

Rossetti's *Maude: Prose and Verse* and a reference guide to the writings on Christina Rossetti.

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CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

The Complete Poems

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80 "Daughter mine, your mother comes to sit with you awhile,
She's sad today, and who but you her sadness can beguile?"

He too left me. Shall I touch my harp now while I wait,—
(I hear them doubling guard below before our palace gate)—
Or shall I work the last gold stitch into my veil of state;

85 Or shall my woman stand and read some unimpassioned
scene,

There's music of a lulling sort in words that pause between;
Or shall she merely fan me while I wait here for the queen?

Again I caught my father's voice in sharp word of command:
"Charge!" a clash of steel: "Charge again, the rebels stand.

90 Smite and spare not, hand to hand; smite and spare not, hand
to hand."

There swelled a tumult at the gate, high voices waxing higher;
A flash of red reflected light lit the cathedral spire;
I heard a cry for faggots, then I heard a yell for fire.

"Sit and roast there with your meat, sit and bake there with
your bread,

95 You who sat to see us starve," one shrieking woman said:
"Sit on your throne and roast with your crown upon your
head."

Nay, this thing will I do, while my mother tarrieth,
I will take my fine spun gold, but not to sew therewith,
I will take my gold and gems, and rainbow fan and wreath;

100 With a ransom in my lap, a king's ransom in my hand,
I will go down to this people, will stand face to face, will stand
Where they curse king, queen, and princess of this cursed
land.

They shall take all to buy them bread, take all I have to give;
I, if I perish, perish; they today shall eat and live;

105 I, if I perish, perish; that's the goal I half conceive:

Once to speak before the world, rend bare my heart and show
The lesson I have learned, which is death, is life, to know.
I, if I perish, perish; in the name of God I go.

SHALL I FORGET?

Shall I forget on this side of the grave?
I promise nothing: you must wait and see
Patient and brave.
(O my soul, watch with him and he with me.)

5 Shall I forget in peace of Paradise?
I promise nothing: follow, friend, and see
Faithful and wise.
(O my soul, lead the way he walks with me.)

VANITY OF VANITIES.

Ah woe is me for pleasure that is vain,
Ah woe is me for glory that is past:
Pleasure that bringeth sorrow at the last,
Glory that at the last bringeth no gain!
5 So saith the sinking heart; and so again
It shall say till the mighty angel-blast
Is blown, making the sun and moon aghast,
And showering down the stars like sudden rain.
And evermore men shall go fearfully
10 Bending beneath their weight of heaviness;
And ancient men shall lie down wearily,
And strong men shall rise up in weariness;
Yea, even the young shall answer sighingly,
Saying one to another: How vain it is!

(1863)

L. E. L.

"Whose heart was breaking for a little love."

Downstairs I laugh, I sport and jest with all:
But in my solitary room above

I turn my face in silence to the wall;
My heart is breaking for a little love.

5 Tho' winter frosts are done,
 And birds pair every one,
And leaves peep out, for springtide is begun.

I feel no spring, while spring is wellnigh blown,
I find no nest, while nests are in the grove:

10 Woe's me for mine own heart that dwells alone,
 My heart that breaketh for a little love.
 While golden in the sun
 Rivulets rise and run,
While lilies bud, for springtide is begun.

15 All love, are loved, save only I; their hearts
 Beat warm with love and joy, beat full thereof:
They cannot guess, who play the pleasant parts,
My heart is breaking for a little love.

 While beehives wake and whirr,
20 And rabbit thins his fur,
In living spring that sets the world astir.

I deck myself with silks and jewelry,
I plume myself like any mated dove:
They praise my rustling show, and never see
25 My heart is breaking for a little love.
 While sprouts green lavender
 With rosemary and myrrh,
For in quick spring the sap is all astir.

Perhaps some saints in glory guess the truth,
30 Perhaps some angels read it as they move,
And cry one to another full of ruth,
"Her heart is breaking for a little love."

 Tho' other things have birth,
 And leap and sing for mirth,
35 When springtime wakes and clothes and feeds the earth.

Yet saith a saint: "Take patience for thy scathe;"
Yet saith an angel: "Wait, for thou shalt prove
True best is last, true life is born of death,
O thou, heart-broken for a little love.

40 Then love shall fill thy girth,
 And love make fat thy dearth,
When new spring builds new heaven and clean new earth."

LIFE AND DEATH.

Life is not sweet. One day it will be sweet
To shut our eyes and diè:
Nor feel the wild flowers blow, nor birds dart by
With flitting butterfly,

5 Nor grass grow long above our heads and feet,
Nor hear the happy lark that soars sky high,
Nor sigh that spring is fleet and summer fleet,
 Nor mark the waxing wheat,
Nor know who sits in our accustomed seat.

10 Life is not good. One day it will be good
 To die, then live again;
To sleep meanwhile: so not to feel the wane
Of shrunk leaves dropping in the wood,
Nor hear the foamy lashing of the main,

15 Nor mark the blackened bean-fields, nor where stood
 Rich ranks of golden grain
Only dead refuse stubble clothe the plain:
Asleep from risk, asleep from pain.

BIRD OR BEAST?

Did any bird come flying
After Adam and Eve,
When the door was shut against them
And they sat down to grieve?

CR wrote to DGR: 'Please cut it short, as you suggest' (31 March [1865] in *Letters*, I, 239), and the last four stanzas in MS (BL) were dropped.

13 *Go to sleep, my sweet sister Jane* 'In a copy of Christina's *Poems*, 1875, I find that she has altered line 1 of stanza 5 thus – "Sleep, sister, and wake again"' ('Notes' 484).

40 *Feel not after my clasping hand* when Jesus appeared to Mary at the tomb, he told her: "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17).

MEMORY

[Part I composed 8 Nov. 1857; Part II composed 17 Feb. 1865. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904.]

A ROYAL PRINCESS

[Composed 22 Oct. 1851. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904. First published in *Poems: An Offering to Lancashire. Printed and Published for the Art Exhibition for the Relief of Distress in the Cotton Districts*. (Emily Faithfull, 1863), 2–10.]

Although published as part of an effort to help mill workers who were suffering as a result of the interruption of cotton shipments from the USA during the Civil War, CR had written this poem long before the 'Cotton Famine' began ('Notes' 461). Marsh suggests that it may have been inspired by the 'strife and peace' theme set by the Portfolio Society, of which CR was a member. She also points out that the tone is reminiscent of Barrett Browning's *Curse for a Nation* (1860) (CR 275–6). In a letter to DGR [13 March 1865], in which CR discusses which poems should appear in *The Prince's Progress* volume, she writes: 'Don't you think we might advantageously eject "Royal Princess" also, which is rather a spite of mine?' (*Letters*, I, 234).

31–3 *Some to work . . . winter nips* apparently DGR had advised CR to cut this stanza; but in a letter to him [24 April 1865], she writes that it 'is by so much one of the best stanzas that I am loath to sacrifice it. Is it so very like Keats? I doubt if I ever read the lines in question, never having read the *Isabella* through. I do not fight for the R.P.'s heroism; though it seems to me that the royal soldiers might yet have succeeded in averting *roasting*. A *yell* is one thing, and a *fait accompli* quite another' (*Letters*, I, 242). CR is referring to *Isabella*; or, 'The Pot of Basil' (1820).

62 *There are families out grazing like cattle in the park* during the Irish Famine (1845–

9, especially 1848), starving families were reported to have eaten grass to survive. Chris Morash, 'Literature, Memory, Atrocity', in *Fearful Realities: New Perspectives on the Famine*, ed. Chris Morash and Richard Hayes (Irish Academic Press, 1996), p. 113, quoting from a newspaper account of an inquest held in 1848 (from 'Inquests' in *United Irishman* I, 14 (13 May 1848), p. 211): 'A poor man, whose name we could not learn . . . lay down on the roadside, where shortly after he was found dead, his face turned to the earth, and a portion of the grass and turf on which he lay masticated in his mouth.'

76 *After us the deluge 'Après nous le déluge'* – Marquise de Pompadour's comment to Louis XV after Frederick the Great's defeat of the French and Austrian armies (1757) – in effect, pointing towards the likelihood of a revolution while, at the same time, expressing lack of interest in anything that might happen after their lifetimes.

77 *If bread's the staff of life* Bread is referred to as the 'staff of life' throughout the Old Testament: e.g. 'I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem' (Eze. 4:16).

104, 105, 108 *I, if I perish, perish* Esther tells the story of the Hebrew wife of a Persian king, who risked her own life by pleading with her husband to save her people from an edict condemning them to death – 'so will I go unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish' (Esther 4:16). Esther's intercession is seen as prefiguring Mary's intercession with Christ for the souls of sinners. See Part 8, l. 1 of 'Monna Innominata'.

SHALL I FORGET?

[Composed 21 Feb. 1865. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904.]

4 *watch with him* see note for Part 2, l. 1 of 'Old and New Year Ditties'.

VANITY OF VANITIES ['Ah woe is me for pleasure that is vain']

[Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904. First published in 1847.]

Title see note for l. 1 for 'One Certainty'.

1 *Ah woe is me for pleasure that is vain* 'I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity' (Ecc. 2:1). See also note for l. 1 of 'One Certainty'.

L. E. L.

[Composed 15 Feb. 1859. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904. First published in *Victoria Magazine* 1 (May 1863), 40–41.]

WR says the footnote ('L.E.L. by E.B.B.') in the MS (BL):

must refer to Mrs. Browning's poem named *L. E. L.'s Last Question* [1844]; but it is not entirely clear what relation Christina meant to indicate between that poem and her own *Spring*. Apparently she relied either upon L. E. L.'s phrase, which was, 'Do you think of me as I think of you?' – or else upon a phrase occurring in Mrs. Browning's lyric, 'One thirsty for a little love' [VI, 4]. It will be clear to most readers that Christina's poem *Spring* relates to herself, and not at all to the poetess L. E. L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon) [1802–39] . . . The poem, as it stands in my sister's MS. note-book, has lines 1 and 3 of each stanza unrhymed, and she has pencilled a note thus: 'Gabriel fitted the double rhymes as printed, with a brotherly request that I would use them'; and elsewhere she adds, 'greatly improving the piece' . . . ('Notes' 483)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem refers to a poem by Landon and also pays 'homage to Landon's mourning ode to Felicia Hemans [1793–1835] in saluting the "bay-crowned living one that o'er the bay-crowned dead art bowing"' (*CR* 246–7). Marsh points out that this poem also echoes Barrett Browning's 'The Mask' (1850) (*CR* 247) and indirectly alludes to Landon's 'Night at Sea' (1841) and Hemans's 'A Parting Song' (1839) (*CR Poems* 435).

Epigraph misquotation of a line from Barrett Browning's 'L. E. L.'s Last Question' (see headnote, above).

3 *I turn my face in silence to the wall* Hezekiah, told by the prophet Amos that he was going to die, 'turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord' (2 Kings 20:2; see also Isa. 38:2).

LIFE AND DEATH

[Composed 24 April 1863. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904.]

12 *To sleep meanwhile* see headnote of 'Dream-Land'.

BIRD OR BEAST?

[Composed 15 Aug. 1864. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904.]

In a letter to DGR [11 March 1865], CR refers to this poem and 'Eve' as 'the two *Eves*' (*Letters*, I, 232).

19–20 *The lamb and the dove / Were preachers sent from God* Jesus Christ (the lamb) and the Holy Spirit (the dove) thus complete the Holy Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit).

EVE

[Composed 20 Jan. 1865. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904.]

A prayer in *FD* illustrates CR's characteristic attitude towards Eve: 'O God All-Wise, let us not be as our mother Eve who thought to hanker after good knowledge denied, when in truth she hankered after evil knowledge kept back' (16).

13–14 *Tree of Life . . . Tree twelvefold-fruited* the tree of life was in the 'midst' of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9); and see 'In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of nations' (Rev. 22:2). CR associates the Tree of Life with Christ, and the twelve-fold fruits with the manna sent from heaven to feed the Israelites in the wilderness – which 'mysteriously adapted to the palate of each eater', just as the 'True Bread from Heaven' will satisfy every taste of 'the perfected Israel' (*FD* 524).

33 *Cain hath slain his brother* Eve's child Cain killed his younger brother Abel because God accepted Abel's sacrifice but not his (Gen. 4:3–8).

56 *comes* rabbits.

61 *deprecation* prayer.

GROWN AND FLOWN

[Composed 21 Dec. 1864. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904.]

A FARM WALK

[Lines 1–40 composed 11 July 1864; date of composition of ll. 41–68 unknown. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904.]

SOMEWHERE OR OTHER

[Composed Oct. 1863. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1875, 1876a, 1904.]

A CHILL

[Probably composed between Oct. 1863 and 15 Jan. 1864. Editions: 1866, 1866a, 1876a, 1904.]