Christina Rossetti's Sing-Song and Nineteenth-Century Children's Poetry
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In a corrupted Age the putting the World in order would breed Confusion. (*Misc.*, p. 244)

31. To serve the Publick faithfully, and at the same time please it entirely, is impracticable. Oct.

Resolving to serve well, and at the same time to please, is generally resolving to do what is not to be done. (*Polit.*, p. 215)

32. Men often mistake themselves, seldom forget themselves. Nov.

Men often mistake themselves, but they never forget themselves. (*Moral*, p. 240)

The Way to Wealth duplicates only one of the above:

In the Affairs of the World, Men are saved, not by Faith, but by the Want of it. Cf. #12.

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CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *SING-SONG* AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHILDREN'S POETRY

IN the current revival of interest in Christina Rossetti, *Sing-Song*,[1] her book of poems for children, should be reconsidered. Generally, critics have examined only the poems which are light in tone or show the influence of Lear and Carroll. Its moral poems have been disregarded and its kinship with contemporary sentimental anthologies of poetry for children has never been recognized. It should be realized that half the poems in *Sing-Song* repeat the moral and sentimental themes which were the stock in trade of nineteenth-century children's poetry.

Sing-Song was published during a vogue for nonsense and fantasy in children's literature. When Sidney Colvin reviewed it, in *The Academy* of 15 January 1872, he also reviewed Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* and Lear's *More Nonsense*. It is with this movement away from the heavy morality of early children's literature that *Sing-Song* has usually been associated. Some poems do reflect the new interest in nonsense, and the nature poems have no moral. But at least half the poems are rooted in the moral tradition of children's poetry which goes back to Watts's *Divine Songs for Children* (1715) and the Taylors' *Original Poems for Infant Minds* (1804) and continued in Christina Rossetti's time, although weakened and sentimentalized, in such popular anthologies as *Children with the Poets* (Philadelphia, 1868), *Little Lays for Little Folk* (London, 1867), *Chimes for Childhood* (Boston, 1868, 1879), and *The Horn of Plenty of Home Poems and Pictures* (Boston, 1876).[2]

Christina Rossetti was familiar with moral children's literature. Mrs. Rossetti kept her children "supplied with books having a directly religious or didactic aim—stories about 'good little boys and girls,' or alternative naughty ones, and other such matter."[3] The Rossetti children read, among others, Maria Edge-

[1] A Nursery Rhyme Book, with 120 Illustrations by Arthur Hughes (London, 1872), reprinted in 1893 with the addition of 5 poems.

[2] Although 3 of these anthologies are American publications, most of the authors represented are English. They are similar in every respect.

[3] *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, His Family Letters*, with a memoir by William M. Rossetti (London, 1895), I, 61.

worth's moral stories, Thomas Day's *Sandford and Merton*, and Mrs. Sherwood's *Fairchild Family*. Christina undoubtedly read early children's poets, like Watts and the Taylors, whose poems were reprinted throughout the nineteenth century. She may not have read the contemporary children's anthologies, but she was acquainted with and read the poems of Jean Ingelow, Dora Greenwell, and Mary Howitt, all of whom wrote poems for children which were frequently reprinted in the anthologies. Many themes found in children's poetry (e.g., the return of the laboring father at eve) were prominent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. Whatever the source, half the poems in *Sing-Song* repeat the stock moral and sentimental themes of children's poetry.

Most of the poems about country life in *Sing-Song* use stock material. "Rosy maiden Winifred / With a milk-pail on her head" is one of many country girls who work amidst the delights of nature. She is like the "rosy milkmaid" who works happily in "The Farm" by Jane Taylor or like a mid-century girl who shakes a clapper to frighten crows "up in yonder field, / Mid the new-sown corn" and who, although her feet are purple with the cold, is happier than a queen.[4] These Wordsworthian children, though poor, are healthy and content, because (in children's poetry) health and virtue reside in cottages, not in palaces:

> I wonder if in palace,
> Or in lordly hall,
> Their hearts are all as hale as
> In our cot so small.[5]

In *Sing-Song* we are told that "little Alice" would be none the happier "If her father's cottage / Turned into a palace." The illustration shows Alice greeting her father, who is carrying a heavy load of twigs; in another poem, children give the most cherries to "father, hot and tired, / Knocking at the door." The illustration and the poem reflect a common theme in children's poetry—hard-working father returning home to his loving family. For example, in Mrs. Alexander's "The Father's Return" (*Little Lays for Little Folk*), father, who has toiled all day in the sun, returns wearily to the sanctuary of his home.

The majority of animal poems in *Sing-Song* repeat stock themes. Like most children's books, it has a good child who gives "a crumb for Robin redbreast / On the cold days of the year," and it has the usual tribute to the cow: "Brownie, Brownie, let down your milk." Like all children's poets, Christina rebukes "cruel boys" who steal birds' eggs or fledglings and begs children to "hurt no living thing," from "harmless worms that creep" to frogs and butterflies. Children were also taught that it was cruel to cage birds. Although most caged birds long for "all the joys that freedom gives,"[6] captivity was occasionally described as having advantages. In Jane Taylor's "The Robin" a good child sets her robin free in the spring, but advises him to return to her warm home in the winter. Christina, too, decides that though a "linnet on a bough" is luckier in the spring than a "linnet in a gilded cage," in the "frosty winter" the caged bird might be the luckier.

[4] "The Little Scarecrow," Capern, *Little Lays for Little Folk*.
[5] "The Father's Knee," James Ballantyne, *Chimes for Childhood*.
[6] "The Linnet's Nest," *Original Poems*.

From Watts onward, children were told to be thankful for their warm homes and to pity the poor, who are usually described out in a cold winter night. A girl in *Sing-Song* who sits "in the chimney nook supping hot pottage" is "so sorry for the poor / Out in the cold." Sometimes the anthologies mentioned a social problem of a more unsavory kind. Adelaide Proctor's "Homeless" (*Children with the Poets*) is a plea for fallen women, one of whom is described wandering about on a stormy night. She has

> neither food nor bed—
> And the night cries, "Sin to be living!"
> And the river cries, "Sin to be dead!"

Sing-Song has a similar Dickensian melodrama. (Christina worked at the Magdalen Home for Fallen Women.) A woman, who "must tramp on through the winter night dreary," says to the child in her arms:

> You are my one, and I have not another;
> Sleep soft, my darling, my trouble and treasure.

Blindness was a fairly common theme in children's poetry. In Mrs. Turner's *The Daisy* (1807) a blind boy, who never sees the sun or the rainbow, is taken out "to feel the air and smell the flowers, / And hear the blackbird's song." He is cheerful because he knows God sent his blindness and that soon he will "see another world, / Most beautiful and bright." Like Millais' painting "Blind Girl" (1856), Christina's poem about blindness merely echoes the conventional themes. A blind child, who sits among flowers and hears a lark singing, is certain that he will someday see "Beautiful flowers / And birds in bowers / Where all joybells are ringing."

The contemporary anthologies always have several poems for mothers, which are usually impassioned addresses to infants. For example, one begins:

> Come to my arms, you bewildering elf!
> Let me gather you, body and soul, to myself.[7]

Poems in *Sing-Song*, like "Cuddle and love me," are in the same sentimental tradition, although they seem dispassionate when compared to the unrestrained flow of emotion common in the anthologies. One type of poem for mothers, in which the mother urges her child to enjoy himself while he is still young, perhaps explains the strange ending of a poem in *Sing-Song*. Minnie, Mattie, and May spend a spring day in the country, where they pick violets and primroses. Christina tells them that in time roses will bloom, but suddenly urges them to pick the violets and primroses while they are in blossom, not to "wait for roses / Losing to-day." This incongruous echo of the *carpe diem* theme may not be the influence of Herrick or Horace, as has been thought,[8] but merely an attenuated version of the melancholy reflections of Victorian mothers who again

[7] "Lullaby," Mary Forrest, *Chimes for Childhood*.

[8] E. W. Thomas, *Christina Georgina Rossetti* (Columbia, 1931), p. 181; Dorothy M. Stuart, *Christina Rossetti* (London, 1930), p. 86.

and again urge their children to enjoy themselves for "Soon, too soon, your childhood passes."[9]

The failure of critics to be aware of *Sing-Song*'s kinship with moral children's literature has led them to attribute the presence of a few poems about death to the morbidity of Christina's personality. Miss Thomas accounts for "the strange inclusion of several verses on the death of babies" by Christina's "tendency to dwell on death." And R. D. Waller also sees it as a symptom of her "habitual contemplation of the death of the body."[10] A biographical explanation, however, is not necessary; death was a standard subject for children's poetry.

In the Taylors' poem "The Churchyard," a child is told, during an evening walk in a cemetery, that under the cold earth "the grave worm devours" both young and old. In an 1866 edition of Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs*, the poem "The Danger of Delay" is illustrated by a small tombstone on which is inscribed: "Annie, aged 4 years." Christina's contemporaries, however, abandoned this terrifying approach; they usually treat death as a pleasant mystery. "A Story by the Fire"[11] is typical. It tells of a boy who is given a rosebud by a child whom he meets while playing in the woods. The child tells him that when it blossoms they will meet again. That night the boy puts the bud in water and goes to bed. In the morning his mother finds the rose in bloom and the boy dead—a "happy child / Who had met his little friend again, / And in the meeting smiled."

Most of the death poems in *Sing-Song* are similarly mawkish and melancholy. In one, a mother watching by her child's sick bed mourns that when her child, her "one rose in the world," is dead, "There'll be but thorns for stooping." A poem which starts with "Three merry sisters / Dancing in a ring" ends with one sister's sudden death. "My baby has a father and a mother," which tells a child he is lucky he is not an orphan, aroused the disgust of Waller, who describes the illustration in detail: "The emblem represents a classical-looking figure lying in the sleep of death, with a live little baby clutching at her breast. She has a pillow and a bolster, but for the rest appears to be on a sepulchral slab." A modern reader may think the poem out of place in a children's book, but a contemporary reviewer gives it special praise: it is "not too wise or grave for three years old—yet carries in it the first tragedy of human life."[12] The death poems in *Sing-Song* are, then, not a symptom of Christina's morbidity. She merely used a standard theme of children's poetry and treated it in the sentimental way of her contemporaries.

Christina too often used stock themes, though, of course, her superior style, taste, and judgment greatly improved them. However, it is only fair to *Sing-Song* to end with a poem in which she challenges a favorite theme of children's literature. The anthologies repeatedly tell children that if they "Trust and Try" and are "Up and Doing"[13] they cannot fail. A poem in *Sing-Song*, however, suggests the possibility of failure:

[9] "The Scramble for Sugar Plums," Amelia Edwards, *The Horn of Plenty*.

[10] Thomas, p. 182; Ross Douglas Waller, *The Rossetti Family, 1824–1854* (Manchester, 1932), p. 239.

[11] Dora Greenwell, *The Horn of Plenty*.

[12] *Scribner's Monthly*, III (1872), 629.

[13] Both in *Children with the Poets*.

Swift and sure the swallow,
Slow and sure the snail:
Slow and sure may miss his way,
Swift and sure may fail.

This is an excellent antidote to the "Strive and Thrive"[14] school of children's poetry. It abandons optimistic maxims like "still slow and sure, success secure"[15] for the somber realm of reality, for the personal inadequacies and the time and chance that happen to all.

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[14] The title of a moral novel by Mary Howitt.
[15] "Nimble Dick," *Original Poems*.

MATTHEW ARNOLD AND JOHN BRIGHT: A TYPOGRAPHICAL ERROR AND SOME IRONIC CONSEQUENCES

AMONG the Philistine Liberals whom Matthew Arnold chose for castigation in the Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, the Quaker manufacturer and Liberal politician John Bright had a prominent place. For purposes of comparison later in this paper I quote a well-known passage from that Preface:

> But America is the great example alleged by those who are against establishments for religion. Our topic at this moment is the influence of religious establishments on culture; and it is remarkable that Mr. Bright, who has taken lately to representing himself as, above all, a promoter of reason and of the simple natural truth of things, and his policy as a fostering of the growth of intelligence,—just the aims, as is well known, of culture also,—Mr. Bright, in a speech at Birmingham about education, seized on the very point which seems to concern our topic, when he said: "I believe the people of the United States have offered to the world more valuable information during the last forty years than all Europe put together." So America, without religious establishments, seems to get ahead of us in culture and totality; and these are the cure for provincialism.
>
> On the other hand, another friend of reason and the simple natural truth of things, M. Renan, says of America, in a book he has recently published, what seems to conflict violently with what Mr. Bright says. Mr. Bright avers that not only have the United States thus informed Europe, but they have done it without a great apparatus of higher and scientific instruction, and by dint of all classes in America being "sufficiently educated to be able to read, and to comprehend, and to think; and that, I maintain, is the foundation of all subsequent progress." And then comes M. Renan, and says: "The sound instruction of the people is an effect of the high culture of certain classes. The countries which, like the United States, have created a considerable popular instruction without any serious higher instruction, will long have to expiate this fault by their intellectual mediocrity, their vulgarity of manners, their superficial spirit, their lack of general intelligence."[1]

It was pointed out some years ago by J. Dover Wilson[2] that Arnold, "no doubt quite unconsciously," was misquoting Bright, and that the crucial sentence quoted should have read: "I believe the people of the United States have offered to the world more valuable *inventions* during the last forty years than all Europe

[1] *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1935), pp. 17–18.
[2] Ibid., p. 217.