

Christina Rossetti's *Maude*: A Re-evaluation

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C. H. Sisson, in the introduction to his edition of Christina Rossetti's *Maude*, published some twenty-five years ago, criticises the story as "mawkish" (13). He says

it presents a virtually closed world of young ladies wrapped up in a mutual friendship and in ordinary domestic exchanges. [. . .] The work is of course extremely immature and far from the point Christina reached in her later development. (13)

However, the work is not as immature as it first appears, although it is marred by an abrupt ending. Although lacking the bewitching, sometimes estranging qualities of Rossetti's later poetry, the story offers a delicate study of female interrelationships, and interesting observations on the life choices available to mid-nineteenth century middle-class women.

In *Maude*, the eponymous fifteen-year-old heroine's suffering—the growth and withering of her ambition to become a poet—is depicted through her relation with two girls of similar ages: Mary, Maude's cousin, who grows up to be a housewife; and Magdalen who becomes a nun. There is another girl, Agnes, Mary's sister, who both resembles and differs from the three main characters. She is at times associated with the three, yet plays a different role in the story. Her outward appearance is similar to Mary's, both being "well-grown and well-made, with fair hair, blue eyes, and fresh complexions".¹ Nevertheless, important differences in their personalities emerge in the course of the story.

This article offers a re-evaluation of *Maude*, which has hitherto been comparatively neglected by Rossetti scholars, particularly Rossetti's careful staging of the predicaments of the central female characters. The standard reading of the story treats it as "a *künstlerroman* or *portrait of the artist as a young woman*" (Marsh, "Maude" 251), and focuses on the eponymous heroine, a

¹ *Maude: Prose and Verse* 31. All further references to this work are cited by page-number in the text.

young woman determined on a poetic career, amidst general disapproval. Overall, critics have focused on the individual characters of Maude, Mary, and Magdalen as representing the poet's "triangulated conflict among fame, femininity, and faith," to use Mary Arseneau's words (68). Here, I will first analyse how Agnes, Mary, and Magdalen are related, compared, and contrasted to Maude. Maude is both associated with and dissociated from the other characters in her determination to lead an artistic life. I will then argue that in the context of Rossetti's biography, more attention should be paid to Agnes, who is destined, like Rossetti, for a life of spinsterhood. Agnes has no artistic ambitions, but resembles Maude in other pertinent respects, discussed later in this paper. R. W. Crump says:

Agnes seems to represent another side of Christina's own personality—the rational, practical-minded, objective side which was sometimes at odds with the aesthetic, overly sensitive, emotional, and somewhat masochistic side of Christina's personality embodied in Maude. (21)

Indeed, Agnes as a character appears to be essentially different from Mary and Magdalen. By considering how Agnes may be related to the writer's later life choices, I will finally demonstrate how *Maude* emerges as an early and trenchant expression of concerns about poetic vocation, marriage, and spinsterhood, that remain vital to an understanding of Rossetti's later life and art.

I Mary and Maude

In order to demonstrate how carefully Rossetti has staged the different female characters, we will start by looking at the characterisations of Mary and Maude, their inward and outward contrasts, and Maude's antagonistic view towards Mary early in the story.

Maude is contrasted to Mary from the beginning. Both women are "well-made" (30), but there the resemblance ends. Maude is "Small" (30) with "dark hair" (33) and "an expression [. . .] languid and preoccupied to a painful degree" (30), while Mary, as already noted, is sturdy, blond, and blue-eyed. With regard to their inward nature, while Mary is "occupied by a thousand shifting thoughts of herself, her friends, her plans, what she must do" (32), Maude "always ha[s] an undercurrent of thought intent upon herself" (32). Maude is deficient in Mary's spontaneous sociability, which makes it an effort for her to "exert herself to amuse the party" (37). Mary is not only "a general favourite" among

her friends, but is also surrounded by a pig, cats, dogs, rabbits, pigeons, and a baby, while Maude is withdrawn into herself and is received with “a howl of intense dismay” by the baby (32).

The first episode which represents the difference between Mary and Maude concerns their attitudes towards writing. It highlights Mary’s limited range of interests. As Arseneau points out, Mary “exists on a lower spiritual level than do the other young women” (84), a characteristic revealed while they are playing *Bouts rimes*. When Maude suggests they should play the game, Mary refuses, saying, “Of course you would get on capitally, and Agnes might manage very well, and Magdalen can do anything; but it is quite beyond me” (35). She asks Maude to “think of something more suited to my capacity” (35). Incapable though she may be of “mak[ing] a couplet” (35), Mary is able to write on certain subjects, as the “well-filled pages” (69) of her letter suggest. As Arseneau goes on to say, the letter with “paragraph after paragraph enlarged on the same topic” (69) “evinces a redundancy, transparency, and superficiality” (84). Mary’s writing is devoid of content, lacking poetic spark. Mary’s interests concern, as Arseneau lists them, “animals, games, fun, ‘unlimited strawberries and cream,’ ‘sundry tarts’ (32) and ‘the mysteries of the toilet’ (33)” (84): she is exclusively focused on the pleasures achievable in a domestic setting. This critical perspective on Mary, a girl destined for wifehood, anticipates Rossetti’s harsh description of the wife-figure in her 1856 poem “A Triad.” Here, Rossetti’s descriptions of an unhappy but energetic mistress suggest admiration, while she seems disgusted with the contented but vegetative wife. We will return to this poem later.

The second episode which highlights the difference between Mary and Maude is a discussion on beauty. For Mary, beauty consists entirely of what appears on the surface. Maude criticises this attitude and says of the girls to whom Mary has referred: “to me they have a wax-dollish air which is quite unpleasant” (39). It is important to note Maude’s phrasing, which suggests a certain lack of interest in the discussion. She is also inconsistent in her views. When she names Miss Stanton as having “one of the handsomest faces in the room,” Mary cannot concur, saying “she has such a disagreeable expression” (39). Agnes remonstrates with Mary about her being “prejudiced” (40), and stresses Miss Stanton’s good deeds. Strangely enough, Maude, who should be grateful to Agnes, disagrees: “I dare say she is very good, [. . .] but that does

not make her pleasing. Besides, the whole family have that disagreeable expression" (40).

What this inconsistency suggests is that Maude's strictures on beauty might have a more personal, perhaps even spiteful motivation. Her criticism of the "wax-dollish air" of the girls whom Mary admires is preceded by the following: "'They have good fair complexions, eyes, and hair, certainly,' and Maude glanced rather pointedly at her unconscious cousin" (39). The features in question belong to Mary. In Maude's opinion, Mary's beauty is something superficial, and the same can be said about aspects of her character. Being aware of this quality, Maude is not only criticising Mary's beauty or her ideals of beauty but also her incapability to delve below and behind matters. This obliviousness extends to appreciation of Maude's own deployment of irony. Mary is "unconscious" of her cousin's barbs about her appearance.

II Agnes, Mary, and Maude

Having discussed the contrastive characterisations of Mary and Maude, I would now like to consider the significance of Agnes. Similar in appearance to her sister but having a different inward nature, Agnes plays an important role in bridging the gap between Mary and Maude. As I will show, it is largely through this intermediary character of Agnes that Maude comes to find a certain aspect of Mary which she envies, a feeling which emerges on seeing Agnes and Mary's embroidery.

It is interesting to note that while Agnes is an intermediary between Mary and Maude, she is not a neutral one. Agnes takes Maude's side on both occasions when the other two girls disagree with her. As has already been mentioned, she supports Maude's criteria for deciding the prettiness of girls, and volunteers to play *Bouts rimes*, overriding Mary's opposition to the game.

More importantly, Agnes is the one who sympathises with Maude in her desire to achieve a poetic vocation: she "surreptitious[ly] [adds a] sprig of bay" (33), a symbol of fame, to the garland she makes for Maude to wear at Mary's birthday party.

Agnes's change of costumes is another bridging of the gap between Mary and Maude. There are two events in which the girls' clothing is emphasised: Mary's birthday party and her wedding (which, due to Maude's accident, she is unable to attend). In the first, the similarity between Agnes and Maude is

that “Neither [. . .] would wear ornaments [. . .] but [they have] left them to Mary, in whose honour the entertainment [is] given” (33). “In all other respects, [Agnes] [is] arrayed like her sister” (33). In the second event, however, Agnes and Maude are to dress alike, as a letter from Agnes informs us: “As we are both bridesmaids elect, I thought it would be very nice for us to be dressed alike, so have procured double quantity of everything” (57). Agnes’s change of clothes, therefore, may suggest that even though her features are similar to Mary’s, she is functionally similar to Maude, which might explain her previous actions in taking sides with Maude during the discussions of beauty and *Bouts rimes*.

Mary can be said to be artless, in two senses of the word. As we have seen, she is uninterested in literature and the work of the mind, aiming instead at worldly (and in Maude’s eyes, limited) domestic and animal satisfactions. But more positively, and in the mid-nineteenth century conventionally, Mary’s artlessness betokens an essential honesty and lack of pretension. Thus, Maude’s single-minded pursuit of her poetic ambitions wavers when she sees Agnes’s and Mary’s embroidery the morning after the party. Needlework does not interest Maude, and she realises that the two other girls share a world quite different from hers. She expresses her true feelings; this time, it is her turn to decline an offer, in a passage parallel to Mary’s refusal to play *Bouts rimes*:

“No, I should not do it well enough [. . .]. How I envy you;” she continued in a low voice as if speaking rather to herself than to her hearers: “you who live in the country, and are exactly what you appear, and never wish for what you do not possess. I am sick of display and poetry and acting.” (41)

In Maude’s eyes, country-life implies self-sufficiency, but also leading a life of bondage to the domestic duties a woman is expected to perform. In such circumstances, women aiming at more complex or satisfying forms of self-realisation suffer from a debility due to excessive thinking. This is clearly very different from the superficiality of the “shifting thoughts” of a country woman like Mary (32). Maude’s logic, however, is that it is because country women are too ignorant to think of the world beyond them that they are contented: they do not see what they “do not possess;” therefore they do not “wish.”

However, despite indications that Maude disparages Mary, Mary does

play an important role in the development of Maude's character. As Lynda Palazzo points out, "She inspires Maude to return to embroidery in order to fashion a present for her wedding" (14). Maude takes up the needle instead of the pen and sews "a sofa-pillow worked in glowing shades of wool and silk" (59) —"the only article on the safety of which she bestow[s] much thought" when she packs to attend the wedding (59). Due to her carriage accident, she becomes incapable of physically handing it to Mary, but is certainly proud of her achievement: it is the main concern of the bedridden Maude that the cushion should reach Mary safely. Palazzo, however, overestimates Mary's role when she says that "Of all the sisters, cousins and friends, it is only Mary who has Maude's 'unique' legacy [(61)], her beautiful embroidery" (14). No matter how "unique" Maude's embroidery may be, this legacy cannot compare with the honour bestowed upon Agnes when she is appointed Maude's literary executor. Palazzo's other criticism, regarding "Agnes[s] choos[ing] poems to her own taste only, and destroy[ing] the rest" (14), also seems unjust, for Agnes's burning of Maude's poems is an act in accordance with Maude's will, and Agnes greatly appreciates the poems she chooses to keep. With regard to Maude's "legacy," an item which I think requires more attention is the bracelet of Maude's hair given by her mother as a birthday present to Mary. Not only does it anticipate Maude's later embroidery but the fact that it was *given* is significant, as contrasted with Maude's hair which Agnes *obtains* later in the story. Maude's mother's choice of recipient suggests that she approves more of Mary's character—promising, as it does, eventual consummation in marriage and domesticity—than she does of Agnes or Magdalen. This supposition is based on the implication that Maude's mother is not particularly supportive of her daughter's wish to become a poet. Even though Maude's mother admires her daughter's poetic talent (Maude believes her mother to be "so fond of" her poems (71)), she is concerned that the activity of writing poetry endangers her daughter's health. Maude recognises this, for when her mother enters her room, she "slip[s] out of sight some scrawled paper" and "lock[s] the writing-book" (29).

Thus Palazzo's focus on Mary is partly justified and partly unjustified. It is true that Mary "tends to be overlooked in accounts of the novel" (14); however, it is also true that she is depicted so as to make a clear contrast with Maude, occupying a position which Maude can never attain. In terms of

similarities, there are more between Maude and Magdalen than between Maude and Mary, a point which will be developed in what follows.

III Magdalen, Agnes, and Maude

Having expressed a certain interest in living a life like that of Mary, Maude has a moment's reflection about leading a life similar to that of Magdalen. This is a more realistic option than the first, as we will see, for religious faith is important to Maude, in the same way that poetry is important to Magdalen. Magdalen finds it perfectly possible to conceive Maude as "Sister Maude" (58). However, Maude's strong desire for fame is incompatible with Christian humility, and the heroine returns to where she was.

Like Maude, Rossetti herself was attracted to Anglo-Catholicism. The church on Albany Street which Rossetti attended from 1843 with her mother and sister soon became the London centre of the Oxford Movement, and she was exposed to the preaching of powerful figures such as John H. Newman, John Keble, and Edward B. Pusey (Marsh, *Christina Rossetti* 55). My reading of *Maude* suggests certain unease on Rossetti's part about one of the key features of Anglo-Catholicism, that is, the practice of "withdrawal." "Withdrawal" into retreats of one kind or another was one of the things critics of High-Church Anglicanism found most objectionable about it. First, because it steered too close to Roman Catholic practice; second, because it seemed to signal a refusal to engage with the world and to reform it, to try to make it a better place. Rossetti's work at the Highgate Penitentiary demonstrates that she, for one, felt a sense of social responsibility. Perhaps this is why Maude doesn't follow Magdalen's route.

What links Maude and Magdalen can also be applied to Agnes. The three girls face similar struggles in life: they all consider becoming nuns, and all are tied to their mothers. Their capability to participate in *Bouts rimes* shows them to have certain talent for literature in common. It is noticeable that while Mary, the future wife, can dispense with literature, it is a companion for the other three girls who are destined to remain alone. Consequently, the poems they produce for the contest reward further attention. On this subject, it is necessary first to note Marsh's curious judgement about the relative merits of the poems:

The productions in *Maude* poke fun at the element of pretentiousness in this [*Bouts rimes*], for though Maude's spiteful sonnet [. . .] is judged the winner, Sister Magdalen's poem is clearly the best. ("Maude" 251)

Marsh's evaluation of Magdalen's poem appears simplistic, for she gives no explanation of her judgement.

Agnes's poem is about her reluctance to write poems. She says:

Would that I were a turnip white,
Or raven black,
Or miserable hack
 Dragging a cab from left to right;
[.....]
Rather than writing [. . .]. (35, 36)

Agnes's poem, which would have been better "had they been expressed in meter," to use Maude's words, is clearly not the best of the three poems.

Magdalen's verse depicts a conventional yearning for "the good fairies" who assist the changes of nature (36). "I fancy the good fairies dressed in white," she says (36):

Glancing like moon-beams through the shadows black;
Without much work to do for king or hack.
 Training perhaps some twisted branch aright;
[.....]
Or dyeing the pale rose a warmer pink;
Or wrapping lilies in their leafy gown,
 Yet letting the white peep beyond the rim.— (36)

On the one hand, this shows that Magdalen has the observant qualities of a poet and that she is proficient in composing poetry. On the other hand, it has obvious elements of cliché.

Maude's poem is more original, and in this sense, I would like to argue that her poem is more interesting than Magdalen's and that Marsh is rather hasty in judging Magdalen's the best of the three. The wry tone of Maude's poem begins by describing how people can vary and therefore warns that it is wrong to automatically associate youth with joy or pleasure: "Youth is not always such a pleasing sight" (37). This poem may at first appear "odd" (37), to use Mary's words, especially at the end:

If all the world were water fit to drown
 There are some whom you would not teach to swim,
 Rather enjoying if you saw them sink;
 Certain old ladies dressed in girlish pink,
 With roses and geraniums on their gown:—
 Go to the Bason, poke them o'er the rim.— (37)

Maude's striking antipathy towards the old ladies may be explained in relation to the description of youth. What is important in explaining Maude's logic here is that the outward appearances of the *old* people dressed like *young* ones represent their inward immaturity. Maude introduces them as examples who do not meet the common expectation that woe and wisdom are the accompaniments of old age. Similarly, Maude's earlier reference to the general association of youth with joy or pleasure may be interpreted as them being simplistic and free from care. This general notion of *youth* appears to be related to *ignorance* in Maude's eyes, and may recall Mary to some extent. The ignorance of "Certain old ladies" is intolerable for Maude, because they do not have the excuse of being young.

Maude's sarcastic poem is therefore the most interesting of the three poems. There is no "pok[ing] fun at the element of pretentiousness," as Marsh says; however, it is true that there is a strong sense of pretentiousness. However much Maude tries to be humble, praising Magdalen's poem before reciting her own—"Miss Ellis is too kind to feel gratified at hearing that her verses make me tremble for my own" (36)—her underlying confidence is so strong that the attempt appears comical. Maude takes for granted Magdalen's later comment on her poem that "it was by far the best of the three" (37) by which point she has given up trying to look humble. What is also implied in the *Bouts rimes* poems is that even though all three girls are capable of composing poetry, their attitudes and proficiencies differ: Agnes is diffident, Magdalen is proficient, and Maude is satirical.

Even though they do not choose to continue composing poetry, Agnes and Magdalen show a strong inclination towards Maude's works: Agnes making copies for herself after Maude's death, and Magdalen committing one of the poems to memory and treasuring it. With regard to Agnes, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use the modifier "anti-literary" to describe her (551). It is true that Agnes's reluctance to compose poetry is expressed in her

contribution to the *Bouts rimes*. But though she is reluctant about writing poetry herself, it should be stressed that she is the one who supports Maude in her pursuit of a poetic vocation, and later transmits her poems to family members and friends. As Margaret Linley has put it, Agnes “performs the role of literary executor and critic” (291).

IV Wifehood and Spinsterhood

The similarities among the three girls reflect prominent aspects of Rossetti's own character. In this respect, it may be more natural to regard the main characters of the story as Maude, Magdalen, and Agnes. Despite her transient feelings of envy for Mary's life, Maude is, by and large, critical of her. Maude's unfavourable view of Mary's superficiality reflects Rossetti's general attitude towards the married state, and of the kind of women who regarded this as the only possible form of fulfilment. As Antony Harrison argues, “Rossetti's discussions of marriage and of the marital relations between the sexes are, in her devotional works, most often cautiously critical” (101). This tendency is especially apparent in Rossetti's later works; however, it is possible to find the germ of it in an early poem of 1856.

In the aforementioned “A Triad,” the poet delineates three different types of women: the mistress, the spinster, and the wife. Rossetti's criticism is directed particularly towards the wife, whom she calls “one [who] temperately / Grew gross in soulless love” (9–10), and “One [who] droned in sweetness like a fattened bee” (13). Marsh finds this attitude in Rossetti interesting, “for though marriage might not retain its rapture in real life, lyric poetry seldom broke the illusion” (*Christina Rossetti* 85). The peculiarity of the wife is noticeable from the opening description of the three women:

Three sang of love together: one with lips
Crimson, with cheeks and bosom in a glow,
Flushed to the yellow hair and finger tips;
And one there sang who soft and smooth as snow
Bloomed like a tinted hyacinth at a show;
And one was blue with famine after love,
Who like a harpstring snapped rang harsh and low
The burden of what those were singing of. (1–8)

The mistress (the first) is depicted as the liveliest character. Her glowing appearance (as the words “Crimson,” “in a glow,” “Flush,” and “yellow” highlight) makes a sharp contrast with the spinster (the third), who is “blue” and whose life is encapsulated by the word “famine.” By positioning the wife between the other two, Rossetti appears to represent the wife in two contradictory ways: first as an innocent respectable woman (“soft and smooth as snow”) and then as a woman on display (“Bloomed like a tinted hyacinth at a show”). The latter aspect of the wife is similar to that of the mistress, if not the same. The phrase, “tinted hyacinth,” also suggests the link with the spinster, for hyacinth flowers are typically purplish-blue. For Rossetti, the wife may have appeared essentially similar to the spinster for reasons I will explain shortly.

The phrases applied to the wife build up an interesting image; that is, of life in a greenhouse. The excess of the “one [who] temperately / Grew gross in soulless love” (9-10), and “One [who] droned in sweetness like a fattened bee” (13) is an unnatural or artificial one controlled by the husband. Even though the wife shares something with the mistress (i.e. sexuality as their appearances suggest), she is not free in the outside air (which is perhaps the reason why the wife is only apparently healthy-*looking* in colour), confined as she is in the stifling air of the house and losing herself in monotonous chores. Being equally unhealthy, the overfed wife and the underfed spinster are two sides of the same coin. This idea may have caused Rossetti to ironically imply that the angel in the house, as Coventry Patmore famously represented her, is, in fact, an angel in the *greenhouse*.²

Written at least six years before “A Triad,” *Maude* does not adopt such a critical tone towards the marriage system. Still, the fact that, for Rossetti, becoming a wife was a far less conceivable outcome than becoming a nun or a spinster is suggested by Maude’s critical and somewhat disdainful attitudes towards Mary. The period when Rossetti was writing *Maude* was marked by a crucial event in her life: the broken engagement to James Collinson. The split is believed to have occurred on religious grounds. However, we may speculate that the engagement provided an opportunity for Rossetti to consider

² Augusta Webster, an admirer of Rossetti, uses very similar imagery in her 1870 poem, “A Castaway,” in order to describe the condition of wifehood: “like summer roses in soft greenhouse air / that never guess ‘tis winter out of doors (517-18).”

more realistically her devotion to writing poetry, and whether this was compatible with being a Victorian wife and mother. It is clear that her image of the married state was very different from Mary's. Perhaps she was beginning to realise at this early stage of her life that becoming a wife and being a poet were incompatible for her. Hence it becomes useful to focus on the character of Agnes, the spinster, who is depicted positively, compared with the lovelorn figure of a spinster whom Rossetti would depict later in "A Triad." However, this is not to say that Rossetti had, by this point, totally abandoned any hope of marriage. Rather, the hope may have smouldered deep within her until her later years, just like her wavering views on spinsterhood that are expressed in *Maude* and "A Triad."

V The Significance of Agnes

In *Maude*, as well as in "A Triad," Rossetti aims to unify three distinct female voices in an attempt to represent both the diversity of, and constraints upon, women's experience. Just as the "Three sang of love together" (1) in "A Triad," so do the "mottoes" of the poem, "Three Nuns" in *Maude*, "Put together [. . .] form a most exquisite little song" (60). In describing three nuns, Maude stresses how this status is appropriate for Magdalen (the final referent), but not for the others (including Mary, who is the second referent). With regard to the first referent, Maude says, "no one can suspect [her] of being myself, partly because my hair is far from yellow and I do not wear curls; partly because I never did anything half so good as profess" (60). But the rhetorical quality of this protest suggests that the referent is indeed Maude herself. Crump, however, takes it as referring to some other character, i.e. Agnes: "who earlier is described as having 'fair hair,'" and whom she argues is therefore "probably the intended speaker of the poem" (19). The things the first nun sings of—her yearning for rest, the world as being "full of vanity and care," and that she "must bear and not complain" (62)—are, however, central themes of Maude's poems, and have echoes within her story: the first with the poem, "Sleep, let me sleep, for I am sick of care" (72), which is posthumously discovered by Agnes, the second with the poem "Vanity of Vanities, the Preacher saith" (51), which triggers a discussion about receiving Communion (discussed below), and the third with the first of Maude's poems ("Surely to suffer is more than to do: / To do is quickly done; to suffer is / Longer and fuller of heart-

sicknesses" 30).

Nevertheless, Crump's misreading does suggest an interesting perspective on the relations between Agnes and Maude. Maude may have had Agnes in mind, in disguising herself in "yellow hair" and as being "good." Indeed, the "good[ness]" is the decisive difference between the two, as Maude notes earlier in the story when she realises that her poetic vanity is too strong to make her worthy of receiving Communion. She tells Agnes of her intention to miss it, to which Agnes objects. When Agnes tells Maude that she "was once on the very point of acting as [Maude] proposes" (52), Maude says, "Your case is different. Whatever your faults may be, (not that I perceive any,) you are trying to correct them; your own conscience tells you that. But I am not trying" (53). Maude is, then, aware that Agnes reflects an important aspect of her personality. The three nun poems are also functionally important, for despite the story temporarily giving the impression of being concerned with the "triad" of the contestants for *Bouts rimes*, the nun poems bring us back to the original "triad" of Mary, Maude, and Magdalen, and cleverly establish Agnes as a mirror, or an idealised version of Maude's character.

At the end of the story, the poet-to-be wavers for the last time. On the night of her death, Maude asks Agnes: if you were to be one of us three, who would you be? The question is brought up after Maude reads Mary's letter about her happy marriage, marking an important turning point in Maude's career. Maude, by this point, is faced with the cost of pursuing her poetic vocation, and is desperate for the assurance that she has lived her life in the right direction. The fact that Maude has no future, that she is about to die, reflects Rossetti's own pessimism about her prospects. Needless to say, the two other main characters, Mary and Magdalen, who personify domesticity and religiosity respectively, survive, owing to their reflection of the qualities expected of a Victorian woman. The story leaves us with Agnes who remains uncategorised in the sense that she neither resembles the conventional figures of Mary and Magdalen nor the unconventional Maude: she is both free from social restrictions and escapes death. While her usefulness is highlighted in the story, very little is said when it comes to her choices in life; however, it is certain that she (at least at this point) remains unmarried. Spinsterhood grants her more freedom: she possesses greater legal rights than her married sister (Mary), and is not physically or mentally secluded in the same way as

nuns or artists (Magdalen and Maude). In this portrait, Rossetti's pen captures well the privileges of the spinster.

Indeed, Rossetti's description of Agnes's nature is one which intentionally puts her above Mary and Maude. At Mary's birthday party, Agnes "[does] more towards making their guests comfortable than the eager good nature of her sister, or the correct breeding of her cousin" (34). When the sisters visit Maude, Agnes is "eager to thank her cousin for the good-natured forethought" of making the place comfortable at the sacrifice of her own convenience, whereas Mary unthinkingly accepts Maude's offer to have tea (42-43). Agnes's difference from the other three is evident from her answer to the question about which of the three girls she would rather be. Her answer is that she dare not and could not be anybody else, and therefore would choose to be herself. What is interesting here is that this answer harmonises with Maude's earlier reflection that she herself is neither "good" like Agnes nor "harmless" like Mary (53). In stressing her individuality, Agnes is in fact demonstrating a resemblance to Maude. Rossetti's sensitivity to the privileges of the spinster is illustrated in her setting Agnes as the main intermediary between the other three. She is the closest person to Mary, she gets in touch directly with Sister Magdalen, corresponds with Maude after her accident, and sorts out Maude's manuscripts after her death in accordance with her will. Moreover, Agnes's later act of mingling the hair of Maude (who has passed away) with that of Magdalen (who enters the convent) suggests a hope of reuniting them, given their similar situations of separation from the secular world.

Pointing out that a large number of influential mid-nineteenth century women (including poets) were spinsters at the time, Kathleen Hickok says that even a woman without a serious career, like Agnes, "*could* be independent, comfortable, and productive, whatever her talents and interests might be" (121). In discussing representations of the spinster in Victorian poetry, Hickok says that male poets "either disapprov[e] of her or pit[y] her or both" (122) and, with few exceptions, female poets "reflect the two conventional attitudes: ridicule and pathos" (123). While Rossetti's description of the spinster is conventional in "A Triad," Agnes in "Maude" suggests new possibilities for Victorian women and may even anticipate the advent of the "New Woman" towards the end of the century (Hickok 117). Maude is generally taken to be Rossetti's fictional counterpart, and the characters of Mary and Magdalen seem to be images of

women who were close to her: her mother and sister. It is widely known that Rossetti dedicated her first surviving poem to her mother, who had always been loving and supportive towards her. Like her sister, Rossetti was highly religious, if not sufficiently so to become a nun. Even though the character of Agnes may appear not to be related directly to Rossetti's real life at the time of *Maude's* composition, it is an irony of this story that Agnes' spinsterhood anticipates Rossetti's. Rossetti was of course still a young and potentially marriageable woman when she wrote the story. However, it may be that through creating the character of Agnes, and in balancing the conventional and innovative aspects of womanhood, Rossetti noticed the potentiality of the spinster-character type and set herself to thinking about how she, unlike Maude, might survive and prosper as a poet.³

Maude's subtitle, "A Story for Girls," shows that the story was targeted at girls, to help them to determine their own ways of life, learning from the lives of the different characters. In this sense, it may remind readers of "Goblin Market" (1862), especially the conclusion of that poem in which the once seduced Laura tells her story to her own girl children. The similarity, in this respect, to "Goblin Market," suggests that *Maude* should not be read as an "immature" work, although it is, in comparison with the later poem, a half-formed one. Even though Rossetti may not have ended the story as successfully as she ends "Goblin Market," the way in which the character of Maude is cleverly made to overlap with that of Agnes represents the acme of her literary power at that point. *Maude* certainly requires more attention, for it marks the starting point of Rossetti's lifelong thoughts on women's way of living. The "Story for Girls" was in fact "A Story of/for Herself." In *Maude*, we can see the young Rossetti thinking through questions of poetic vocation, marriage, and spinsterhood, questions that remain vital to an understanding of her later life and art.

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³ Leighton finds Maude's statement an echo of Rossetti's real life. Maude's expression of awareness of her poetic aspirations—"No one will say that I cannot avoid putting myself forward and displaying my verses" (267)—recalls Rossetti's refusal to join the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood the year before writing "Maude." As Dante Gabriel put it: "it would seem like display, I believe,—a sort of thing she abhors" (66) (Leighton 142). Judging from the fact that Rossetti's work thus reflects her real life, it is not unlikely that Rossetti was highly aware of the potentiality of the spinster and the possibility that she might become one herself.

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