. Her book *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*, which accompanied the 2019 National Portrait Gallery exhibition that aimed to shed light on the oft-ignored work of these women, traces the ways in which female artists created their own communities in order to offer themselves the opportunities and resources that their male counterparts withheld from them. Rossetti’s poetry in particular, concerned as it is with notions of sisterhood in terms of both familial and artistic realms, showcases the ways in which the experience of female writers differs from that of male writers, and explores multiple meanings of the word ‘sister’ insofar as it pertains to Victorian women’s artwork. The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood within and about which Rossetti writes allows these women writers to feel more secure in both masculine and feminine spheres. It is due to this community of sisterhood that they are able to make art and participate in

artistic spaces without feeling as though they are risking their femininity or womanhood. Marsh's *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (1985) considers the implications of the term 'sisterhood' and identifies the need for this sense of community for Pre-Raphaelite women: "at the same time as they were encouraged to contribute and participate in the practice of art, which was generally reserved as a serious business for men, they were discouraged, set in a dependent relation, downgraded" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 193)². Though pursuing art may have been seen as a serious vocation for men, the opposite was true for women, as they were expected to remain in the domestic sphere; a woman's engagement in the masculine art world seemingly rendered her impure and unfeminine.

For women writers to consider themselves a sisterhood not only responded to exclusive brotherhoods, but furthermore provided support for any female artist who felt insecure in their womanhood as a result of her endeavours. There was no official group named the Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood, for the varying implications of the word 'sisterhood' would have attributed many connotations to the name; a public group of this nature would furthermore have placed these women, who were attempting to balance their involvement in two gendered worlds, squarely in the masculine sphere. Many women engaged in practices similar to those of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, albeit female-centric and on a smaller scale: "one very early female Pre-Raphaelite was Anna Mary Howitt, who projected an 'art sisterhood' on the lines of the PRB, providing mutual support for other women artists, although nothing substantial followed" (Marsh *PRS* 2019: 10). Communities of this nature were more private, and did not include public elements like periodicals such as *The Germ*, for part of the women's fear of impurity stemmed from public artistic participation.

² Given that Marsh's books *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (1985) and *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* (2019) have similar titles, and would be indistinguishable based on acronyms alone, I have included their respective publications years when citing them in order to differentiate them from one another.

Beyond explicit misogyny and exclusion at the hands of male artists, many women were cautious to engage publicly in literary spheres out of fear of seeming unfeminine, or worse, being labelled a ‘fallen’ woman. Derived from Eve’s fall from the Garden of Eden, a ‘fallen’ woman is, in its most literal sense, one who has engaged in an unwomanly, often sexual, act and is therefore impure. A fallen woman usually cannot be saved from her fallen status on her own, try as she might to repent for her sin and change whatever behaviour led to her fall; some sort of external interference is necessary. The most common Victorian example of a fallen woman was a prostitute, and notions of femininity were so delicate at the time that if a woman’s engagement in public was not mediated by the presence or authority of a man, she ran the risk of rendering her status equivalent to that of a sex worker. “The splitting of femininity into a negative public and a proper private image meant that a mid-Victorian woman could not fully participate in the market economy because to do so would make her an improperly public woman who resembled the prostitute” (Michie 174), and the general consensus was therefore that women belonged in the private space of the home, where they could remain under male control (be it that of their father, brother, uncle, or husband) and remain safe from the fate of the fallen woman. In general, “women writers were anxious to protect themselves from accusations of unwomanliness, domestic incompetence, and publicity-seeking” (Hurst 4) because it was virtually impossible to reverse the effects of the fallen woman status. Given the inherently public nature of artistry, many female artists risked becoming perceived as fallen.

Rossetti’s writing frequently engages the difficult balancing act that many female Victorian poets faced regarding the simultaneous maintenance of one’s literary career and one’s womanly duties. Her personal roles as woman, Christian, and poet were often at odds throughout her lifetime; it is as though she believed that certain elements of these roles were in conflict with

one another, and that it was impossible for her to accomplish goals in all aspects of her life. The central conflict of her text *Maude: Prose and Verse*, written in 1850 but edited by her brother William and published posthumously in 1896, directly places the aforementioned masculine literary and feminine domestic spheres at odds with each other. In the prefatory note to the text, William describes the story as a “Tale for Girls” (WMR 1)³ and laments its “juvenile performance” (WMR 2), but acknowledges that his sister’s fame renders its lack of quality irrelevant: “the literary reputation of Christina Rossetti is now sufficiently established to make what she wrote interesting to many persons—if not for the writing’s own sake, then for the writer’s” (WMR 2-3). Ironically, it is Rossetti’s existence in the public sphere, which men cautioned women from joining, that provided her with the fame that allows for *Maude*’s public distribution. This tension between public and private is central to the text: “her dilemma—how to reconcile feminine docility with desire for excellence and fame, or to find a role that combined piety, poetry, and love—is resolved only by Maude’s melodramatic death, as if to say literary ambition is incompatible with female fulfillment” (Marsh CR 109).

William remarks that his sister’s text is somewhat autobiographical and that Christina used Maude “to exhibit what she regarded as defects in her own character” (WMR 3), but he criticizes the severity with which Christina treated her. According to him, “the worst harm [Maude] appears to have done is, that when she had written a good poem, she felt it to be good” (WMR 4), which he claims does not merit such harsh judgement. His final verdict is in disagreement with Rossetti’s: “so far as my own views of right and wrong go, I cannot see that the much-reprehended Maude commits a single serious fault from title-page to finis” (WMR 5). The difference between William’s and Christina’s perceptions of Maude, representative as she is

³ All uses of ‘Rossetti’ in citations refer exclusively to Christina; for her siblings, I use initials in order to clearly differentiate between the four Rossettis.

of female poets, is indicative of the gendered differences between larger cultural perceptions of Victorian women writers. While women, like Christina, understood the dangers of Maude's acknowledgement of her own literary talent, William cannot conceive of why his sister presents Maude as compromised when her worst sin is poetic creation. Though his lack of understanding may be reflective of his support for not only his sister, but also for women writers in general, it is nevertheless a privilege of his not to consider the ways in which a woman's career as a writer may disturb her personal life, especially in regards to the ways in which society perceives her.

Rossetti was aware of the inequalities that women writers faced, and much of her poetry focuses on the experience of being a female poet, particularly in comparison to her male counterparts, like her brother Dante Gabriel. She often accesses these themes through the lens of sisterhood, considering not only her position as a blood sister to a major literary figure, but also as a symbolic Pre-Raphaelite sister to other Victorian women writers. Her major work, *Goblin Market* (composed in 1859, published in 1862), follows two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, as they undergo transformations after encountering goblin men peddling forbidden fruit. Their experience, wherein sisterhood is a salvific force that pulls a woman away from the traditional fate of the fallen woman, subverts the typical use of this topos and suggests that "fallen women are not only streetwalkers and sinners but also loving sisters" (Leighton 137). The same can be said for women writers; Rossetti's description of sisterhood in this poem applies not only to literal sisters like Lizzie and Laura but to artistic sisters like the ones with whom she surrounded herself in literary circles. Through the writing of this poem, she mediates her perception of the fallen woman through her descriptions of sisterhood and the many forms it can take.

I posit that Classical myth influences Rossetti's construction of sisterhood, especially in *Goblin Market*. More specifically, I identify many similarities between Rossetti's poem and the

ancient myth of Procne and Philomela, two sisters who, like Lizzie and Laura, experience a metamorphosis of their own after a traumatizing violation. Philomela takes on a Laura-like role when, after her sister's husband Tereus rapes her and cuts out her tongue, she becomes 'fallen'. Procne attempts to save Philomela in a fashion similar to Lizzie's rescue of Laura: Lizzie puts her fear aside and enters the goblin market to fetch a cure for her sister's illness, and Procne sacrifices her life as a mother and wife to protect her sister. While sisterhood in *Goblin Market* offers both women salvation from the fate of the fallen woman, Procne and Philomela share their fall; as a consequence, they transform into birds and flee the scene of their sins, in an eternal state of escape. The most famous Victorian retelling of the Procne and Philomela myth, published several years before *Goblin Market*, is from Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866), which includes the poem "Itylus", titled after Procne's son. Swinburne was a family friend of the Rossettis, and when Christina received her copy of his book, William "claimed that she pasted strips of paper over offensive passages in Swinburne's verse" (Marsh CR 357). An 1867 letter reveals Rossetti's concerns with his content: "apropos of Mr Swinburne, 'Atalanta' is noticeably free from one of his faults; but not to my regret from the irreligious taint, which is obvious enough" (CGR 322 to Ann Hayward in Harrison 1: 286). Rossetti must therefore have read the Procne and Philomela myth through the mediation of someone else's work.

Every critic of *Goblin Market* locates possible texts from which Rossetti may have drawn inspiration; as many identify, "Christina had grown up with Thomas Keightley's mythologies and Perrault's Fairy Tales, and [...] knew those collected by the Brothers Grimm or newly-minted by Hans Andersen, whom the Howitts had introduced to English readers" (Marsh CR 138). When analysing *Goblin Market* in particular, it is important to accord due credit to the heavy

influence that Rossetti's family members had on her early poetry; Rossetti never lived apart from her family, and though the men came and went, stable presences in her home for the majority of her life were her sister Maria, her mother Frances, and her maternal aunts, the Polidori sisters. The stories with which Rossetti grew up, alongside her three siblings, were passed down from her parents' own libraries. The work of Thomas Keighley in particular, whom Antony H. Harrison identifies as a "friend of Gabriele Rossetti" (Harrison 1: 20), was impactful on the siblings' upbringing. Bertram Rota's 1973 catalogue *Books from the Libraries of Christina, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael Rossetti* includes the following entry: "29 **Keightley** (Thomas). *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy, intended chiefly for the Use of Students. Twelve plates by W.H. Brooke. 1831. First Edition. Original cloth. Covers somewhat worn, but a good copy. Inscribed by Frances to her sister Charlotte Polidori*" (Rota 7). The inscription from Rossetti's mother to her aunt is indicative of the family's shared reading material, especially given that this catalogue is from almost a century after Rossetti's death; passing down important literary texts was a common practice within the Rossetti family. The fact that the book is an 1831 first edition, dated a year after Rossetti's birth, proves that she had access to it from early childhood, and therefore could have easily drawn from it when writing *Goblin Market*. The impact of Keightley's writing rang throughout the Rossetti siblings' upbringing: they knew him as the man "in whose books on European mythology Maria read the classical legends that startled Mrs Jervis" (Marsh CR 36), which speaks to the frequency with which they returned to his stories; if a young Maria could recite them to a family friend, they had clearly been subject to some rereading. Furthermore, the Rossetti parents clearly deemed them appropriate for not only their children's consumption, but most importantly, that of their daughters.

Thomas Keightley's initial intention for *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy* was to distribute it across universities as a text for students, allowing them access to Classical literature. Given that booksellers at the time were suspicious of the degree to which a collection of myths would be profitable, according to Keightley in the book's preface, it was only after receiving high praise as a "specimen-sheet" (Keightley 1831: vi)⁴ that he sent the text to a printing press for public distribution. His broader goal was for the collection "to be instrumental in diffusing juster ideas on the subject of Mythology than have hitherto prevailed in this country" (Keightley 1831: vi); as was the case with students, he wished to provide the English public with further access to Classical myths. Acknowledging that there was "a general prejudice against the Grecian Mythology on the score of delicacy" (Keightley 1831: vi), his text is full of active efforts to ensure that the stories are acceptable for the general reader's perusal, "so as not to offend" (Keightley 1831: vi). Nevertheless, Keightley's text does not fully submit to societal pressures regarding the alleged inappropriate nature of the myths; while he comments on the respect he has for delicacy, he simultaneously criticizes "false delicacy, that sure mark of a prurient imagination" (Keightley 1831: vi) and assures readers: "I view it with contempt, and never will do it homage" (Keightley 1831: vi). Given the original nature of the book as a student text, and its subsequent public distribution, Keightley was aware of the potentially widespread readership it would garner. When drawing on source texts while writing the collection, he therefore likely omitted certain unsavoury details (such as those regarding violence) in order to make the myths more palatable to a general audience. In doing so, however, he claims not to have changed the stories at their core at the risk of misrepresentation. He concludes the preface with the hopes that his work is "useful to the student and not unacceptable to the scholar, and from which the general

⁴ As is the case with Marsh, in my citations, I distinguish the two versions of Keightley's text by publication year given their similar titles.

reader may derive both information and pleasure” (Keightley 1831: viii). Keightley as author faced the challenge of balancing accuracy and propriety in order to render the text simultaneously entertaining and educational. It seems that as far as the Rossetti family was concerned, he was successful, for Christina and Maria were allowed to grow up reading the stories from his collection, which later influenced their own work.

Keightley made efforts to present the myths in a fashion that was acceptable for both student readers and Victorian readers at large. As a result, he omitted some of the more indelicate details of the stories; for example, a crucial aspect of the Procne and Philomela myth is Tereus’s violation of Philomela. This event is such a relevant catalyst that Stephanie McCarter’s 2022 translation of the Ovidian myth from the *Metamorphoses* bears the title “Tereus Rapes Philomela” (McCarter 167). Instead, the violation scene in Keightley’s version reads: “not long afterwards [the marriage between Tereus and Procne] he conceived a passion for Philomela; and pretending that Procne was dead, obtained her in marriage” (Keightly 1831: 342). This instance is notably the only one in which Keightley intentionally removes a violent detail, for the rest of the story follows Classical ones: Tereus still cuts out Philomela’s tongue, and the sisters still kill Itys and feed him to his father. Perhaps it is not the violence itself, but the fact that it is sexual in nature, that allowed Keightley to feel as though it was necessary to omit.

Keightley released a second edition of the book in 1838, simply entitled *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy. By Thomas Keightley*, the audience for which being the general public rather than students. In the preface to the 1838 version, the author claims that this second edition “is properly speaking a new work” (Keightley 1838: iii) as a result of the extensive rewriting that has come from the diligent research he has done since the release of the 1831 edition. He speaks to the unexpected influence that his original work has had on young minds,

and comments on the necessity of correcting significant errors in order to continue “impressing correct ideas in history and politics on the minds of those who will be future legislators, or occupy other important stations in society” (Keightley 1838: iv). In the 1838 edition, he strives for accuracy and truth, and nowhere in its preface does he mention delicacy or the lack thereof in his text. Keightley’s 1838 version of the Procne and Philomela myth provides not only a revamped retelling of the story, but also the original one from the 1831 text. Two notable differences involve details of Procne “becom[ing] desirous to see her sister” (Keightley 1838: 379), and the explicit mention of Tereus having “violated” (Keightley 1838: 379) Philomela while en route to reunite the two sisters. Rather than presenting this revamped tale as the sole version of the myth, Keightley acknowledges that “like so many others, this story is told with considerable variations” (Keightley 1838: 350), speaking to the development in authorial research between the 1831 and 1838 texts. Nevertheless, there is no indication that Rossetti read anything other than Keightley’s initial 1831 publication, which ends as follows: “it is a strange idea, by the way, though a very general one, especially with poets, that the note of the nightingale is melancholy: it is in reality cheerfulness itself” (Keightley 1831: 343). As Rossetti would grow up to become a poet, she too would explore the plight of the nightingale and the swallow, as well as that of other birds, in her own work.

Chapter One: “When our swallows fly back to the South”

The opening lines of Jan Marsh’s biography of Christina Rossetti are these:

As she later recreated in her own nursery poem, Christina Rossetti’s earliest memory was of her father crowing like a cock to wake his children:

Kookoorookoo! Kookoorookoo!

Crows the cock before the morn;

Kikirikee! Kikirikee!

Roses in the east are born.

Kookoorookoo! Kookoorookoo!

Early birds begin their singing;

Kikirikee! Kikirikee!

The day, the day, the day is springing.

It came, of course, from Italian, as she recaptured when translating her verse back into her father’s tongue:

Cuccurucu – cuccurucu –

All'alba il gallo canta.

Chicchirichi – chicchirichi –

Di rose il ciel s'ammanta. (Marsh CR 3).

As biographer, Marsh immediately identifies several key facets of Rossetti’s upbringing which led to her eventual development as a poet. By referencing Rossetti’s nursery rhymes before presenting the quotation from her father, Marsh primarily draws a link between Gabriele’s work and that of his daughter, acknowledging the significant role he played in influencing Christina’s writing. That Marsh chooses to open with this quotation allows the reader to first access Rossetti

as a daughter and a poet simultaneously. The mention of Gabriele's children, plural, and his role as a 'cock' in accompaniment to his 'early birds' not only places Christina in the realm of siblinghood but furthermore recognizes the impact that the natural world had on the Rossettis' perception of their family dynamic. Finally, the presentation of the poem in both English and its native Italian identifies Rossetti as having a foot in two worlds: the Italy of her father and the England of her poetry. There are many ways in which these worlds intermingle throughout her writing; Rossetti is not merely an English poet but an Italian-English poet, and this dual culture is something that, as Marsh declares, she works to 'recapture'. Rossetti's family had a stronger influence on her writing than anything else in her life, and this fact remained unwaveringly true throughout her lifetime. More than anything, she drew inspiration from her siblings, and it is ultimately her role as a sister that allowed her to flourish as a poet.

Beyond the morning wakeup call to his children, Gabriele Rossetti wrote prolifically, and "there was hardly a time when the children did not know their father himself was a poet" (Marsh CR 23). He often drew artistic inspiration from his children, such as with the following poem:

<i>Cristina e Maria</i>	Christina and Maria
<i>Mie care figliuole</i>	My dear daughters
<i>Son fresche viole</i>	Are fresh violets
<i>Dischiusse all'albor.</i>	Opened at dawn.
<i>Son rose nudrite</i>	They are roses nurtured
<i>Dall'aure novelle</i>	By the earliest breezes,
<i>Son tortore belle</i>	Lovely turtle-doves
<i>Nel nido d'amor.</i>	In the nest of Love. (Marsh CR 24).

Gabriele commonly referred to his daughters as birds, leading not only to Maria and Christina considering one another as such, but moreover to all four Rossetti siblings to perceive Christina in particular as bird-like. Due to her skittish and introverted nature, “Gabriel once compared his sister to a startled bird” (Marsh *CR* 360), and this seems to have been a shared joke amongst the siblings, to the extent that Christina sought out taxidermied birds while travelling to offer as gifts to her brother. In 1867 she wrote to her lifelong best friend Amelia Barnard Heimann: “I brought an owlet up with me from Gloucester as a present to Gabriel” (CGR 349 to ABH in Harrison 1: 303) and while travelling in 1869 she offered Dante Gabriel “a very nice little American owl, and fancy he may be for sale at a low figure. Would you like him?” (CGR 383 to DGR in Harrison 1: 323). Harrison comments in a footnote that “CGR often shopped for (presumably stuffed or carved) owls when away from home” (Harrison 1: 303). It is as though gifting Dante Gabriel birds, regardless of the extent to which the act was in jest, was a way for Christina to offer her brother a piece of herself. Despite her (albeit infrequent) travels and his distance from the family home, birds would remind Dante Gabriel of his sister, allowing him to feel her presence in his home even in adulthood when he had, so to speak, left the Rossetti nest. It is therefore clear that “her father’s tender image of sisterly love imprinted itself on Christina” (Roe 24), as she maintained her perception of birds as sisterly figures throughout her life.

Given the paternal influence leading to her connection between birds and sisters, it is no wonder that encountering the Procne and Philomela myth via Keightley’s work was significant for a young Rossetti. As the 1831 version of *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy* was primarily intended for an audience of students, Christina likely read it at a young age alongside her sister Maria. Frances Rossetti often read to her children, and this tradition continued well into her daughters’ adulthood, as Christina writes in 1853: “last night Mamma began reading aloud a

very interesting book, and perhaps she may continue it: and now we three can enjoy it together as of old” (CGR 57 to ABH in Harrison 1: 75-6). Rossetti’s development as a poet was inherently tied to her role as a sister; as aforementioned, her brothers were excellent resources for her, especially regarding connections to the male-dominated English literary sphere, but her day-to-day domestic experiences with Maria were equally as important to her writing. As children, the Rossetti siblings competed against one another to see who could write the best short poem, or *bout rimé*, in the shortest length of time. One such poem, composed by Maria at age ten, mourns “a thrush that died today” (qtd. in Marsh *CR* 23); years later, Christina “was surely inspired by Maria, and must refer to the thrush whose elegy she composed” (Marsh *CR* 84) in her own *bout rimé* that reads “When the poor bird was struggling; I still see / The throbbing tenderness of virgin glow” (qtd. in Marsh *CR* 85). Commenting on various poems from across Rossetti’s oeuvre, Marsh remarks that “Maria’s thrush cast a longer shadow than has been perceived” (Marsh *CR* 111) and that Christina drew heavily from experiences shared with her sister when composing her own poetry. Not only do Rossetti’s poems frequently feature birds, these birds are also often representative of sisterly figures. Regardless of whether the sister in question is meant to be Maria, Christina herself, or an entirely fictitious character, what remains is the fact that Rossetti made use of birds as literary stand-ins for sisters in her work.

Christina lived with her mother until Frances died in 1886, leaving her daughter alone only for the last few years of her life, and the majority of those years were also spent alongside her sister Maria. With a revolving door of Polidori aunts entering and exiting the Rossetti household, Christina not only drew from her own firsthand experiences of sisterhood, but was furthermore exposed to the bonds between her mother and her mother’s sisters. That Keightley’s book was a gift from one Polidori sister to another is relevant to Christina’s perception of the

myths therein, particularly that of Procne and Philomela given its primary focus on sisterhood. Her aunts shared the story amongst themselves, and once the Rossetti siblings were born, they too were able to participate in this familial literary engagement. Originally a gift between sisters, Keightley's book was passed down to a second generation of siblings, expanding the avenues through which family members were able to share the stories it held. That Rossetti accessed the Procne and Philomela myth in a familial space is relevant, as is the way in which the story was mediated through her perception of sisterhood between her mother and aunts, and the potential of a shared experience between her and Maria upon being read the myth at the same time or in the same space.

Christina's mother was her first reader and her favourite confidante: "Christina's earliest poem was written when she was eleven, copied out in a large copperplate hand on pencilled lines that were then erased, and given to Mamma" (Marsh *CR* 33). Rossetti's first poem was a birthday gift to her mother and read:

To my Mother on her Birthday

Today's your natal day

Sweet flowers I bring;

Mother accept I pray,

My offering.

And may you happy live,

And long us bless

Receiving as you give

Great happiness. (qtd. in Marsh *CR* 33)

Her poetic debut is tied to a celebration of her mother, and throughout her career, Rossetti would continue to honour Frances in her writing. Her book of religious musings *Time Flies* is dedicated “To My Beloved Example, Friend, Mother” (Rossetti *TF* iii), which is particularly special given the weight that the mother and daughter’s shared faith held in their relationship. Just as in her first poem, Rossetti continues to provide her mother with poetic ‘offerings’.

In the *Time Flies* entry for March sixth, Rossetti presents a scene she witnessed on one of her walks; in doing so, she displays her perception of a family home as a nest, contemplating the importance of the mother bird’s role in caring for that nest:

In a certain little nest, built almost if not quite upon the grassy ground, having a sheltering bush behind it, and not far in front a railing, I one day saw three naked young birds consisting mainly of three gaping beaks. Neither father nor mother in sight, there sat the three wide open birds and beaks handy and prompt in case anything edible should drop in. There seemed a thousand chances that these particular nestlings should never attain to feathers and years of discretion; for like their own beaks their nest spread wide open, and any passing cat might in a moment ‘finish the birds with the bones and the beaks.’ Occasional cats were known to haunt these grounds. Yet feather by feather the three became fledged; until deserting their nest they fluttered, perched, made merry, among the world-wide family of birds. (Rossetti *TF* 46-7).

Though the passage describes a literal nest and the family of birds living within it, Rossetti uses the above scene to create an analogy for her own family. Published in 1885, *Time Flies* is one of her last works; Rossetti is therefore able to use the daily thoughts to reflect on her own life, and on her experiences with her siblings in particular. At the time of writing, both Maria and Dante Gabriel are dead, leaving Christina to muse on life cycles and the impact that one’s family has on

one's own development. In this passage, the three birds who find the strength to leave their nest on their own are impressive to Rossetti, and surely must remind her of her own three siblings. Rossetti was in awe of all of her siblings for various reasons, but what they ultimately shared was artistic talent; in regards to herself, however, "raised in an era when female literary success was regarded with suspicion, she remained circumspect about her accomplishments [...] The nearest Christina came to acknowledging her success was when ascribing it to her family's influence; she had inherited her 'literary bias' from her 'clever and well read parents'" (Roe 353). Rossetti could not separate her own success from that of her family, which is likely why she did not see herself as one of the birds able to independently 'desert their nest' without the support of a mother figure, as she did her three siblings. All four Rossetti siblings viewed their role as a sibling with great importance; William "always defined himself in relation to Gabriel, Christina, and Maria; without them, he never seemed entirely sure who he was" (Roe 369), and similarly, Christina often felt like part of a unit as opposed to an independent being. This mindset was not limiting, however; rather, she believed that her inclusion in the powerhouse that was the Rossetti household was what gave her strength, both artistically and personally. To Rossetti, the source of this strength, shared amongst the four siblings, was their mother.

Rossetti believed adamantly in the power that the mother bird had over her nest of children, and attributed her own success to her mother's influence and the way in which she shared it with her three siblings. Though she knew her family was exceptional, Rossetti did not limit her perception of a mother's power to her own Frances; in a letter to Amelia Barnard Heimann, who had recently become a mother in 1856, she wrote: "best wishes that you who feather nests for others may have your own feathered" (CGR 288 to ABH in Harrison 1: 259). Advising against her friend letting the responsibilities of a mother overtake the quest for her own

personal fulfillment, here Rossetti details her perception of a household as a nest built by the parental (motherly) bird in which the inhabitants—children, or birds—are continuously provided for by the mother bird figure. Not only does this motherly influence allow the birds to develop and grow, it furthermore offers them the ability to flourish beyond the confines of the nest, or of the world at large. To Rossetti, maternal affection has the power to transcend the boundaries set up by external influences which may limit her children. In 1878 she wrote: “I do think if anything ever does sweep away the barrier of sex, and make the female not a giantess or a heroine but at once and full grown a hero and a giant, it is that mighty maternal love which makes little birds and beasts as well as little women matches for very big adversaries” (CGR 750 to Augusta Webster in Harrison 2: 158). Not only does this passage once again reinforce her perception of a family home as a nest, and moreover of siblings as birds of a feather, but it furthermore details how she directly benefits from her mother’s influence not merely as a daughter but as a writer.

Given the fear Victorian women writers felt upon entering into the masculine literary sphere at the risk of being labelled ‘unfeminine’, Rossetti had good reason to seek empowerment and courage from her strongest supporter—her mother. She cites not only her own mother’s ability to provide her with strength, but moreover that of all mothers to contribute to their children’s development through their unwavering support. Alison Chapman’s “Father’s Place, Mother’s Space: Identity, Italy and the Maternal in Christina Rossetti’s Poetry” (1999) explores the safety that Frances offered her daughter as she immersed herself in the male artistic world: “this excessive identification with her mother marks Rossetti as an eternal daughter, forever identified securely as feminine” (Chapman 238). Rossetti is aware of the fact that her strong relationship with her mother offers her poetic freedom in two ways: as a daughter, she is

personally fulfilled by her mother's love, which provides her with internal strength, and as a poet, she is externally protected by the way in which her status as a daughter works its way into her poetry, allowing her to simultaneously access the masculine sphere as a poet and the feminine sphere as a daughter.

Rossetti's status as a daughter was not limited to her literal familial relationships, but moreover by her faith. Christina and her mother were devout Christians, as was Christina's sister Maria, who eventually left home to join the Society of All Saints. As young women, both sisters worked at the Highgate Penitentiary, a home for 'fallen' women who underwent rehabilitation with the assistance of volunteers like Christina and Maria before returning to proper society. Rossetti's Christian lifestyle offers further insight into her perception of sisterhood; she composed her most famous work while working at the Penitentiary, and "the double meaning of sister in *Goblin Market* thus gains a dimension from Sister Christina's role at Highgate, but leaves in limbo the explicit dedication of the poem to her real sister: 'M. F. R.' on the manuscript" (Marsh *CR* 237). Rossetti's understanding of sisterhood did not solely stem from her home life; it extended into the Anglican church and its many influences. She did not view herself only as her parents' daughter, but also as a child of God, who took on a similarly bird-like role in Rossetti's writing. The *Time Flies* entry for August twenty-fifth presents this notion succinctly: "our room, as God builds and makes it for us, is likewise our nest: and a nest is surely the very homeliest idea of a home" (Rossetti *TF* 164). That Rossetti's life is bookended by perceptions of siblings as birds and family homes as nests, beginning with her father's poetry and ending with her own religious writing, is relevant, for it provides a lens through which to view her entire poetic career. These ideas were present throughout her life, and they may therefore be present in much of her work, albeit to varying degrees.

The following entry in *Time Flies* further develops the particularities in this view of God's parental influence and the ways in which it differs from that of one's own parents. Given that God is an equal father to all Christians, the nest that he builds must house many, eventually preparing them for their natural departure—in this case, the departure is from the land of the living and towards Heaven. Rossetti writes:

A nest implies, suggests, so much.

A circumference in comfortable proportion to its inhabitants' size.

Warmth and softness: "For so He giveth His beloved sleep."

Pure air, bright sunshine; leafy shade sufficient to satisfy a very Jonah.

A windy branch whereon to rock safely. Wind and rain heard yet little felt. A storm, indeed, sometimes, but as the exception not as the rule.

Most of all by way of comfort a nest suggests an overhanging presence of love. A brooding breast sheltering its cherished nestlings. A love ready to confront death in their defence.

"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

When "room" and way are too great for us, let us think of Him Who prepared our present "nest" and carries His little ones, and Who desires to see in each of us of the travail of His Soul and to be satisfied. (Rossetti *TF* 165)

The love that God provides is parental and inspires growth and transformation in His children. This growth allows them to develop spiritually, eventually becoming worthy of joining Him in Heaven. To Rossetti, the love that God provides in building a nest is similar to that which her parents provided in her home. Much as she attributed any literary skill she may have to the influence of her talented family, so too did her personal development depend on her parents'

affection and support. Given that she believed that all Christians were the children of God, she could ultimately attribute her parents' positive influence on her back to God, for he provided them with a loving nest in the first place.

Rossetti links her artistic journey with her spiritual one: she is able to simultaneously develop as a poet and as a Christian because of God's love. The nest that He builds provides her with an environment in which she can gain the strength to fly, ultimately arriving at her ideal final destination: Heaven. Rossetti once again makes use of birds in describing this journey to a higher plane, but the swallow in particular continuously reappears in her work. "To Christina, swallows were always birds of promise" (Marsh *CR* 292), as is exemplified by the liberating role they play time and again in her writing. When Rossetti writes of swallows, they are often migrating from one place to another, their destination being a more freeing, more positive place than that from which they are departing. One such example is present in the October twentieth entry from *Time Flies*:

Once at the seaside I recollect noticing for some time a row of swallows perched side by side along a telegraph wire. There they sat steadily. After a while, when some one looked again, they were gone.

This happened so late in the year as to suggest that the birds had mustered from migration and then had started.

The sight was quaint, comfortable looking, pretty. The small creatures seemed so fit and so ready to launch out on their pathless journey: contented to wait, contented to start, at peace and fearless.

Altogether they formed an apt emblem of souls willing to stay, willing to depart.

Only I fear there are not so many “willing” souls as “willing” swallows. (Rossetti *TF* 202)

The swallows in this passage represent Christians who are able to put their faith in God, allowing Him to lead them away from sin and toward salvation. Rossetti’s comparison between souls and swallows reflects her attribution of a holy quality to the birds, who are superior to humans in their willingness to trust God and follow His teachings. The birds have a religious importance that provides them with the ability to migrate to freedom; in this sense, the freedom is spiritual, but the metaphor can generally reflect one’s ability to fly after receiving the necessary support. The following entry, for the twenty-first of October, claims that “the swallows by dint of analogy, of suggestion, of parallel experience, if I may call it so, convey messages from the Creator to the human creature” (Rossetti *TF* 203). Here swallows are messengers between God and humans, and perhaps fellow inhabitants of the nest that God built; if the swallows are able to flourish beyond the nest, then so too can humans, according to Rossetti, if they accept God’s teachings. In relation to Rossetti in particular, her faith offers her the nest of God’s love, making her a sister to the swallows who have the strength to leave the nest when the time comes. Moreover, the support of her parents, who have also built a home for her and her siblings, provides her with the ability to undergo a similar transformation to the swallows and migrate to a new existence: one that consists of simultaneous personal and poetic development.

What is furthermore notable about swallows in particular is their relevance to the Procne and Philomela myth. Once Tereus discovers that Procne has freed her sister, murdered their son Itys, and fed his flesh to Tereus, he pursues both sisters as they flee the home. The sisters’ transformation into birds is what saves them: “while they were in Daulia of Phocis, finding themselves nearly overtaken by Tereus, they prayed to the gods to change them into birds;

Procne immediately became a *Nightingale* [...], and Philomela a *Swallow*” (Keightley 1831: 342). The gods offer Philomela, the story’s violated and therefore ‘fallen’ woman, a chance to redeem herself and escape to freedom through this metamorphosis into a swallow, which charges the figure of the swallow with a redemptive quality. It may be the interference of her sister Procne that saves her—a notion that Rossetti will explore in her own poetry—or merely the gods’ good will. Philomela is offered a newfound freedom that even Procne would not have had access to if not for this entanglement with her sister. Transforming into a swallow allows Philomela the ability to migrate to an improved plane of existence: a swallow is a free bird.

Charles Algernon Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* adapts the myth of Procne and Philomela in the poem “Itylus” (1866), which is titled after Procne and Tereus’s son. According to Charles Martindale in *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (1988), “Swinburne did not really care for Ovid, according to his biographer. His classical enthusiasm was for Greece rather than Rome” (Martindale 221), which explains the choice for the Greek spelling over the Roman ‘Itys’. The speaker of Swinburne’s poem is unclear; one of the sisters laments her separation from the other after their respective transformations into a nightingale and swallow. Though Philomela becomes the swallow in Keightley’s iteration of the myth, he acknowledges that “according to others, Philomela was the nightingale” (Keightley 1831: 342). In the notes to the 2008 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, A.D. Melville states that “generally Greek poets made Procne the nightingale, Philomela the swallow; in Roman poets it is usually the other way about” (Melville 413). Given Swinburne’s preference for Greek poets over Roman ones, it is likely that Procne is the speaker of the poem, lamenting the loss of Philomela the swallow, but even so, he deliberately shrouds the speaker’s identity in mystery.

The poem opens with a call to “Swallow, my sister, O sister swallow” (Swinburne 1), a refrain that she repeats in each stanza. She persistently blames the sisters’ separation on the distance between the north and south, and it seems that the swallow has travelled onward to the latter. The speaker refers to “the soft south whither thine heart is set” (Swinburne 9) and believes that the swallow has gone because she wanted to “take flight and follow and find the sun” (Swinburne 24). Though the south may be beneficial to the swallow’s well-being, the speaker nevertheless misses her sister; she is able to simultaneously appreciate the freedom that flight has offered her sister and mourn the loss of her companion. The south in Swinburne’s poem is representative of general freedom, which is something that one can only unlock after a personal transformation, be it physical like the swallow’s or spiritual, as Rossetti illustrates in *Time Flies*. Rossetti also explores the distance between north and south in her poetry, and like the swallow, is allured by the warmth of the south.

Christina Rossetti’s poem “*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*” (composed in 1865, published in 1881), inspired by a trip to Italy she took with her mother and William at the year of composition, identifies the cultural struggle she faced between her own northern and southern selves. Rossetti was not merely an English poet, but an Italian-English poet; her work was largely influenced by her family’s Italian heritage, particularly that of her father Gabriele, who was exiled from the Kingdom of Naples in 1821 as a result of his political radicalism. Her mother Frances was also born to an Italian exile, Gaetano Polidori, and both sides of Rossetti’s family were therefore intimately connected to their ancestral culture. Rossetti’s poetry showcases the tension she feels between her English literary career and her Italian family life; though she wrote prolifically in Italian and even translated her own English work into Italian, she was only able to view herself as an English poet. Rossetti sensed a disconnect between her relationships to England and to

Italy, for while she lived her entire life in the former country, the latter had a certain unattainable appeal to her. In 1865 she wrote: “its people is a noble people, and its very cattle are of high born aspect; I am glad of my Italian blood” (CGR 281 to Anne Burrows Gilchrist in Harrison 1: 254). In this poem, she identifies England as the north and Italy as the south, and much as in Swinburne’s “Itylus”, the south is alluring and somewhat inaccessible to the poem’s speaker.

The poem opens with the speaker’s return to her home “from the sweet South” (Rossetti “*Italia*” 1), immediately identifying this location as one that, as pleasurable as it is, can only be temporary to her. The speaker must continue to exist in “the North, / Where I was born, bred, look to die” (Rossetti “*Italia*” 1-2) despite the pull she feels towards the south. Without projecting authorial biographical information onto the poem, the first few lines read as though the speaker is drawn to the south because it provides a leisurely reprieve from the routine of her daily life. Given her stagnant existence in the north, where she must “do my day’s work in its day” (Rossetti “*Italia*” 3) and seemingly nothing more, the south is a more exciting place because of its novelty. In the opening lines of the poem, the south reads as a vacation spot that directly contrasts the somewhat dull laborious life that the speaker leads at home in the north; her lament at leaving therefore merely involves an unwillingness to return to her normal life in favour of a desire to remain on holiday.

The speaker reveals that there is more to her sadness when despairing that she will “see no more the country half my own, / Nor hear the half familiar speech” (Rossetti “*Italia*” 6-7) that a visit to the south offered her. The south therefore becomes not merely a reprieve from the mundanity of her home life but rather a location in which she feels her identity can be truly affirmed. It is upon leaving the south that the speaker finally realizes that, although she feels intimately connected to it, she can never truly access it because of her inextricable connection to

the north and the inherent distance that exists between the north and south. Reading the speaker as a somewhat autobiographical figure, therefore identifying England as the north that contrasts Italy's south for Rossetti, transforms the sadness behind the speaker's departure from the south. The country that only half-belongs to the speaker can be either England or Italy, but the language on which she only has a partial grasp must be Italian; despite her father's education of his children in his native tongue, growing up in London forced the Rossetti siblings to learn English before all other languages. As a result of this secondary status that Italian had in Rossetti's vocabulary, England took precedence over Italy in her daily life. Travelling to Italy may have allowed the speaker to further develop the connection she felt to her family's homeland, but her return to England only reinforces the chasm that exists between her English identity and her Italian one.

The phrase "the sweet South" (Rossetti "*Italia*" 12) is repeated twice more at the end of the poem, which directly contrasts with "that bleak North" (Rossetti "*Italia*" 8) in which the speaker is forced to live. She acknowledges that there are a litany of reasons for which "The South lies out of reach" (Rossetti "*Italia*" 10) for the most part, but there is one method through which she may be able to access the personal cultural truths that Italy holds for her. It is "when our swallows fly back to the South" (Rossetti "*Italia*" 11) that she will find satisfaction in bridging the gap between her English identity and her Italian one. As the swallow does in Swinburne's poem, the swallows in "*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*" can migrate to the south in order to provide themselves with greater freedom. In Rossetti's poem, "the swallows mediate between the two opposites, north and south, but the prevailing sense of Rossetti's poem is that of both assimilation and isolation from the 'half familiar' country and language (made more immediate when we remember that all members of the Rossetti family were bilingual)" (Chapman 246-7).

In Keightley's myth, it is Philomela's transformation into a swallow that provides her with the ability—and potentially even the courage—to travel to the south, and though the swallow may leave her sister behind in Swinburne's poem, it seems as though the swallows in Rossetti's poem are migrating as a unit.

Given that Rossetti was accompanied by her mother and brother on the trip that inspired this poem, it is likely that she is once again using swallows as a stand-in for family members; furthermore, the story of Procne and Philomela may have further led her to think of her sister when writing this poem, for the freedom offered the migrating swallows is akin to that which Procne and Philomela find upon metamorphosing into birds at the end of the myth. The salvific sisterhood that exists between Procne and Philomela is similar to that in Rossetti's poem, wherein the swallow leads the speaker to further access a once-unattainable aspect of her cultural identity. It is a result of the swallows' migration that, for the speaker, "The tears may come again into my eyes / On the old wise, / And the sweet name to my mouth" (Rossetti "*Italia*" 13-5). The speaker's siblings, represented in this poem by the swallows, allow her accurately to consider the ways in which English culture and Italian culture merge in the formation of her identity, not only personally, but artistically. Though England is the land of her writing, Italy is the land of her family, who have the most significant influence on her poetry; her Italian heritage is therefore integral to her self-perception as a poet, and the swallows offer her the freedom with which to explore it.

Chapter Two: “Like a caged thing freed”

Christina Rossetti’s most famous work, the poem *Goblin Market*, makes use of birds as sisterly figures in order to illustrate the salvific power of sisterhood. The poem follows two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, as they are enticed by the calls of goblin men passing through the forest and must decide whether to give in to the temptation of the goblins’ wares. Cautious Lizzie knows better than to risk the dangers of feeding her desire, but Laura cannot resist, and despite her sister’s warning, succumbs to the pull of the goblins. After eating their fruit, she experiences a debilitating fall in which she suffers from withdrawal from the goblin fruit, losing her senses and beginning to descend into death. It is only when Lizzie faces the goblins herself to retrieve more fruit for her sister that Laura regains her faculties and is able to heal. The poem ends with the sisters having grown into wives and mothers, recounting to their own children the story of their entanglement with the goblins. Lizzie and Laura alike praise the salvific nature of sisterhood, acknowledging that it is their bond that saved them from danger and led them to safety. Richard Menke’s “The Political Economy of Fruit: *Goblin Market*” (1999) labels the poem “something like a fairy tale” and credits “the love for a sister and the ethical action that arises from this domestic tie” (Menke 128) as the ethos at *Goblin Market*’s center. The poem’s fantastical nature and core themes stem from Christina’s own experiences as a sister, not only to her two older brothers, but to the eldest Rossetti sibling: her sister Maria.

Beyond its content, the very tone of *Goblin Market* can also be attributed to Maria, who “may simply have asked her sister for a poem with a happy ending. The family teased Christina about her poetic gloominess, and at some stage Maria also criticised her opacity” (Marsh *CR* 237), leading to a poem suitable for children and adults alike. Rossetti’s original title for the poem speaks to its partially-childish nature; first titled *A Peep at the Goblins*, the poem is

dedicated “to her sister: ‘to M.F.R.’ [as] reads the line below the title in the notebook” (Marsh *CR* 229). Many who knew the Rossetti family “would observe that Christina’s admiration for her sister remained ‘extreme’ throughout her life” (Roe 34): this high regard was not only that which the youngest sibling often naturally has for the eldest, but rather something deeply rooted at the core of the sisters’ relationship. Christina looked to Maria for guidance in most aspects of her life, and given that the women lived together for the vast majority of Christina’s life, they were seldom apart; to Christina, Maria seemed to be almost an extension of herself—one that encouraged her to become the best version of herself. Many scholars argue that Rossetti modelled Lizzie and Laura’s contrasting personalities “on Christina’s own wilful, impulsive nature, disciplined by Maria’s stronger sense of duty” (Marsh *CR* 232). Notably composed in 1859, during Christina’s time as a young adult, the poem may have served as a tribute to the ways in which Maria consistently positively affected her sister during her formative years.

As aforementioned, Rossetti’s brothers significantly influenced her emergence as a poet, providing her with connections to major figures in the London literary scene and acting as editor and colleague for her. Though William and Dante Gabriel had a more hands-on role in the shaping of Christina’s writing, Maria was equally important to the formation of Rossetti the poet; as with the *bout rimé* of their childhood, much of Rossetti’s oeuvre draws on personal experiences. Given Maria’s ever-presence in her sister’s life, she is connected to many of Christina’s autobiographical poems; *Goblin Market* is no different, inspired by “the wild strawberry incident at Holmer Green when she, immediately tempted to pick out and eat, was restrained by Maria, only to find the ripe berry hollowed out by a slug, transformed from a delightful treat into a rotten husk, rather like the goblins’ fruit, fair without but foul within” (Marsh *CR* 232). Maria’s role as her sister’s saviour in this—albeit comparatively

minor—situation mirrors that which Lizzie plays for Laura in *Goblin Market*, wherein she pulls her sister from the brink of death and provides her with the strength to grow into the woman she is destined to become. Rossetti unknowingly affords Lizzie and Laura a luxury that she will never share with her own sister: the two live to see one another become wives and mothers, passing on the precious nature of their own sibling bond to their children. Though neither woman ever married, in 1876 Christina witnessed the end of her sister's years-long battle with ovarian cancer, and “unlike the suffering sister of *Goblin Market*, Maria could not be cured by exotic fruit or sibling love” (Roe 292). Nevertheless, the spirit of Rossetti's sister and the deep love they share live on in this poem, posthumously providing both sisters with an unexpectedly new kind of salvation to that which Lizzie offers Laura.

The opening lines of the poem inform the reader of the particular ways in which to perceive the two sisters: “Morning and evening / Maids heard the goblins cry” (Rossetti *GM* 1-2). The first mention of Lizzie and Laura immediately labels them as ‘maids’, or unmarried women, notably suggesting that neither sister has engaged in sexual acts. This shared purity is worth mentioning because of the ways in which the sisters deal with the possibilities of losing and subsequently regaining their status as maids. Moreover, their respective statuses are linked to one another; when Laura submits to her desire for goblin fruit and becomes fallen, only her sister can allow her to return to her original state of maidenhood. Catherine Maxwell, in “Tasting the ‘Fruit Forbidden’: Gender, Intertextuality, and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*” (1999), highlights the importance that Lizzie and Laura's similarities have on their seemingly-inherent pure nature: Rossetti “stress[es] not merely the sisters' likeness but also their fair purity of demeanor. That this purity can be completely restored even after Laura's fall reinforces Rossetti's belief in the power of sisterly relations and her positive faith in a ‘better’ nature, which inheres

even when a woman has gone ‘astray’” (Maxwell 94). Despite Laura’s tangle with temptation, her fall is a temporary one, not only because she is intrinsically good at her core, but because the strength of her sisterly bond consistently allows this goodness to overpower all else.

While Lizzie and Laura’s relationship is at the core of the poem, the speaker does not reveal that they women are sisters until after Laura’s fall; having consumed the fruit and yearning for more, Laura brushes off Lizzie’s second warning against seeking out the goblin men by attempting to silence her: “‘Nay, hush, my sister’” (Rossetti *GM* 164). This explicit declaration of sisterhood is not only Laura’s attempt to comfort a worried Lizzie but also a foreshadowing of the powerful force that will ultimately protect Laura from falling victim to the very phenomenon Lizzie is describing. Knowing that it is not enough to merely inform her sister that “‘Twilight is not good for maidens’” (Rossetti *GM* 144) and that it is important for both Lizzie and Laura to maintain their pure status of maidenhood, Lizzie instead reminds Laura of a cautionary tale: a woman they both know who also fell victim to the goblins’ calls.

Do you not remember Jeanie,
 How she met them in the moonlight,
 Took their gifts both choice and many,
 Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
 Pluck’d from bowers
 Where summer ripens at all hours?
 But ever in the noonlight
 She pined and pined away;
 Sought them by night and day,
 Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey;

Then fell with the first snow (Rossetti *GM* 147-57).

Lizzie does not blame Jeanie's premature death on the goblins, but rather on Jeanie herself. In lamenting Jeanie's fall, she notably uses the active voice when describing Jeanie's actions, highlighting the conscious role that she had in her own demise. For example, Jeanie was not targeted by the goblin men as a victim might be, but rather actively sought them out on her own accord. Lizzie therefore not only warns her sister against falling victim to the goblins' calls, but furthermore against deliberately contributing to her own fall as she claims Jeanie did. This sisterly warning comes too late, for Laura has already fallen, but just as Lizzie does when approaching the goblins herself, the poem invites its readers to remain "Mindful of Jeanie" (Rossetti *GM* 364) for the duration of the poem, as her fate interestingly contrasts that of Laura.

Given that Laura does not meet the same end as Jeanie because of the intervention of her sister, Rossetti suggests through Lizzie and Laura's relationship that sisterhood can be salvific in nature. The difference between Laura's and Jeanie's respective encounters with the goblins stems from their original statuses prior to eating the goblin fruit; due to her role as a sister, Laura can be saved from the perils of submitting to temptation. Jeanie, by contrast, does not have the same protection, and unlike her, "as soon as the sisters enter that market, *as* sisters rather than as vulnerable single women like Jeanie, they can counter the goblins' rule of sin and suffering" (Leighton 138). Within the greater context of Victorian society, Jeanie is at a second disadvantage, for her name (and variations of it) was often tied to the fallen woman herself. One example of such is Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Grandmother's Apology* (1859), which includes "a contretemps involving her cousin Jenny, who was known to have 'tript in her time'—another example of the fascination with the 'fallen' woman and the name that seems to have been attached to their fate" (Marsh *CR* 247). Another poet may have been inspired by the

work of Tennyson and Rossetti alike, albeit the latter was closer to home for him: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1870 poem "Jenny", wherein the eponymous Jenny is a prostitute, also deals with the plight of the fallen woman.

Though Dante Gabriel's Jenny is repeatedly scorned for "her contaminating influence" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 156) on innocent women, the speaker also describes her in kinder terms than are typically used when painting a picture of the fallen woman. Not only is she "rendered partly in the conventional terms of faded lilies, besmirched clothes, despair, decline and death, but also in terms usually reserved for love poetry" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 156); this dual perception of Jenny the prostitute offers more nuance than Victorian writers tended to afford so-called 'impure' women. The speaker of "Jenny" identifies the inherent similarities that all women share, regardless of their (im)purity, and argues that, despite common belief, even the women who have fallen the farthest are not so distant from the purest of women. He explores this dual nature of women through the language of sisters:

Of the same lump (as it is said)
For honour and dishonour made,
Two sister vessels. Here is one.

It makes a goblin of the sun

So pure,—so fall'n! How dare to think

Of the first common kindred link? (DGR 203-8).

It is likely that Dante Gabriel borrowed language from his sister's work when composing these lines, for the mention of both sisters and goblins is evidently reminiscent of *Goblin Market*. The

speaker laments that honour and dishonour stem from the same motherly source, making them sisters, for this shared origin indicates that the two characteristics are not strictly opposites. More specifically, this fact means that a prostitute and a maiden, for example, are not opposites, but instead share core similarities that are ultimately more significant to the true nature of their character than is their status as pure or impure. The inherent sisterhood that exists between all women, according to the speaker of “Jenny”, is not only what makes a woman’s fall more tragic—for by this definition, she was not always destined to fall, but instead had the capabilities to resist the fall—but furthermore what reinforces a woman’s ability to save her sister from her fallen status. What prevents her from doing so, however, is the society in which they live; the speaker “sees the desirability of women’s rescue by other women, but believes that the conventions of the day prevent pure women from even contemplating their fallen sisters’ plight” (Maxwell 95). Contrasting the sisters in *Goblin Market*, whose core similarities lead to the fallen Laura’s salvation, the ‘common kindred link’ that Jenny shares with other women is not enough to prevent her from her fate.

Lizzie and Laura share a dual sisterhood: the one described by the speaker of “Jenny”, which includes all women, and a literal one that is born from a blood tie. As with many of her other poems, Rossetti describes this latter familial relationship with the language of birds. The night after Laura has tasted the goblin fruit, the sisters lie down to sleep together,

Golden head by golden head,

Like two pigeons in one nest

Folded in each other’s wings,

They lay down in their curtain’d bed. (Rossetti *GM* 184-7).

The shared space of the nest, from which the sisters originate and in which they notably choose to continue to live together, provides them with shelter from the dangerous calls of the goblin men. It furthermore reinforces their inherent similarities; despite the fact that Laura has now fallen as a result of her submission to temptation, the sisters are nevertheless “Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Lock’d together in one nest” (Rossetti *GM* 198-9), not only for this night, but forever. The use of the word ‘locked’ affirms the permanence with which Lizzie and Laura are connected through sisterhood, both that of women in general and that of literal siblings. Though Laura has now crossed into the realm of ‘dishonour’, to use language from “Jenny”, and Lizzie remains ‘honourable’, the speaker of *Goblin Market* continues to emphasise their inherent similarities.

It is this unbreakable sisterly connection that allows Lizzie to save Laura from the fates of both Jeanie and Jenny: “Rossetti’s insistence on symmetry, on the maidens’ essential likeness, not only reinforces the fact that even fallen women are redeemable, but also reminds pure women that they too are frail, and might in other circumstances have suffered the same fate. Sisters share both a fallible human nature and a nature redeemed by grace. Recognizing their own fallibility and the contingencies that can make another fall, saints are the best sisters to sinners” (Maxwell 96). Just as in other poems from her oeuvre, mediation of the sisterly bond through bird-like language allows Rossetti to highlight the freeing power of sisterhood. In the case of Lizzie and Laura, this freedom entails salvation from the fallen woman’s demise. Recognizing the symptoms of withdrawal from which Laura is suffering, Lizzie braves the goblin men alone in an attempt to retrieve more fruit for her sister. Upon returning to Laura with fruit juice, which she must drink off Lizzie’s body, Lizzie provides her sister with the freedom to break free from the consequences of her fall, and “like a caged thing freed” (Rossetti *GM* 505),

Laura can return to sharing a status of ‘honour’ with her sister. Notably, “given by the goblin men, the fruit juice is like a poison, but mediated by a loving sister, sucked from a woman’s body, it becomes a restorative antidote” (Maxwell 85): this restoration is of the sort that the speaker of “Jenny” believes is improbable, and the reason for its success stems from the deep sisterly bond that Lizzie and Laura share.

Rossetti uses Lizzie and Laura to suggest that “fallen women are not only streetwalkers and sinners but also loving sisters” (Leighton 137), and it is this sisterhood, salvific in nature, that offers women the freedom of redemption. The insistence upon the similarities between Lizzie and Laura, mediated as it is by bird-like imagery, is likely inspired by the myth of Procne and Philomela, who transform into a nightingale and a swallow when fleeing the rage of Procne’s husband Tereus. After Tereus rapes Philomela, leading to another sort of fall, it is Procne’s love that saves Philomela from the traditional fate of the fallen woman: death. Though the respective falls of Philomela and Laura fundamentally differ because Laura actively engages in an erotic experience and Philomela is assaulted, given the excessive importance that Victorian society placed on the preservation of women’s ‘purity’, the blame for a woman’s rape was placed on the woman herself. Being the victim of sexual violence was deemed just as dishonourable as seeking out pre-marital sex, and “this social disapproval was reinforced by ostracism, which also served to strengthen the growing Victorian ideology of the family: parents were encouraged to expel their ‘erring’ daughters and women in all classes combined to ensure that prostitutes, however successful, could never be received in ‘respectable’ circles” (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 145-6). Given this cultural perception, Procne’s rescue of Philomela is similar to Lizzie’s rescue of Laura; furthermore, in both cases, the saved women are granted the freedom—described by the imagery of birds—to flee their current situation in favour of a more beneficial one. Instead of telling the

cautionary tale of a fallen woman dragging her sister down with her, which was common in Victorian England with “one bricklayer’s daughter, for example, [who] described in detail her social rise as a result of her sexual fall, and claimed to be training her sister to follow the same profession” (Marsh *CR* 219), Rossetti constructs a narrative in which a woman can save her fallen sister in order to demonstrate the salvific strength of sisterhood.

“Christina’s imagination had many reasons to be preoccupied by sisters in the 1850s” (Leighton 130), and beyond that of inherent sisterhood between women and literal blood sisterhood, another type of sisterhood that Rossetti focused on was religious. Just as all Christians are siblings living in the nest of God the Father, Rossetti’s volunteer work in the Anglican Church provided her with a third group of sisters who likely influenced the writing of *Goblin Market*. Beginning in 1859, Rossetti joined her sister Maria in volunteering at the St. Mary Magdalene home for ex-prostitutes at Highgate Penitentiary, where the sisters were responsible for working with women to rehabilitate them before allowing them to return to society. Rossetti’s work with “the plight of fallen women (a broad designation in mid-Victorian England that included abused wives and children as often as it did prostitutes)” (Harrison 1: XXIV) must have influenced the writing of *Goblin Market*, and “though its composition also included many other autobiographical elements” (Marsh *CR* 229), the daily exposure to so-called fallen women that Rossetti had likely shaped her perception of their status in the context of Victorian England. Given that the poem is geared toward children and adults alike, all inhabitants of St. Mary Magdalene would have been a suitable audience for it, especially due to the rehabilitative nature of the sisters’ work. The goal of the Penitentiary was not merely to house these fallen women but rather to provide them with a second chance to live in proper society; the sisters at Highgate offered these women a similar freedom to that which Lizzie offers Laura and

Procne offers Philomela—though the catalysts for the respective falls of all women involved differ greatly, the resulting label of ‘fallen’ leads to the same place, and it was the responsibility of the sisters to reroute the lives of these fallen women.

While Christina and Maria worked at the Highgate Penitentiary, so too were their brothers preoccupied with fallen women; within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, “the Fallen Woman theme re-emerged in the painters’ art and lives during 1858” (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 142). At this time, ex-prostitute Fanny Conforth had joined the circle of models, and critics largely regard her presence as a contributing factor to this newfound interest among members of the PRB. The Rossetti sisters were tasked “with the object of ‘reclaiming’ women like Fanny” (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 185) while their brothers were engaging with them personally and professionally; as a result of this presence in Rossetti’s personal life, some of *Goblin Market*’s major themes revolve around the fate of the fallen woman and the degree to which it is possible for other women to alter that fate. Regarding Rossetti the poet, “it seems very probable that *Goblin Market* was conceived as an engaging but moral tale for the Penitentiary, designed to delight and instruct and be pitched midway between the nursery and the study, in order to be accessible both to intelligent children and imaginative adults. And if not written explicitly for the girls at Highgate [...] it surely evoked their situation, and the relation of fallen and redemptive ‘sisters’” (Marsh *CR* 235). The idea that sisterhood is salvific in nature therefore stems not only from literal blood sisterhood, nor even from inherent sisterhood between all women, but furthermore from sisterhood as it is defined by Christ and his devout followers.

The entry for June third in *Time Flies* details Rossetti’s understanding of falling, and though it does not explicitly relate to the kind of fall from grace that fallen women experience,

the overall musings may nevertheless connect to her perception of Lizzie and Laura and the salvific nature of their sisterhood:

Whatever other idea we may form of the bottomless pit, whatever other feature we may think to detect within its undefined horror, two points stand out unmistakably: as a *pit* it is a place into which to fall; as *bottomless*, it appears to be one within which to fall lower and lower for ever and ever. Herein lies one distinct thought for ourselves: an awful thought. A deep fall, indefinitely deep, so long as any bottom at any depth underlies the lapses, must at length be arrested and must stop. However mangled or shattered, and on whatever floor landed, the wretch cannot cease there to lie: self-destroyed, indeed, yet accessible to Mercy and Help if these deign to look so low, and lift with recovering hand, and carry home on shoulders rejoicing. (Rossetti *TF* 105)

Though Rossetti wrote this passage almost thirty years after having written *Goblin Market*, her belief regarding the possibility of one's recovery after a fall remains constant. It may not be a loving sister who offers salvation in this case, unless the sister is not blood-related but rather connected to the fallen woman by Christ, but instead the power of faith in God that provides rehabilitation. Rossetti's restorative work with ex-prostitutes at Highgate likely influenced this text as well; keeping in mind the Victorian "determination that any woman not visibly under the protection of a man could be defined as a prostitute" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 145), Rossetti's definition of a fallen woman was probably broader than necessary. Nevertheless, she used this definition to create parameters within which a woman could fall and then be saved within the narrative of *Goblin Market*. Through a contemporary lens, Laura's fall is primarily a result of a sexual experience, but "erotic readings of *Goblin Market* are our creations, not Christina's. *Goblin fruit* was not intended by the author as a symbol of sexual desire, nor received as such by

her original audience, for both Christina and her readers were accustomed to interpret ‘forbidden fruit’ as pleasures and self-indulgences of various kinds. In this case, the mouth-watering urgency of Laura’s longing for the ripe fruits, which now seems so expressive of sexual desire, is also that of childish greed, the passionate hunger for instant gratification, which like Lizzie adults learn to withstand” (Marsh *CR* 232). Even if Laura is not directly connected to it by Rossetti’s own standards, sex still has a place in the poem, playing a significant role in the plight of the fallen woman.

The original fallen woman of the poem, Jeanie, meets her demise as a result of her inability to resist the pull of her own desire. She simultaneously succumbs to the goblin men and to her own sexual craving as she allows herself to be seduced by their calls. Even after making use of Jeanie as a cautionary tale to Laura, Lizzie constantly reminds herself

of Jeanie in her grave,
 Who should have been a bride;
 But who for joys brides hope to have
 Fell sick and died
 In her gay prime (Rossetti *GM* 312-6).

By giving in to the goblin men and tasting their fruit, “a clear allusion to pre-marital experience”, Jeanie becomes fallen, a true “poetic sister to her near-namesake in Gabriel’s poem” (Marsh *CR* 233). Jeanie notably wishes to experience the sexual elements of being a bride but never truly becomes one, and thus never fulfills her expected role as a woman. Jeanie ‘should have been a bride’ in more ways than one, but because she prematurely ventures to experience a taboo but crucial part of being one, she is punished by being prevented from ever fully reaching her goal.

Laura engages in a similar practice when approaching the goblin men; the speaker describes her as “sweet-tooth Laura” (Rossetti *GM* 115), for she is so eager to taste the fruit that her desire overtakes her. Having decided to ignore her sister’s warnings and give in to temptation, the only thing preventing her from accessing the fruit is a lack of money: “not being part of the market economy of goblin men, Laura substitutes herself for the coin which she does not possess and, in a gesture which parodies the favourite exchange of Victorian betrothals” (Leighton 136), cuts off a lock of her hair with which to trade for fruit:

She clipp’d a precious lock,
 She dropp’d a tear more rare than pearl,
 Then suck’d their fruit globes fair or red:
 Sweeter than honey from the rock,
 Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
 Clearer than water flow’d that juice;
 She never tasted such before,
 How should it cloy with length of use?
 She suck’d and suck’d and suck’d the more
 Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
 She suck’d until her lips were sore;
 Then flung the emptied rinds away (Rossetti *GM* 126-37).

The intensity with which Laura eats the heavily sought-after fruit is palpable, and the sense of relief she feels after finally attaining that which she so whole-heartedly desired is so powerful that it is almost orgasmic. In describing Laura physically, the speaker uses treasured language like ‘precious’ and ‘rare’ to reflect the great sacrifice that Laura makes in order to access the

fruit; moreover, it is not only Laura herself that is precious, but the purity she is forsaking in exchange for this single pleasurable experience. The raw, newfound satisfaction that she feels immediately after eating the fruit is short-lived; she has now fallen, and must deal with the consequences. Rossetti uses this split-second pleasure and lengthy fall to comment on “the essence of desire: once attained, it ceases to satisfy, vainly driving the sensual urge to repetition, seeking to regain that first, orgasmic joy. By denying gratification, the ascetic soul triumphs over desire, and is no longer in thrall to the senses” (Marsh *CR* 233). Though Laura experiences a flash of sensory overload while eating the fruit, she is left almost barren in comparison.

Seeking out another orgasmic experience at the hands of the goblins and their fruit, Laura expectantly awaits their arrival the following evening; however, “Listening ever, but not catching / The customary cry” (Rossetti *GM* 230-1), she believes that they do not intend to return. It is only when Lizzie laments, “I hear the fruit-call but I dare not look” (Rossetti *GM* 243) and, for the second consecutive evening, urges her sister to return to the safety of their nest, that Laura begins to acknowledge the consequences of her fall: “Laura turn’d cold as stone / To find her sister heard that cry alone, / That goblin cry” (Rossetti *GM* 253-5). It is worth noting that this is the second use of the word ‘sister’ in the poem (the first being part of Laura’s reassurance to Lizzie after eating the fruit); it is as though the speaker is reminding the reader of the women’s similarities and exposing the ways in which they are beginning to differ as a result of Laura’s submission to the goblin’s calls. Laura realizes that she has “Gone deaf and blind” (Rossetti *GM* 259) and throws herself into a period of mourning, not only for the loss of the pleasurable fruit, but for that of her senses. Waiting until her sister falls asleep so as to not worry her, she “sat up in a passionate yearning, / And gnash’d her teeth for baulk’d desire, and wept / As if her heart would break” (Rossetti *GM* 266-8).

While Laura remains without senses as she deals with the symptoms of withdrawal from the goblin fruit, Lizzie becomes increasingly concerned for her sister's well-being. Laura's senses are replaced with delusion: "She dream'd of melons, as a traveller sees / False waves in desert drouth" (Rossetti *GM* 298-90), signifying the consequences of her fall. She is no longer able to truly see, but instead conjures illusions, indicating the loss of her mind along with her senses and, ultimately, her body. This false sight contrasts Lizzie's now-heightened senses, for out of love for her sister, she puts aside her fear of facing the same fate as Jeanie (a fate that Laura is now dangerously approaching) and actively seeks out the goblins. It is "her sister's cankerous care" (Rossetti *GM* 300) that forces Lizzie to, "for the first time in her life, / [Beg[i]n to listen and look" (Rossetti *GM* 327-8). This third use of 'sister' in *Goblin Market* reinforces the new difference between the two women that the second use calls attention to, but highlights the extent to which this difference has intensified over the course of time. The label of 'sister' paired with Lizzie's leap to action strengthens Rossetti's presentation of sisterhood as a salvific force, for it is ultimately this bond with Laura that allows Lizzie to brave her fright and act out of love.

A primary difference between the sister's respective encounters with the goblin men stems from their motives; while Laura is in a frenzied state of desire, Lizzie has the sense for forethought. She will not be forced to trade a part of herself—whether physical or spiritual—in exchange for the goblins' fruit, and she "put a silver penny in her purse" (Rossetti *GM* 324) prior to her departure. Realizing that Lizzie, unlike her sister, is immune to their seduction, the goblins reject her payment and attempt to assault her by force-feeding her fruit; her fortitude never wavers, however, and she manages to not only escape unscathed but triumphant:

Lizzie utter'd not a word;

Would not open lip from lip

Lest they should cram a mouthful in.
 But laugh'd in heart to feel the drip
 Of juice that syrapp'd all her face,
 And lodg'd in dimples of her chin,
 And streak'd her neck which quaked like curd. (Rossetti *GM* 430-6).

Knowing that she has accomplished that which she set out to and retrieved at least part of the fruit to heal her sister, Lizzie exchanges her fear for joy, even amusement, at having bested the goblins. While returning to her sister, she “heard her penny jingle / Bouncing in her purse,— / Its bounce was music to her ear” (Rossetti *GM* 452-4), reinforcing her ability to maintain her senses throughout the extent of her encounter with the goblins. Like Laura, she does not hear the goblins’ calls, but not because she is unable to—because they do not exist. The power of Lizzie’s love for her sister propels her to triumph over the goblins to the extent that she is able to replace their noise with that of her own success. Lizzie circumvents the economy of the goblins’ market and “in fact contradicts Laura’s approach to the market completely; to take without paying is to purloin, but Lizzie manages to escape with a free sample, as it were. Lizzie saves: she saves her pennies, she saves herself, she saves her fruit juice, and at last she saves her sister. Lizzie saves but never spends, never consummates an exchange” (Menke 127-8). Returning to Laura with the fruit juice, her penny, and her senses allows her the secure promise of lasting victory over the goblins.

By the time Lizzie returns, Laura has become fully aware of her fate and the ways in which she has brought it upon herself. Especially given that “the goblins’ wares of course invoke the symbolic fruits of the Bible—the forbidden fruit with which the serpent tempts Eve” (Marsh

CR 231), Laura fears that Lizzie will suffer the same fate, and that after an attempt to rescue her sister, she has only doomed herself, too:

“Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted
 For my sake the fruit forbidden?
 Must your light like mine be hidden,
 Your young life like mine be wasted,
 Undone in mine doing,
 And ruined in my ruin,
 Thirsty, canker’d, goblin-ridden?”—
 She clung about her sister,
 Kiss’d and kiss’d and kiss’d her (Rossetti *GM* 478-86).

The speaker once again uses ‘sister’ to call attention to the characteristics that both women share. The purpose of this fourth explicit mention of sisterhood is to heighten the risk of the danger to which Laura believes she has exposed her sister. In this moment where Laura believes she has doomed Lizzie to share in her fallen fate, the speaker reminds the reader that the pair already share a beginning, and it would be only natural for them to share this tragic ending as well. Laura, too, seems aware of this notion, but Lizzie’s love for her sister is so powerful that it subverts all expectations for the fallen woman. As Lorraine Janzen Kooistra suggests in “Visualizing the Fantastic Subject: *Goblin Market* and the Gaze” (1999), “as a result of Lizzie’s actions, Laura regains control over her selfhood; the sisters’ relationship achieves a more intense level of love through their painfully acquired knowledge and power” (Kooistra 141). Through the mediation of sisterly love, Lizzie repurposes the once-taboo goblin fruit and uses it as a tool through which she can save her sister, reversing the effects of her fall.

The speaker furthermore describes the salvific nature of sisterhood with bird-like language, allowing Rossetti to continue to highlight the freedom that sisterhood offers women. Beyond the continued description of Lizzie and Laura as sisters within a shared nest, the speaker uses birds when reminding the reader of the separation between, to use Dante Gabriel's speaker's language from "Jenny", the honourable Lizzie and the dishonourable fallen woman Laura. On the first day post-fall, the sisters go about their daily tasks as usual, but their minds are in vastly different places, "One warbling for the mere bright day's delight, / One longing for the night" (Rossetti *GM* 213-4). The happy warbler is Lizzie, who is content with the mundanity of the day, but Laura, who has tasted the goblin fruit and achingly yearns for more, has become a woman of the night, language which is often reserved for descriptions of sex workers (like Jenny herself). That the speaker compares Lizzie to a singing bird in this passage speaks to her freedom: she is satisfied with her life as it is, and because she is free from temptation, unlike Laura, she is free from the dangers of falling. As the day draws to a close and Laura awaits the return of the goblin men, Lizzie entices her to return to their home by reminding her that "not another maiden lags" (Rossetti *GM* 223) and "The beasts and birds are fast asleep" (Rossetti *GM* 225). Though Laura is no longer in possession of her maiden status, Lizzie nevertheless attempts to allow her to return to it, and furthermore, to that of a bird, both of whom are creatures of the day, not of the night. It is only once Lizzie saves her sister that Laura can finally obtain the freedom of a bird; "when the first birds chirp'd about their eaves" (Rossetti *GM* 530) on the morning after Laura drinks the juice from her sister, "Laura awoke as from a dream, / Laugh'd in the innocent old way" (Rossetti *GM* 537-8) and returns to her original state of maidenhood. Lizzie gives her sister not only the gift of recovery, but that of freedom, and the bird-like language the speaker uses to describe this act speaks to Rossetti's overall perception of sisterly birds as ultimately free.

Laura's return to being birdlike is akin to her return to maidenhood, and it offers her the freedom to continue to live alongside her sister in the safety of their shared nest until they are ready to build their own.

Lizzie spares her sister from the traditional fate of the fallen woman and allows her to grow into a mother and wife; in writing the sisters' relationship as such, Rossetti "reminds readers to think of all women, even fallen ones, as mothers and sisters" (Roe 351). Though Jeanie's punishment is premature death, which prevents her from ever attaining the ultimate feminine goal of wifehood and motherhood, the powerful force of sisterhood saves Laura from suffering the same demise. Once the narrative moves away from the dangers of the night and into the bright hopefulness of daylight, the sisters' encounter with the goblins seems less seriously frightening and more amusing, "and their experience is affirmed throughout the continuity of children and storytelling" (Kooistra 141):

Days, weeks, months, years
 Afterwards, when both were wives
 With children of their own;
 Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
 Their lives bound up in tender lives;
 Laura would call the little ones
 And tell them of her early prime (Rossetti *GM* 543-9).

The women's fear of the goblin market is gone because they are aware of the power of their sisterly bond and its ability to triumph over evil. Replacing the grave language they formerly used to describe the goblin are words like "wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men" (Rossetti *GM* 553); in fact, Laura's ending monologue does not include the word 'goblin' at all, speaking to the

way in which the sisters have rid not only their own lives, but the poem as a whole, of goblin influence. The decidedly feminine strength of sisterhood has defeated the male goblin market: “*Goblin Market* simultaneously recognizes ‘sisterly influence’ in its figuration of an emergent women’s tradition (Laura saved by Lizzie, Laura’s story as told to her daughters) and demonstrates how this tradition is born out of its contact with the male tradition” (Maxwell 79). The final two uses of the word ‘sister’ are in the closing lines of the poem, wherein Laura passes on her bond with Lizzie to their respective children and

Would tell them how her sister stood
 In deadly peril to do her good,
 And win the fiery antidote:
 Then joining hands to little hands
 Would bid them cling together,
 “For there is no friend like a sister
 In calm or stormy weather,
 To cheer one on the tedious way,
 To fetch one if one goes astray,
 To lift one if one totters down,
 To strengthen whilst one stands.” (Rossetti *GM* 557-67).

The poem ends with a strong declaration about sisters that ultimately highlights their long-lasting triumph over the goblin men; there is furthermore a promise that Lizzie and Laura’s shared sisterly power will continue to live on through their children, ensuring the permanence of their female victory in a male-dominated market.

Rossetti famously and “disingenuously claim[ed] that she meant nothing profound by *Goblin Market*, but even William, famous for toeing the family party line, disagreed on record” (Roe 188). Though William may have identified a deeper meaning to his sister’s poem, it is likely that he was not entirely aware of the ways in which Lizzie and Laura’s conflict with the goblin men reflected his sister’s own plight as a new writer emerging in the London literary scene. “Rossetti’s poem reveals that women cannot enter this tradition on the same footing as men, any more than they can compete with men on equal terms in the mid-Victorian marketplace. Yet it also suggests that female interaction with the male tradition, however complicated and risky, is inevitable” (Maxwell 84): Lizzie and Laura’s sisterhood is at odds with the brotherhood that exists among the goblin men. Before making any explicit mention of the women’s sisterly bond, the speaker of *Goblin Market* describes the goblins as “Brother with queer brother; / Signalling each other, / Brother with sly brother” (Rossetti *GM* 94-6). The declaration of a brotherhood label prior to that of a sisterhood label identifies the power discrepancy between the two groups: as a brotherhood, the goblins in their male-dominated market are stronger than Lizzie and Laura when the poem begins. It is only as the poem progresses and the strength of the women’s sisterhood fortifies that they are able to supersede the goblins. *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862) was Rossetti’s first major publication, and as an emerging poet in a male literary sphere—one largely influenced by her own brothers and their Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—she must have been aware of the inherent disadvantage at which she was debuting: “*Goblin Market* therefore illustrates the complex tactical process by which women might enter a male-dominated literary arena and negotiate with male texts in order to secure materials with which to enlarge their own sphere” (Maxwell 88). Just as the power of

sisterhood allows Lizzie and Laura to infiltrate and overthrow the goblin market, so too does it offer Rossetti the necessary tools with which to access the artistic world as a woman writer.

Lizzie and Laura each take on the role of the women writer attempting to break into a masculine literary sphere. The poem opens with the goblins attempting to entice the women with their fruit “Sweet to tongue and sound to eye” (Rossetti *GM* 30), and the speaker continues to use mouth-related imagery when describing the various stages of Laura’s fall and subsequent recovery. When considering the influence that Procne and Philomela have on *Goblin Market*, the poem’s early mention of tongues is relevant, for an important aspect of the myth is Tereus’s attempt to silence Philomela by cutting out her tongue. “Fearing that the truth might be discovered” (Keightley 1831: 342), Tereus robs Philomela of her voice so that she cannot reveal to anyone, especially Procne, that he has violated her. By preventing Philomela from speaking, Tereus aims to limit her for his own benefit. That the goblins attempt to lure Lizzie and Laura to their market by referencing their tongues similarly indicates their desire to control them, albeit in a different way than Tereus does Philomela. Despite her lack of speaking ability, Philomela nevertheless makes her voice heard: “she contrived to communicate her story to her sister” (Keightley 1831: 342) by any means necessary, and successfully manages to transmit information to her sister, overcoming the limitations Tereus places upon her. In the myth, the figurative ‘voice’ of the woman, even if it is not her literal voice, triumphs over male influence, and a similar phenomenon happens in Rossetti’s poem.

Regarding the goblin fruit itself, critics “propose that not only are they poems but that they are men’s poems” (Maxwell 80), and that part of Laura’s desire stems from the feminine lack of access she has to the literary world. The reading of masculine fruit as poetry is present in one of Rossetti’s own poems, an unpublished piece written in 1853 and titled “The P.R.B.”. The

poem names each of the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, including Christina's own brothers Dante Gabriel and William Michael, and ends with "So luscious fruit must fall over when ripe, / And so the consummated P.R.B." (Rossetti "P.R.B." 13-4). The ripe fruit to which the speaker refers is the art produced by the members of the PRB. This poem precedes *Goblin Market* by almost a decade, marking an early instance in which Rossetti perceives male art as fruit. Laura seems to share this perception: "for Laura, desire first enters through the epistemological aporia between the product and the knowledge of its production, the gap between perceiving the fruits and imagining their roots" (Menke 117), and the only way in which she believes she can identify their roots is by consuming them herself. "She continues her oral gratification by filling her mouth with verbal evocations of the pleasure-giving fruit that has stimulated both her physical appetite and her love of language" (Maxwell 82), but despite the overwhelming pleasure the consumption of the fruits offers her, they ultimately cannot satisfy her curiosity: she confesses to her sister, "I ate and ate my fill, / Yet my mouth waters still" (Rossetti *GM* 166-7). Though she has already fallen as a result of the initial submission to temptation, her insatiability contributes to the speed and intensity with which she deteriorates prior to salvation at the hands of her sister.

In the morning after the fall, Lizzie goes about her day normally, completing her tasks and "set[ting] to rights the house" (Rossetti *GM* 204), as is her expected womanly duty. The speaker calls attention to the mouths of women twice in this passage, once commenting on the sisters' "dainty mouths" (Rossetti *GM* 206) and then highlighting that Lizzie alone "Talk'd as modest maidens should" (Rossetti *GM* 209). That only Lizzie's mouth and speech are maiden-like speaks to another reading of Laura's fall; her engagement with male texts prevents her from fulfilling her role as a woman, which largely involves housekeeping. "It may be that

where the fallen woman or the poet as narrator offers a reassessment or redemption of female fallenness, we are likely to be reading the poet's sense of her own engagement with a male tradition" (Maxwell 87); Rossetti's potential anxieties surrounding her public emergence as a writer may manifest in this aspect of Laura's fall. As with the traditional reading of the fall, it is Lizzie's involvement that saves Laura from an unfortunate demise.

Upon retrieving the fruit juice from the goblins, Lizzie invites Laura to "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices / Squeeze'd from goblin fruits for you" (Rossetti *GM* 168-9), highlighting the ways in which her physical mediation of their once-poisonous substance has transformed it into an antidote. Rossetti uses Lizzie's triumph over the goblin market as a metaphor for her own entrance into a male-dominated literary sphere: "her goblin men and goblin fruits are her way of indicating a tradition of male-authored poems that use fruit, fruit-juice, and honey-dew as motifs for imaginative inspiration and poetic influence, and her poem shows how women poets can claim their place in this tradition by appropriating this 'scientist sap' for themselves through theft" (Maxwell 83). Rossetti once again emphasizes the many ways in which sisterhood acts as a salvific force; in this case, the desire that causes Laura to fall is that for access into the masculine artistic world, and Lizzie's influence not only saves her from her fall but furthermore provides her with that which she initially sought.

Even when closest to death, Laura is insatiable, and when her sister provides her with the fruit juice, "She kiss'd and kiss'd her with a hungry mouth" (Rossetti *GM* 492): the speaker's repeated mention of mouths in this context speaks to Rossetti's own desire, parallel to Laura's, to amplify her voice as a woman writer. Her own engagement with male texts mirrors Lizzie and Laura's respective confrontations with the goblins and their fruit, and "her confident beliefs about the mediating work of supportive sisters mean that she can use these texts in a revised and

‘strengthened’ form to mediate her own relationship with the male tradition” (Maxwell 97). Similarly, Philomela communicating with her sister despite her lack of speech is symbolic of the woman writer’s ability to make her voice heard in a male-dominated literary sphere. Philomela’s ability to relay information to Procne by weaving a story into a tapestry allows her to reform the act of female communication in the face of male limitation. Both Philomela and Lizzie adapt to the masculine world and use it to their own advantage. Lizzie notably does not merely defeat the goblins but instead manages to manipulate their weapon to benefit her and her sister: “this reading sees the poem as an allegory of the women writer’s negotiations with her male precursors’ texts, but it also charts how individual male-authored writings are absorbed into the body of the poem. While it shows that Rossetti was aware of the difficulties a woman might experience in relation to the work of poetic ‘fathers’ and ‘brothers,’ it also demonstrates that she sees women’s contact with men’s writing as a potential source of strength that can be appropriated and adapted to female use” (Maxwell 78-9). Lizzie and Laura’s sisterhood triumphs over the goblins’ brotherhood, just as Rossetti’s entrance into the masculine literary scene in London by means of this poem allows her to acknowledge and absorb the already-existing male writing and provide female-centric art in response.

Chapter Three: “Not warbling quite her merriest tune”

Elizabeth Siddal, born in 1829, is best known not for her artwork or poetry, but for her role as muse and later wife to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As Serena Trowbridge writes in her introduction to the first collection of all extant poems by Siddal, *My Ladys Soul* (2018), Siddal’s “life appears to be of more interest than her work, then; she seems to exist in our consciousness of the Victorian period as a woman who represents the repressed, neglected and ‘fallen’ females of the time” (Trowbridge 7). Until very recently, Siddal’s appeal has stemmed from her elusive, mysterious nature; given that we do not have access to much of her personal writing, various myths have taken the place of her history in our cultural consciousness. A major proponent of the refiguring of Siddal studies as focusing on her work and not only her life, Marsh asserts that “behind the myth, she was a real person” (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 15). The fantastical stories surrounding Siddal silence her own voice as a female artist, privileging instead the voices of those insistent upon mythologizing her. Despite her artistic and poetic talent, Siddal’s legacy is largely that of a tragic heroine—a secondary figure passing through the grandiose lives of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, living eternally in their artwork.

The primary work attached to Siddal’s name is not one of her own but rather one for which she modelled. Sir John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia* (1852), a painting inspired by William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, features Siddal as the eponymous figure lying in a pond and singing, an image presumably capturing the moments before she drowns (Figure 1). Mouth agape, hair flowing behind her, hands clutching flowers and held up to the sky, Siddal seemingly effortlessly embodies the ideal Victorian model: “if there is one image that conveys the idea of Pre-Raphaelite art it is that of a woman’s face, set with large, lustrous eyes and surrounded by a mass of loose hair, looking soulfully out of the canvas” (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 1). Siddal is enticing,

inviting the viewer into the world of the painting but carefully remaining silent so as to not influence their perception of her: this is the role of the model, and Siddal fulfills it so well that it is this role for which she is most often remembered. Her work as a model supersedes that as a poet or artist in her own right, for it comfortably fits into the cultural norms of the time, which the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were generally all too eager to maintain.



Figure 1: Sir John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*

Siddal began modelling in 1849 after Walter Deverell 'discovered' her working in a milliners' shop. In the years following, she worked both with and for many members of the PRB, most notably Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Ruskin; the latter later offered her two years of patronage at £150 a year in exchange for her artwork. Both men were the most vocal supporters of Siddal's own work as an artist, especially when her professional relationship with Dante Gabriel bled into her personal life. The pair were married in 1860 after years of entanglement,

and their relationship is a primary source of interest for those thrilled by the myth of Lizzie Siddal. After giving birth to a stillborn child a year into their marriage, Siddal's already-fragile mental health seriously declined, and she died of a laudanum overdose in 1862. Historians do not know whether her death was accidental, and the "dusty clouds of Pre-Raphaelite myth" (Trowbridge 16) continue to shroud the already-inaccessible truth with stories about "her (probably mythical) suicide note; [and] how her hair allegedly carried on growing after her death" (Trowbridge 8). The mystery of Lizzie Siddal's life ensures that she remains strictly in the feminine sphere of passivity and submission to male activity; allowing her to take on a voice of her own through her artwork disrupts the alluring mythical quality surrounding her. Despite resistance, Siddal worked to hold her own among members of the PRB, but "such determination belies the legend of Lizzie as a frail, delicate flower and lifelong invalid. It also illustrates how the legend came into being at the very moment that she attempted to assert her identity in a male world" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 53). By limiting her legacy to that of a model and tragic figure, the masculine artistic sphere can assert a certain level of control over her; her artistic freedom, by contrast, is threatening because it allows her to resist this control.

Siddal's relationship with Dante Gabriel, though in parts ultimately leading to her death, did first offer her resources to which many women were not privy. Much like with his sister Christina, Dante Gabriel was willing to provide Siddal with support when she attempted to enter male-dominated artistic spaces: "there was partnership as well as passion between them, based on shared activity, which was unusual in Victorian England, when male and female spheres were generally kept separate" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 45). At times, Dante Gabriel seems to have considered Siddal his artistic equal, perhaps not in terms of talent but rather in terms of deservingness of recognition; in 1857 he supported her involvement in a private exhibition of

work by Pre-Raphaelite artists, among whom she was the only woman. He made certain efforts to ignore the traditional boundaries between masculine and feminine spheres, but, as with so many male artists, he will not do so at the expense of his own comfort.

Upon Siddal's death, Dante Gabriel buried a collection of his own unpublished poetry with her, but returned seven years later to retrieve them, disturbing his late wife's grave in order to publish more of his own work. Defending his overtly selfish, disrespectful act, he wrote to Swinburne: "the truth is, no one so much as herself would have approved of my doing this. Art was the only thing for which she felt seriously. Had it been possible to her, I should have found the book on my pillow that night she was buried; and could she have opened the grave no other hand would have been needed" (33 DGR to ACS, 1869, Fredeman 2001-12, letter 69: 190).

Dante Gabriel uses Siddal's determination to make herself known as an artist in her own right—and not merely as a tool for male artists' use—against her in an attempt to justify the desecration of her grave; in doing so, he completely ignores his late wife's true motive, and cements her role in his life as exactly that which she was working against: a tool for him to use in his own work. It is as though, in death, "Lizzie was defeated and ultimately destroyed by the forces of Victorian ideology, which, not unlike our own, preferred legendary women to those who in real life tried to challenge the prescriptions of class and gender" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 223). Siddal's death—and moreover, Dante Gabriel's reaction to it—substantially forces her back into the limiting role from which she tried so desperately to escape.

Considering Siddal as an artist therefore requires the use of a particular feminist lens that is specific to the mythological position she holds in Pre-Raphaelite studies. Given that "feminist criticism, by its very nature, needs to ask 'Who is this author?' who, far from having to die, has not yet been brought to life in the reader's consciousness" (Leighton 4), it is true that Siddal's

personal life plays a large part in the proper understanding of her work. “To ignore the authorial name, and all the historical and biographical information that goes with it, would be to lose, not only an already lost history of women’s writing, but also the rationale for writing about women poets at all,” (Leighton 4), but as collector of her poems, Trowbridge calls for a reformed lens through which to view Siddal’s writing, which involves “examining her poems *as* poems, not as biographical manifestations from a Pre-Raphaelite idol. We need to look at them as though we have no idea where they came from” (Trowbridge 16). The study of women’s writing inherently involves the consideration of the sociocultural environment in which a particular woman wrote, as well as her specific role within that environment, such as in her household. Feminist criticism of women’s writing must take into account an author’s biographical information in order to make sense of the context in which she developed as a writer, but given that the reason Siddal’s work is largely ignored stems from an excessive focus on the mystery of her personal life, it may be more beneficial to view her art by homing in on the work and ignoring external conditions to provide further insight. Nevertheless, Siddal’s work as a model, for example, heavily influenced her own art, and must therefore play a part in any analysis thereof. Rejecting the myth of Siddal’s life may be crucial to accurate criticism of her work, but ignoring personal elements entirely runs the risk of treating her as the PRB treated their models: “in this form of representation, women are rendered decorative, depersonalized; they become passive figures rather than characters in a story of drama” (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 317). Depersonalizing Siddal, in any sense of the word, is counterproductive when working to restore her legacy as an artist in her own right. In order to understand Siddal’s position in a Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood made up of artists and models alike, contrasting the Brotherhood’s perception of her, it is necessary to consider biographical elements in her art and that of women artists at large.

In 1860, Christina Rossetti wrote of Lizzie Siddal: “some years ago, I knew her slightly: she was then extremely admired for beauty and talent. I hope we shall be good friends some day” (CGR 120 to Lady Pauline Trevelyan in Harrison 1: 137). Having first met Siddal in 1854 during her years-long, seemingly casual engagement to Christina’s brother Dante Gabriel, the pair did not interact much; in fact, none of the Rossetti family members were present at the quiet event that was Siddal’s wedding to Dante Gabriel. The most Rossetti saw her sister-in-law was at her brother’s studio, wherein the face of Lizzie Siddal seemed to jump out from every canvas and easel on which she lay her eyes. Resulting in this disconnected relationship with her brother’s model wife is the poem “In an Artist’s Studio”, an unpublished sonnet composed in 1856 that details the viewer’s experience with recognizing the same face in piece after piece. It furthermore introduces another kind of sisterhood with which Rossetti engages: that of an artistic sisterhood between women who are equally trying to break into artistic spheres and make names for themselves in male-dominated spaces. To borrow Marsh’s language, Rossetti describes a ‘Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood’ that engages with, rejects, and triumphs over the work of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

In an 1889 piece entitled “London Models”, published in *English Illustrated Magazine*, author Oscar Wilde describes a model as “a pretty girl, from about twelve to twenty-five years of age, who knows nothing about art, cares less, and is merely anxious to earn seven or eight shillings a day without much trouble” (Wilde 314). The role of the model, as Siddal represents, is to passively exist for the artist’s benefit, contributing nothing to the composition of the work itself beyond visual inspiration through which the artist’s talent can manifest on the canvas. The model is not meant to inspire anything that the artist himself does not mediate: “as depicted, they are silent, enigmatic passive figures, not individuals engaged in activity but objects to be gazed

upon by painter and spectator” (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 1). The act of viewing a work of art therefore does not involve the model, but rather only engages the viewer with the artist; the viewer must bypass the true face into which they look and seek the artist beyond the model herself. Though the description of an ideal model that Wilde provides directly contrasts Dante Gabriel’s assertion to Swinburne that ‘art was the only thing’ Siddal truly cared about, what remains true is the male artist’s desire for a passive model who does not wish to disrupt male art with female influences: “at an ideological level, women were required to be like the paintings—alluring and silent rather than active and equal—in a correspondence that ultimately defended the interests of men” (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 318). Rossetti’s poem interrupts this masculine correspondence between viewer and artist by featuring a female speaker engaging with the female model featured in the artwork, prompting the reader to consider the ways in which a feminine perspective differs from a masculine one.

The poem opens with the discovery that “One face looks out from all his canvases, / One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans” (Rossetti “Studio” 1-2). Though there are many works of art, the speaker only identifies one woman reflected in all of them; despite this common thread between the paintings, the canvases are notably ‘his’ and not ‘hers’ or ‘theirs’, confirming the possession of the artist over not only the work but the model herself. Furthermore, though the common figure in the paintings acts, she does not do anything that allows her to directly communicate with the viewer; the extent of her action is movement, but the boundaries of the canvas limit this movement. She notably does not speak, for example, or do anything that indicates that she has a voice of her own that exists alongside and in conversation with that of the artist; this silence threatens to push her to the foreground of the art, allowing the artist to be the focal point of the work. Much like Tereus, who robs Philomela of her voice, the artist silences his

model. The following line, however, reads: “We found her hidden just behind those screens” (Rossetti “Studio” 3), indicating that the speaker is able to identify the model despite her silence. Notably, the speaker accuses the artist of having actively ‘hidden’ the voice of the model, privileging instead the ways in which the artist uses her to amplify his own voice; the use of the passive voice further indicates the lack of agency that the model has. Moreover, the plurality of the first-person pronoun in this line is significant, for it suggests that the speaker is not the sole viewer capable of perceiving the model beyond the artist himself. When applying autobiographical bias to Rossetti’s speaker, it seems as though she uses ‘we’ in order to reflect this artistic sisterhood that exists between female artists within the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Despite the lack of personal relationship between Rossetti and Siddal, the two nevertheless share in the difficulties that accompany the plight of the Victorian woman writer, and through this poem’s speaker, Rossetti engages with these similarities by claiming a secondary kind of sisterhood between the sisters-in-law.

Rossetti’s speaker laments that the recurring face in the artist’s work is “A nameless girl” (Rossetti “Studio” 6) and not someone who will receive equal credit for the art as the artist himself will. It seems as though the speaker reflects Rossetti’s own views, for in the February twenty-sixth entry for *Time Flies*, Rossetti asserts that “we are not summoned to pose picturesquely in *tableaux vivants*, or die away gracefully like dissolving views” (Rossetti *TF* 40), referencing the women of her time. The employment of the personal pronoun ‘we’ is once again crucial to the overall argument, for it suggests the existence of a kind of solidarity between women who share experiences in the artistic sphere Rossetti describes here. The sisterhood borne from the ideas presented in this passage strives to ensure the longevity of women artists, actively working against male artists’ attempts to have their models fade away behind their own work.

“Grace, purity, and invention were qualities prized in the early Pre-Raphaelite period” (Marsh *PRS* 2019: 27), and the models’ expected silence contributes to these idealized ‘pure’ statuses that the women needed to hold; speaking out, as Rossetti as a woman writer wished to do—and furthermore which the speaker of “In an Artist’s Studio” wishes the female figure in the paintings will do—worked against this ‘graceful’ demeanour that the models, and Victorian women in general, were meant to have. To defy societal expectations alone is daunting, but to do so alongside allies is inspiring and fortifying, and Rossetti speaks to this phenomenon when describing the sort of artistic sisterhood present in the poem. The speaker acknowledges that the artist has repeatedly represented the model as “A saint, an angel—every canvas means / The same one meaning, neither more or less” (Rossetti “Studio” 7-8), and these figures reflect the above qualities that the members of the PRB ‘prized’ in their models. The speaker identifies the stagancy of the model, not only in terms of her physical movements being limited to the confines of the canvas as above, but furthermore in terms of the roles she plays in each work of art. Though she may be the inspiration for a different character or figure in each painting, like Siddal posing for Shakespeare’s Ophelia, she will always be a passive, silent model.

The reason for this passivity, according to the speaker, stems from the artist’s desire to have the model’s influence benefit but never threaten him: “He feeds upon her face by day and night, / And she with true kind eyes looks back on him, / Fair as the moon and joyful as the light” (Rossetti “Studio” 10-2). The model may gaze back at the artist, and even later at the viewer, but may never speak or actively involve herself in the creation or perception of his art. The extent to which he ‘feeds’ on her presence is limited to the ways in which she can improve his life, whether personally or professionally. Siddal benefitted Dante Gabriel in both ways, but given her own artistic talent, which existed independently from him, he likely felt threatened by

her; if she was capable of creating her own artwork, she therefore had the power to affect his work when modelling for him. Limiting her to a passive, ‘fair’, and ‘kind’ figure in his work allowed him as an artist to exert a certain control over her, preventing her from interrupting the masculine conversation between viewer and artist. It is the feminine influence of the speaker, who identifies with the difficulties that women face in male-centric spaces, that allows the model in the poem to take on a new life.

The speaker understands that the way in which she is perceiving the model is representative of her “Not as she is, but as she fills his dream” (Rossetti “Studio” 14). The speaker’s acknowledgement of the model’s dreamlike existence offers the model a certain kind of freedom. Naturally, the speaker cannot alter the paintings, nor can she physically free the model from them, but the new and charitable perception she has of the model is freeing in a different way, for it offers her an artistic liberty that her role as a model does not fulfill. The speaker allows the model to adopt a newfound agency, for the speaker’s perception of her proves that she does, in fact—despite the artist’s best efforts to hide her—have the power to influence his artwork: “Rossetti’s fantasy posits a world in which women can take pleasure in looking and survive the ordeals of being looked at to emerge triumphant as storytellers who deliberately display themselves to the gaze of others as part of an exemplary spectacle—a redemptive image of feminine power and Christian virtue to be seen, understood, and imitated” (Kooistra 141). This mutual understanding between female viewer and model contributes to the overall salvific nature of sisterhood that Rossetti describes throughout her oeuvre; in this case, the sisterhood is not familial or religious but instead artistic.

The artistic sisterhood that Rossetti evokes in this poem offers the women within it the opportunity to represent themselves on their own terms and not those of the men around them.

Accompanying the male artist's tendency to deliberately 'hide' his model within his work is the desire to silence her in order to prevent her from having too much of an influence on his art: "one result of silencing the women in this way has been to open the way for misrepresentation. From the intense faces gazing from the canvases and from the available scraps of biographical information, a range of personalities has been constructed, claiming to describe Pre-Raphaelite women. These descriptions are often slanderous in effect if not in intention" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 355), and one such description further contributes to the mythology surrounding Siddal. "The quiet dove was [...] Gabriel's favourite image for Siddal's quiet, meek demeanour when he first knew her" (Marsh *PRS* 1985: 216), and it is clear that this perception of Siddal spread amongst those to whom Dante Gabriel introduced her.

After meeting Siddal for the first time in 1854, Rossetti extended her conception of birds as sisterly figures to include the woman who would later become her sister-in-law, even if she was not yet aware of that fact. Six months after their first encounter, "she recorded her impressions in a little poem that adopted her brother's own image of Lizzie as a dove, seeing her as sweet and shy" (Marsh *CR* 151). The never-published poem, titled "Listening", includes the following lines:

And downcast were her dovelike eyes,
 And downcast was her tender cheek;
 Her pulse fluttered like a dove
 To hear him speak. (Rossetti "Listening" 11-4).

Presenting Siddal in accordance with her brother's description of her as dove-like, and furthermore in a generally submissive and timid light, contrasts Rossetti's above use of birds as figures that flee from repression and toward freedom. Though she is bird-like in nature, Siddal does not follow the liberated path of the swallow, for example, and instead adopts the soft compliance of the dove. Rossetti's description of her in particular is notable; by describing Siddal as bird-like, she accepts her as a sister, as is exemplified by her aforementioned understanding of the sisterly nature of birds. The distinction between the brave swallows, which she associates with herself and with Maria, and Siddal's demure dove is also significant, for it allows Rossetti to maintain a separation between her blood sister and her sister-in-law. Though she welcomes Siddal into the sisterhood to a certain extent, Christina acknowledges that she inherently lacks the Rossetteness that she and Maria—and furthermore, their two brothers—share.

Siddal herself adopts Dante Gabriel's perception of her, as she demonstrates in her poem "Thy strong arms around me love", later titled "Worn Out" by William Michael Rossetti, who took it upon himself to edit Siddal's work before it was published in *Ruskin, Rossetti, Pre-Raphaelitism* (1899):

For I am but a scared thing
Nor can I ever be
Aught but a bird whose broken wing
Must fly away from thee. (Siddal 5-8).

In this poem, the speaker views her vulnerability as a detriment, and describes her inability to heal from emotional distress despite the support of a companion. This support, however, seems awfully stifling, and robs the speaker of her ability to truly fulfill the destiny of a bird and fly

away from limitations and towards freedom. The contrast between the migration of the swallow and the stagnation of the dove is once again present; though “Worn Out” does not explicitly feature a dove, it is clearly inspired by Dante Gabriel’s description of Siddal and the submissive nature he projects onto her.

Much as Rossetti describes the migration of the swallow as a plight for freedom in “*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*”, she makes use of the dove to reflect the exact opposite phenomenon. The contrast between the liberated swallow and the submissive dove is present in Rossetti’s “Songs in a Cornfield” (composed in 1864 and published in 1866), which tells the story of women who are weighing the benefits of maintaining their current lifestyle against the risks of migrating in search of something greater. As per the poem’s title, the women who work in the cornfield sing about their lives while awaiting their lovers’ returns; there is just one who does not partake in this communal song, for “Marian cannot sing / While her sweetheart’s away” (Rossetti “Cornfield” 7-8). At first, the reason behind her silence seems sorrowful and tied up in missing her lover; however, as the women’s song progresses, it becomes clear that Marian is more pensive than she is sad. Her companions sing about their daily work, which consists of repetitive tasks that are ultimately unfulfilling: they must “Take the wheat, clasp the wheat / That’s food for maid and dove” (Rossetti “Cornfield” 53-4). It is not merely the wheat that must feed the maids in question, but the work itself; beyond the food satisfying their physical hunger, the tedious monotony of harvesting wheat day after day is moreover meant to satisfy the women’s desire for purpose. As doves, these women cannot question what is expected of them, and certainly cannot do so in the presence of their male acquaintances. For the first few stanzas of the poem, the women are content with singing about their work as they complete it.

It is only when they are out of the men's earshot that they begin to reveal their true feelings: "While the reapers took their ease" (Rossetti "Cornfield" 67), the women realize that they are unfulfilled by their lives. The catalyst for this discovery is the sight of none other than a swallow flying by:

‘There goes the swallow—
 Could we but follow!
 Hasty swallow stay,
 Point us out the way;
 Look back swallow, turn back swallow, stop swallow.

‘There went the swallow—
 Too late to follow:
 Lost our note of way,
 Lost our chance to-day;
 Good bye swallow, sunny swallow, wise swallow.’ (Rossetti "Cornfield"
 71-80).

As with the speaker in "*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*", the women in "Songs in a Cornfield" are inspired by the freedom that the swallow has to travel at its leisure, but ultimately acknowledge that, though they admire the swallow, they cannot follow its flight. The working women believe that they must remain in their positions as labourers: as maids and doves. Though they implore the swallow to stop flying and stay behind, abandoning its plight in favour of joining them, they know that it is the swallow's destiny to continue forward to freedom, and one woman, Rachel, laments their inability to do the same:

'After the swallow
 All sweet things follow:
 All things go their way,
 Only we must stay,
 Must not follow; good bye swallow, good swallow.' (Rossetti "Cornfield"
 81-5).

It is notable that the women identify the swallow's path as 'sweet', for this language mimics that of the "sweet South" (Rossetti "*Italia*" 1) in "*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*". Much as the south and the many freedoms it represents is unattainable to Rossetti's autobiographical speaker in the aforementioned poem, so too are the working women unable to follow the sweet flight of the swallow.

Marian is equally affected by the presence of the swallow, albeit in a way that results in a contrasting outcome to that of her companions. Despite having remained silent for the duration of the poem, even while the rest of the women sing throughout their workday, upon seeing the swallow, she finds her voice: "Then listless Marian raised her head / Among the nodding sheaves; / Her voice was sweeter than that voice" (Rossetti "Cornfield" 86-8). Though she cannot fly, Marian nevertheless follows the swallow to a certain extent, and in doing so, regains her voice. She may still be separated from her sweetheart, but the swallow has encouraged her to seek new freedom. The repeated use of the word 'sweet' indicates that Marian truly has developed a similarity to the inspirational swallow: Rachel identifies the swallow's followers as sweet, and that is exactly what Marian has become, having transformed from a submissive dove into a liberated swallow. She cements the difference between her past and present selves by returning to the topic of her lover; instead of continuing to mourn his absence, she asserts that the

longer he takes to return, the more likely it is that she will be gone: “If he comes the next day, / He’ll not find her at all” (Rossetti “Cornfield” 115-6). The poem ends with Marian’s aspiration to truly become swallow-like and flee her current stagnant life in search of something new and fulfilling, leaving behind the rest of the women who cannot bring themselves to follow the swallow by whom they cannot but be inspired. The freedom of the swallow, on display in both “Songs in a Cornfield” and “*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*”, is likely inspired by Procne and Philomela. In the latter poem, freedom is physical, for it involves a migration to a new location, whereas in the former, freedom is more spiritual. The swallow inspires a desire for fulfillment that the women in the cornfield otherwise would not have known they lacked. While Procne and Philomela are free from physical limitations when they transform into birds, so too do they leave behind the figurative restrictions placed upon them by a patriarchal world.

Doves continue to appear throughout Rossetti’s writing as submissive, passive figures; the poem “The Lowest Room” (composed in 1856 and published in 1875) employs Maria’s love for Classical myth and bird-like sisterly imagery alike when exploring the cultural gender norms of the time. “Originally titled ‘An argument over the body of Homer’” (Roe 286), the poem uses language from the Homeric epic *The Iliad* to illustrate a disagreement between two sisters over the conflicting male and female spheres of their society and the differing ways in which they are able to access each. Rossetti’s poem is directly inspired by her sister Maria’s lifelong interest in the epic: “unlike her brothers, to whom the language was a chore and the legends of less interest than their home-made tales of bandits and brigands, she conceived a lifelong passion for the heroes of *The Iliad*, which in childhood was far stronger than religion” (Marsh CR 29). These heroes feature heavily in “The Lowest Room”, providing a fictional conflict onto which the

sisters can project their own argument. “Ambitious girls tended to identify themselves with male heroes and to be interested in politics and war” (Hurst 8), but despite the real Maria’s genuine fascination with Homeric character, it is the semi-autobiographical speaker of the poem that truly adopts the position of war hero at the end of the sisters’ disagreement.

The first use of the word ‘sister’ in the poem is in the following passage: “‘What is your grief now tell me, sweet, / That I may grieve,’ my sister said” (Rossetti “Room” 9-10), indicating the desire to share burdens so as to lighten a sister’s load. The speaker expresses her annoyance with Classical epic by lamenting that “Old Homer leaves a sting” (Rossetti “Room” 24); the pain of this ‘sting’ stems from the clear divide that the world of Greek epic delineates between masculine spheres and feminine spheres. The speaker is hesitant to share this concern with her sister because, despite the mutual disadvantages they face in a patriarchal world, she believes that her sister is not concerned enough by this inequality to be willing to enact any change to improve their positions as women. While the speaker is preoccupied with questions such as, “how could women fulfil their ambition and aspirations to excellence? How could they relate to the world of masculine endeavour and achievement?” (Marsh *CR* 180), her sister contentedly partakes in her daily household tasks. Much as the women in “Songs in a Cornfield” are not bothered by the mundanity of their work, the speaker’s sister in “The Lowest Room” is, at first, seemingly satisfied with her position in the social hierarchy. She claims that she “would rather be one of us / Than wife, or slave, or both” (Rossetti “Room” 68-9) when her sister points out that, in the time of Homeric epics, “By them a slave was worshipped more / Than is by us a wife” (Rossetti “Room” 63-4). The speaker’s sister identifies the similarities between a slave’s lack of freedom and that of a wife, and her response indicates her belief that, with their lives being as they are, the two sisters have a satisfactory level of freedom.

The speaker draws a clear distinction between her Homeric role and that of her sister at the beginning of their disagreement; while she yearns for an improvement in social standing, lamenting, “A shame it is, our aimless life” (Rossetti “Room” 81), she places her sister in a decidedly passive position by comparing her to another Homeric archetype: that of the faithful wife. She references the wife of Odysseus, Penelope, who spends two decades loyally waiting for her husband to return by rejecting the pursuit of suitors and weaving a seemingly-endless funeral shroud for her father-in-law. The speaker mentions Penelope in the middle of expressing her desire for access to the male sphere: “The princess laboured at her loom” (Rossetti “Room” 73); only a few lines later does the speaker once again use the imagery of a weaving woman, but this time, she does so in reference to her sister, whose “needle erred, a moment’s pause” (Rossetti “Room” 89). In “‘Frogs and Fat Toads’: Christina Rossetti and the Significance of the Nonhuman” (1999), Kathryn Burlinson identifies “two literary traditions, one predominantly male, the other female, which Rossetti inherited and worked within” (Burlinson 176), and the speaker makes use of both when describing the difference between the two sisters in this section of the poem. Due to her desire for heroism, she aims to exist in the masculine sphere, whereas her sister, taking the place of the dutiful Classical wife, is securely in the feminine sphere. The brief ‘pause’ of her needle, however, is indicative of the speaker’s growing influence on her sister as she continues her speech. Moreover, Rossetti may be referencing the tapestry that Philomela weaves when trying to communicate with her sister after having her tongue cut out. She is able to recount her story “by means of characters woven into a peplus” (Keightley 1831: 342), using a traditionally feminine activity to engage in an activity that, in the world of the myth, is decidedly masculine: speech. Philomela rejects the silence that Tereus attempts to impose on her by cutting out her tongue, instead finding her ‘voice’ while still existing in the

feminine sphere. Rossetti uses this duality to demonstrate the speaker and her sister's continued attempts to balance their involvement in the masculine and feminine spheres of their society; their attempts are furthermore representative of those of women writers at large, who did not want to risk venturing too far but nevertheless wished for their own voices to be heard.

Eventually, the speaker's sister declares that the speaker should take it upon herself to improve her social positioning if she is so unsatisfied with it; what is especially interesting is that she includes herself in this hypothetical improvement, asking, "Why should not you, why should not I / Attain heroic strength?" (Rossetti "Room" 115-6). The speaker's sister begins a speech of her own, wherein she condemns the inequality women face in both the era of Homeric epic and their current existence, and after declaring that both women should strive to become heroes in their own right—a sentiment expressed in a far more intense way than that in which her sister expressed her own desire for social improvement—she suddenly feels as though she has crossed a line, and must backtrack for her own safety:

To me our days seem pleasant days,
Our home a haven of pure content;
Forgive me if I said too much,
So much more than I meant.

'Homer, tho' greater than his gods,
With rough-hewn virtues was sufficed
And rough-hewn men: but what are such
To us who learn of Christ?' (Rossetti "Room" 149-56).

The speaker's sister must return to the feminine sphere of household work and religious devotion in order to repent for the speech she deems out-of-line and inappropriate for women. The speaker's frustration with her sister doubles as a result of her sister's almost immediate rejection of her own ideological breakthrough, but being the elder sister, she is primarily concerned for her sister's well-being, "For mild she was, of few soft words" (Rossetti "Room" 161). The use of passive language like 'mild' and 'soft' is relevant here because it is reminiscent of the language of doves that Rossetti uses when describing Siddal. The speaker's sister's fearful, hasty return to the safety of the feminine sphere after daring to question her lack of access to the masculine sphere places her squarely in the position of dove in Rossetti's bird vocabulary, but it furthermore represents the endless plight of the woman writer, whose attempt to appropriately engage with the masculine literary tradition forces her to maintain a certain level of femininity. In "Dying to Be a Poetess: The Conundrum of Christina Rossetti" (1999), Margaret Linley identifies the ways in which Victorian women writers needed to strike a balance between masculinity and femininity in order to be taken seriously as writers but still be considered 'pure' women: "the performance of femininity required of a writing woman in the nineteenth century also entailed the constant reformation of authorial image; indeed such reformation, frequently couched in the religious language of redemption and resurrection" (Linley 287-8). The speaker's sister in "The Lowest Room" does not wish to play this balancing game, and therefore forgoes any attempt to break into the masculine world in favour of the safety of the feminine one.

Witnessing her sister's retreat from her brief moment of radicalism, the speaker remarks that she is "Not warbling her merriest tune / Bird-like from tree to tree" (Rossetti "Room" 207-8) as she normally does; instead, her sister seems to be rejecting her own voice in favour of comfort. The bird-like language in this line, when in conversation with other poems from

Rossetti's oeuvre, seems to track the premature ending to the speaker's sister's flight to freedom. Her above declaration of a desire for freedom may be the moment in which she takes flight, so to speak, but fear seems to get the better of her, leading her to cease her migration and return to the home she knows, for though it is no longer stimulating, it is comfortable and safe. Unlike the swallow that inspires the women in "Songs in a Cornfield", the dove in "The Lowest Room" forces the speaker's sister to remain stagnant, foregoing a desire for freedom out of fear. The swallow prompts the return of Marian's voice, but the dove robs the sister's speaker of her true voice by removing the joy from her song. Once again, Rossetti establishes a connection between Philomela and the freedom that her transformation into a swallow offers her. Having restored her own voice figuratively, Philomela is granted freedom by the gods, and her birdsong allows her to physically regain her voice as well. The swallow is free to project her voice, fulfilling the desire of the Victorian woman writer on display in "The Lowest Room".

Unlike her sister, the speaker does not wish to continue to live in the domestic feminine sphere, and instead "chose a book to read and dream" (Rossetti "Room" 209), reinforcing her goal to break into the masculine literary sphere reflected in Classical epic. She does not want to fall victim to the same fate as her sister, and wishes to have a voice of her own that can be heard externally from her home. The speaker's plight may stem from Rossetti's own desire to stake her claim as a woman with a voice in London's literary scene; an 1864 letter reads: "to have thought, as my own spontaneous thought, in any form or degree, the same thought as Shakespeare, must reconcile me to an apparent (though, as far as I know, merely an apparent) imitation" (CGR 227 to W.H. Budden in Harrison 1: 204). Rossetti was aware of the degree to which women's writing would always come second to men's writing, and the construction of her speaker in "The Lowest Room" reflects her frustration at the acknowledged inequality between the voices of women and

men. By choosing books, the speaker makes an active effort to reject this inequality in favour of projecting her own voice, “to display and exploit femininity, to criticize the gender politics of representation, to interpret and shape literary history (and [her] own location in it), and to protest the social subordination and dispossession of women” (Linley 291), contrasting with her sister’s unwillingness to do so.

Rossetti once again employs the notion of birds as sisterly to reflect the difference between the respective journeys that the sisters in this poem undergo. The speaker laments her sister’s inability to fly with her toward freedom—away from the feminine sphere and into the masculine one—because, “Tho’ nestling of the selfsame nest” (Rossetti “Room” 218), the pair are different in this fundamental way. “Words were very important to all the Rossettis, and were selected more carefully than clothes, houses, or lovers” (Roe 132), and Rossetti’s use of ‘selfsame’ when describing the ‘nest’ from which the sisters were borne is therefore crucial to her perception of their respective paths. The language here is similar to that in *Goblin Market*, particularly the postlapsarian passage that highlights the similarities Lizzie and Laura continue to share despite the latter’s newly-fallen status. Moreover, it reflects Gabriele Rossetti’s description of his daughters as “Lovely turtle-doves / In the nest of Love” (qtd. in Marsh *CR* 24), another poetic placement of the dove in the feminine space of the family home. That the sisters in “The Lowest Room” come from the same nest but are nevertheless choosing separate paths is at first upsetting to the speaker, because she believes that their inherent similarities (as the speaker of Dante Gabriel’s “Jenny” puts it, their ‘sister vessels’) should be enough to allow them to embark on the same path towards freedom. As the poem draws to a close, however, she grows to accept that she and her sister have made contrasting choices and must each bear the subsequent consequences.

The final lines of the poem take place twenty years in the future, where the speaker's sister has become "a stately wife" (Rossetti "Room" 230) and remains "in her home most tender dove" (Rossetti "Room" 246). Unlike her sister, the speaker is unmarried and likely still living in the original nest she shared with her sister; despite this difference, however, neither woman has managed to enter the masculine sphere, a failure more tragic for the speaker than for her sister, who consciously gave up on trying. Nevertheless, her sister is still not content, for having seen the potential freedom awaiting her beyond domestic abilities and deciding not to seek it out of fear, "her song just mellowed by regret" (Rossetti "Room" 257). Both women exist within the feminine sphere, one by choice and one by default, but neither one is satisfied by this existence. Given her seemingly continuous plight, however, the speaker must be "Content to take the lowest place, / The place assigned me here" (Rossetti "Room" 271-2). Though her sister's song is the one full of regret, the speaker acknowledges that she has made a choice that offers her less than that which her sister has; she may not regret her decision to attempt to migrate away from the limitations of femininity and toward the liberties of masculinity, but she nevertheless understands that to do so is to remain at a disadvantage. Like Siddal, her sister the dove is confined to the feminine sphere of the home, but her continued efforts to enter the heroic literary world inspire hope "that a very different future may materialize" (Linley 308) for the woman writer. The dove cannot attain the freedom of the swallow, which Rossetti explores in other poems, mediated as it is by the Procne and Philomela myth. In Rossetti's vocabulary, the woman writer's desire to become swallow-like is representative of her desire to amplify her own voice in a public, masculine sphere instead of limiting it to the private, feminine sphere.

Conclusion

Christina Rossetti once wrote to her brother William: “who shall wish you well except the sister whom you have cared for all her life?” (CGR 529 to WMR in Harrison 1: 433). The letter dates back to 1873, following news of the engagement between William and Lucy Madox Brown; in this time of great joy, Christina employed the greatest tool at her disposal: her sisterly love. This thesis began with Rossetti calling on the power of sisterhood in an attempt to lessen her sibling’s pain by taking it on herself, and it will end with her using this power to share in his happiness.

Rossetti’s mediation of sisterhood through the Classical myth of Procne and Philomela, two sisters who transform into a nightingale and a swallow while escaping danger, manifests throughout her oeuvre in a litany of ways. She likely accessed the myth through Thomas Keightley’s original 1831 publication of *The Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy*, which was included in Bertram Rota’s 1973 catalogue of books left behind in William Rossetti’s family estate. The copy of Keightley’s text was inscribed by Rossetti’s mother Frances to her sister Charlotte Polidori, an aunt alongside whom Rossetti spent many years living. That the text was passed between two generations of sisters—the Polidoris, and later, the Rossettis—is relevant to Christina’s reading of its contents, particularly when considering the Procne and Philomela myth. Her siblings, Maria Francesca, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael, were all writers and artists in their own right, as was her father Gabriele. Given that Rossetti’s poetic identity was tied up in being part of a family overflowing with artistic talent, it is important to consider the personal and familial contexts in which she not only received the myth but called upon it in her own writing.

The first chapter of the thesis explored the genesis of the bird-filled vocabulary that Rossetti uses to describe sisterhood and its salvific nature in her work. A poem by Gabriele

describing his daughters as “Lovely turtle-doves / In the nest of Love” (qtd. in Marsh *CR* 24), for example, serves as an early instance in which Christina could have associated birds with sisters. More broadly, Rossetti conceives of birds as siblings living within the shared nest built by their parents. As many entries in the reading diary *Time Flies* (1885) elucidate, a bird’s ability to fly is entirely attributed to the support offered by its parents in the building and maintaining of a loving nest. In this text, Rossetti has in mind not only her own parents, but moreover God her Father, in whose nest she lives among other Christians. Early writing from Rossetti’s childhood and later work like *Time Flies* both share themes revolving around nests as family homes, which is indicative of Rossetti’s lifelong perception of birds as sibling-like figures. Procne and Philomela’s influence works alongside this childhood-borne conceptualization in the poem “*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*” (1865), which explores Rossetti’s dual cultural identity. The pull that the speaker feels towards Italy, “the sweet South” (Rossetti “*Italia*” 12), contrasts her unwillingness to return to England, “that bleak North” (Rossetti “*Italia*” 8). Rossetti’s Italian-English heritage is the focus of this poem, and it is only “when our swallows fly back to the South” (Rossetti “*Italia*” 11) that she will find satisfaction in bridging the gap between her English identity and her Italian one. The swallow’s freedom is unattainable to the autobiographical speaker of this poem, but as with Procne and Philomela, this freedom can be shared through sisterhood.

The second chapter focused on the sisterhood between Lizzie and Laura in *Goblin Market* (1862) and the way in which its salvific nature frees Laura from the traditional fate of the fallen woman. The poem opens with Lizzie attempting to convince her sister to ignore the calls of the goblin men, using the cautionary tale of Jeanie, who submitted to the goblins and “who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died / In her gay prime” (Rossetti *GM* 314-6). Laura nevertheless gives in to her desire and eats the goblin fruit, setting her own fall in motion. What

differentiates Jeanie and Laura, and what ultimately saves the latter from the former's fate, is the meditative presence of a sister. Lizzie and Laura's sisterhood, wherein they are "Like two pigeons in one nest / Folded in each other's wings" (Rossetti *GM* 185-6), is what shields Laura from truly facing the consequences of her fall—namely, death. It furthermore allows Lizzie to face the goblins herself, manipulating their own tools for use against them; in returning with the antidote for Laura's illness, juice that must be sucked from her body, Lizzie's sisterly mediation of goblin fruit allows Laura, "like a caged thing freed" (Rossetti *GM* 505), to reverse the effects of her fall. The bird-like imagery that Rossetti uses throughout this poem is evocative of Procne and Philomela's transformations into birds mid-escape from Tereus, which are similar to Laura's revival after drinking Lizzie's fruit juice. The efforts that Procne makes to save her own sister in the myth mirror Lizzie's course of action. The declaration at the end of *Goblin Market* that "there is no friend like a sister / [...] To strengthen whilst one stands" (Rossetti *GM* 563-7) reinforces Rossetti's belief in the salvific nature of sisterhood.

The third chapter expanded Rossetti's definition of 'sisterhood' to include her fellow Victorian female artists, who make up an unofficial Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood in response to the ever-present Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of the time. Rossetti's bird vocabulary continues to develop with the inclusion of the dove, a passive figure who contrasts with the active swallow. She associates the dove with Lizzie Siddal, her sister-in-law and subject of the poems "In an Artist's Studio" (1856) and "Listening" (1854). Rossetti borrows her brother Dante Gabriel's words when describing his wife Siddal's "dovelike eyes" (Rossetti "Listening" 11) and demure nature. Siddal's role as a model was, and is, considered far more seriously than her vocation as an artist in her own right, and though male artists and critics may attempt to silence her voice, Rossetti's speaker asserts that "We found her hidden just behind those screens" (Rossetti

“Studio” 3), indicating that she is able to identify the model despite her silence. This ‘we’ reflects the artistic sisterhood that exists between female artists within the Pre-Raphaelite circle, and may also be inspired by Procne and Philomela. Though Tereus attempts to silence Philomela by cutting her tongue out, she is nevertheless able to use her ‘voice’ in communicating to Procne, allowing herself to tell her story and ultimately leading both sisters to safety. Philomela the swallow contrasts Siddal the dove, especially in “Songs in a Cornfield” (1864) wherein working women lament their inability to achieve the swallow’s freedom of flight: ““There goes the swallow— / Could we but follow!”” (Rossetti “Cornfield” 71-2). Instead, they must “Take the wheat, clasp the wheat / That’s food for maid and dove” (Rossetti “Cornfield” 53-4) and remain squarely in the domestic feminine sphere. Similarly, the speaker of “The Lowest Room” (1856) wishes to access the masculine sphere and argues with her sister, who remains “in her home most tender dove” (Rossetti “Room” 246). The speaker remarks, however, that she is “Not warbling her merriest tune / Bird-like from tree to tree” (Rossetti “Room” 207-8) as she normally does; instead, her sister seems to be rejecting her own voice in favour of comfort, much as the women do in “Songs in a Cornfield”. The freedom afforded Procne and Philomela is desirable but unattainable to the dove, the woman artist like Siddal, whose voice is continuously silenced. Rossetti suggests that it is sisterhood, such as that between Pre-Raphaelite Sisters, that offers women writers the chance to find freedom in flight.

Rossetti built her sisterly bird vocabulary as she developed both personally and artistically alongside her siblings; in doing so, she discovered the salvific nature of sisterhood, making it the focus of much of her writing. The poems highlighted here are but a few in which Rossetti calls upon the power of sisterhood and ventures to share it with the world. As presented in her poetry, sisterhood offers Rossetti the freedom of the swallow.

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