

‘We may not know, we cannot tell’: Religion and Reserve in Victorian Children’s Poetics.

Religion has, of course, always played a very substantial role in poetry written for children, and the complex interplay between children’s poetics and the English hymn tradition – from Isaac Watts’ 1715 *Divine and Moral Songs for Children*, to Eleanor Farjeon’s ‘Morning Has Broken’, first published in 1931 – has lent a vitality and persistence to eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century Christian poems for child readers, in many cases ensuring their continued survival for twenty-first century audiences. This essay explores a small part of this rich body of work by considering the importance of religious poems for children in the High Church, Anglo-Catholic or Tractarian tradition of the nineteenth century. While Tractarian poetics has attracted considerable recent criticism, and has been reassessed from a variety of critical perspectives, there has been little discussion of the role of children’s literature in the Oxford Movement.¹ The most relevant exceptions, Alisa Clapp-Itnyre’s two significant articles on children’s hymnody in the nineteenth century, take a general overview of this field while noting the popularity of Tractarian hymnbooks for children as the movement gathered strength.² Clapp-Itnyre’s 2010 article argues convincingly that Tractarian hymn-writers develop a tradition of ‘writing to children

¹ Watson (1998, 2003) provides brief commentary on women’s religious verse for children and a discussion of *Lyra Innocentium*, as does Gray. In full-length studies of Tractarian poetry, e.g. G. B. Tennyson, no mention is made of poetry for children. For recent reassessments of Tractarian poetics more broadly see Blair and Mason’s special issue of *Victorian Poetry* (2006) and Blair (2012). Significant commentary on Tractarian literature for children has centred on Charlotte Yonge’s novels, see especially Wagner.

² See Clapp-Itnyre (2010), especially pp.155-60 and her astute discussion of Isaac Williams’ hymn translations, and Clapp-Itnyre (2012) on women’s hymnody, including an important discussion of Cecil Frances Alexander. See also her forthcoming monograph, *British Hymn Books for Children, 1800-1900: Re-Tuning the History of Childhood* (Ashgate, 2015). While I do not engage in depth with all of Clapp-Itnyre’s concerns here, and my focus is less on hymns in performance and in communal contexts than on verse and lyric as private devotional reading, her work provides an important point of comparison and is essential reading in this field. I am grateful for her very helpful comments on this essay in draft form.

as adults' (156). Without disagreeing with her fine readings, I suggest here, in concentrating on two of the nineteenth-century's most famous children's poets, Cecil Frances Alexander and Christina Rossetti, that Tractarian poets also wrote to adults as children, and that their successful volumes of verse aimed at pre-adolescent, or even pre-literate children, speak to adult readers (and singers) *about* children, as well as speaking *to* children. Rossetti and Alexander were both passionate advocates of High Church principles and directly influenced by the key theological and literary works of the Oxford Movement, but they have not been considered together. Rossetti's *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872), as I argue below, makes an indirect contribution to a larger body of Anglo-Catholic poetry for children, whereas Alexander's enormously popular *Hymns for Little Children* (1848) is a direct and explicitly polemical addition to the sub-genre of children's poetry designed to build on the popular success of John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827) and adapt its principles for younger readers. Indeed, Keble himself participated actively in this endeavour, both by lending his patronage to authors and by publishing, as a long-awaited follow-up to the bestselling *Christian Year*, *Lyra Innocentium: Thoughts in Verse on Christian Children, Their Ways and Privileges* (1846), a volume which followed works for children by other leading Tractarians, such as Isaac Williams' *Ancient Hymns for Children* (1846) and John Mason Neale's three series of *Hymns for Children* (1842-67). As I will argue here, this body of verse provides significant insights not only into the aesthetics of children's verse, but also into the aesthetics of Tractarianism, and beyond that, into Victorian (poetic) attitudes towards faith in a period often stereotyped as an age of uncertainty.

Devotional poets, particularly from the mid-late Victorian Anglo-Catholic tradition, had a definite tendency to view children as particularly pure, innocent, holy and blessed, in part, as outlined below, to shore up beliefs in baptismal regeneration, and also simply because children had not yet grown into the adult world of suspicion. As Manley Hopkins (Gerard's father) wrote in a poem selected for a prominent Anglo-Catholic anthology, *Lyra Mystica*, in 1865:

But oh! more sweet than all
Than Manhood's faith, or Life's calm autumn fall
Is holy Childhood! 'Tis the dew
That after-hours can not recall,
A joy which years can ne'er renew.
'Tis incense in a virgin fane
'Tis new-fallen snow from fields above
The white-bleached robe, without a stain,
Drawing our gaze of mingled awe and love.

(‘Childhood Holiness, Shipley 245-7)

Hopkins's imagery of white robes and incense draws into the poem some of the staples of High Church ritualism. While this vision of childhood's innate holiness is certainly not restricted to one segment of Victorian Christianity, such poems highlight substantial Anglo-Catholic investment in the holy child, a child who might, in varied ways, offer a guide to and fulfilment of key doctrines of the renewed High Church.

This does not necessarily contradict Clapp-Itnyre's perceptive argument that Tractarian hymn-writers often treated child audiences as capable of adult understanding and reasoning.³ The 'holy child' trope, in Tractarian hands, does not undervalue the intelligence of young children, suggesting on the contrary that adults—the purchasers, publishers and promoters of hymns and poetry for and about children – should aspire to child-like understanding and reasoning.

Tractarian writers who were significant in the Oxford Movement – including Keble, John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey and Isaac Williams – firmly adhered to a vision in which the ideal Christian would trust absolutely in the authority of the Church of England, as embodied in her forms and ceremonies and in the time-honoured language of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. They also adapted the concept of 'Reserve' as central to Tractarian doctrine. Reserve, as explained in Williams' two tracts on the subject in the *Tracts for the Times* series (80, 1838 and 87, 1840) and exemplified in much of the poetry produced by Williams, Keble and later Tractarian poets, emphasized that holy truths were deliberately hidden from believers until they were fit to receive them, and that Anglicans should mirror this principle in their own writings and actions. The various volumes of children's verse which took their cue from *The Christian Year*, such as Esther Wigglesworth's 'Christian Year suitable for *little* children', *Verses for the Sundays and Holidays of the Christian Year* (1863), were happy to outline these doctrines in explicit terms for a

³ See Clapp-Itnyre 2010, 160. It is also worth noting that the works she focuses on are arguably aimed at an older readership than the young children who feature in the works discussed here.

younger readership.⁴ Building on the text ‘And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look on God’, Wigglesworth counsels:

Even so, O Christian children,
Those whom God doth nearest draw,
Those to whom He shows his glory,
Hide their eyes in holy awe.

Thus the rebel tribes of Israel,
When God would to them draw nigh,
Needed bounds around the mountain,
Lest they should break through and die.

(‘Fifth Sunday in Lent’, Wigglesworth 58)

Such poems highlight the Tractarian stance that earthly believers are not capable of bearing the full knowledge of God and should deliberately eschew attempts at such knowledge, ‘hiding’ from His glory. This poem is also entirely in line with Tractarian doctrine in emphasizing that boundaries and regulations are necessary to protect the individual from this knowledge, and are for his or her own good. Wigglesworth repeatedly states throughout her collection that all nature’s works ‘Hear the bounds

⁴ See preface. Wigglesworth is not named on or in the volume, which identifies her as ‘the author of The Daily Life of the Christian Child’, a devotional work that evidently obtained substantial circulation. Of her several other religious publications, one potentially links her to Edward Irving’s Catholic and Apostolic Church. For the purposes of this essay, I have not investigated whether this denominational allegiance can be proven. The Irvingites were separate from the Anglo-Catholic ritualist movement but shared their view about the importance of ritual and ceremony in worship.

appointed' by God ('Twelfth Sunday After Trinity', 129), and her presumed child readers should accordingly recognize and embrace their limitations and the requirement that they submit to authority. Her volume, like many in this tradition, indicates this in its own format by rigidly following the plan of the Church year and its services, presenting itself as a series of expositions on the weekly Biblical texts and as an imitation of Keble, whose poems are similarly titled after the weeks of the Church year.

In her important study of Victorian women's devotional verse, F. E. Gray notes how many women poets either wrote volumes for children or included subsections directed to the child reader in their collection. She does not, however, distinguish such collections in her broader argument that the emphasis in devotional poetry on humility, shown in a deliberate use of simple language and forms, reveals a 'problematic humbleness' and at times 'a radical kind of ambition: an ambition to deference' (67). Gray's argument holds especially true for poetry written for children, in which simplicity, I suggest here, is part of an effort to make substantive claims for the role of both children and women poets in modelling faith. As Clapp-Itnyre observes, 'religious convention associated the woman hymn writer with child-like weakness', and so female hymn-writers for children sought to 'claim power in their obscurity and anonymity' by revaluing these qualities (2012, 50). Children's poetry thus forms an important subsection of women's devotional poetics, as well as devotional poetics more broadly, in that it allows writers such as Wigglesworth to argue that the 'childlike heart' ('Second Sunday in Advent', 7) is essential in Christianity, and particularly in High Church Christianity.

In order to achieve a state in which limited understanding and expression was a positive good, a state of unquestioning obedience and passive faith in authority, adult Christians necessarily had to resemble children, taking their cue from Christ's teaching in Matthew 18: 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' As *Verses for the Sundays and Holidays of the Christian Year* implies, true Christians will be ready to learn only what is appropriate for them to know: all believers must appreciate the famous analogy of 1 Corinthians and recognize that they cannot fully 'put away childish things' on earth. Indeed, Williams noted in Tract 87, the final part of *On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge* (1840), that when adults were considering how to incorporate 'natural' reserve and a habit of reverence in their day-to-day life:

The fact is, that this is one of the many subjects in which we have to go back, and learn of children: there is remarkable in children, together with that openness and freedom which accompanies simplicity and singleness of heart, that modesty also and reserve which is here inculcated. (109)

Children's devotional verse was often intended to be read to children by adults, sung by children in Sunday Schools and used as a teaching tool, or at least given to children as suitably improving Sunday reading. It therefore equally has lessons to teach the adult Christian reader, and speaks obliquely to the parents and teachers as well as to the children they educate.

In this light, the purpose of Keble's *Lyra Innocentium*, oddly positioned as a book both about and for children, becomes clearer. His design is less to teach children about the Church than to present an ideal vision of Anglican childhood as an exemplary model for adult readers. As J. R. Watson, one of few critics to have discussed this volume, observes, the childless Keble firmly believed in the 'innocence which he hoped to find in his parish children, and which formed such a contrast to the warring factionalism of Victorian religion' (106). The prefatory poem asks the reader to

Pray that the Prayer of Innocents

On Earth, of Saints in Heaven above,

Guard, as of old, our lonely tents (xii)

It is innocent prayers from children, unaware of the embattled position of the Oxford Movement in the early 1840s, which protect the adult members of the Church in their lonely endeavour to restore her glories. By describing the Church as a 'holy Mother' in this opening poem, Keble emphasises that all her followers should perceive themselves as in a parent-child relationship to the Church, a relationship characterized by obedience and respect. In 'Repeating the Creed', he argues that Christians should be inspired less by glorious spiritual visions than by a 'pure and meek' earthly vision of childhood:

Give me a tender spotless child,

Rehearsing or at eve or morn

His chant of glory undefiled,

The Creed that with the Church was born. (55)

The child is ‘undefiled’ in part because he is fortunately unconscious of the bitter debates surrounding the Creed or creeds and their relative authenticity and value. Adult readers would be well aware that in 1846 ‘The Creed that with the Church was born’ was in itself a polemical, and political, statement. In chapter 7 of John Henry Newman’s novel *Loss and Gain* (1848) for example, one character comments to the hero, Charles, on the service they have just attended: ‘I did not know that Carlton was so much of a party man [...] did not his reading the Athanasian Creed strike you?’ (146). The disingenuous Charles ‘did not see how obeying in so plain a matter the clear direction of the Prayer Book could be a party act’, and his friend is obliged to explain to him in detail the ‘not unfrequent’ objections to the Athanasian creed in contemporary scholarship; objections which Charles, Newman’s mouthpiece, finds shocking (147,149).

Keble’s child, with ‘his eye sealed fast/Against the world’s intruding glare’ (55), participating daily in Morning and Evening service, is the embodiment of a High Church ideal. And all the more so because he is unlikely to grasp the full meaning behind the words he is reciting. This was a positive good. Children provide a model for every believer in their organic intellectual growth and progress towards greater theological understanding. Keble’s preface to Frances Mary Yonge’s anthology of anonymous religious verse with a High Church bent, *The Child’s Christian Year* (1841), emphasized that the poems she had selected for inclusion might not be easy, but that children who learned them would gradually find ‘deeper and deeper meanings in them as they grow older’ (Yonge iv). Yonge herself noted in her headnote that her

hymns (some original, many selected from volumes originally intended for adult readers) might seem ‘too difficult’, yet that ‘if we observe the Church’s method of teaching, we shall find that she places in the memories of her young members a form of sound words, the full understanding of which neither they nor their teachers can arrive at.’ No believer, of any age, can hope to comprehend the divine truths embodied in Anglican ritual. The more an adult reader, like a child, learns to recite the words of the service without agonizing over their import, the more he or she approaches the ideal of an innate, childlike understanding of faith.

Conveying the ideal of simple, childlike, yet strong faith in poetry required careful choices about language and form. Earlier writers associated with the Evangelical or Dissenting traditions, notably Charles and John Wesley, had attempted to write hymns that would combine simplicity of language and complexity of content in such a way as to encourage maturity. John Wesley wrote, in a preface to a 1790 selection from Charles’s *Hymns for Children* (1763):

The following hymns... contain strong and manly sense, yet expressed in such plain and easy language as even children may understand. But when they do understand them they will be children no longer, only in years and in stature.
(cited Towns 328)

Wesley contrasts this practice with Isaac Watts’ habit of talking down to children, ‘speaking to children as children, and leaving them as he found them’ (cited Towns 328).⁵ High Church writers attempting to create their own children’s poetic tradition, moving away from the great Evangelical and Dissenting writers such as Watts,

⁵ See the discussion of this preface and its relationship to differing traditions of children’s hymnody in Clapp-Itnyre (2010), 149-50.

Wesley and Ann and Jane Taylor, were divided as to the correct path to take in composing or selecting religious verse for children. Some, like Keble and Yonge, were doubtful about the merits of adapting Christian truths into more readily comprehensible language. 'It should likewise be considered that such subjects cannot be lowered to the level of childish minds without more or less of irreverence', Yonge comments in her preface. Yet the use of 'easy' language had its merits, enabling the linguistic register of the poem to embody innocence and holy simplicity, particularly when, as is not the case in Keble, Isaac Williams or Yonge's volumes, the poem is spoken not *to* but *by* a child; a child whose imagined faithful voice serves as a corrective to the futilities of adult debate and understanding. Used in combination with familiar, regular and repetitive verse and metrical structure, 'simple' language and form could come together to reinforce an impression of holy truths as most easily accessible to a childlike spirit, who accepts without question the constraints of discipline and obedience.

I want to suggest here that the most successful poets in this tradition, by a long way, were Alexander and Rossetti, and indeed that Rossetti's playful and experimental collection for children, *Sing-Song*, works in unacknowledged relationship to Alexander's *Hymns for Little Children*. There is no mention of Alexander in Rossetti's surviving letters, but given the success and wide circulation of Alexander's 1848 collection, her High Church sympathies, and Rossetti's general familiarity with contemporary works of poetry for children, it seems highly unlikely that Rossetti would never have encountered her poems. Cecil Frances Humphreys was a devoted member of the Church of Ireland. Her husband, William Alexander, also a religious poet, eventually became Bishop of Derry. The fear of a growing move towards the

disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, spurred by the Church Temporalities Bill of 1833, directly influenced the rise of Tractarianism and had a profound impact on the Alexanders. Even prior to her marriage to William, who encountered Tractarianism as an Oxford undergraduate and briefly considered following Newman to Rome, Humphreys was well aware of developments in the Church in England. Through family connections she knew and was close to Walter Hook, Vicar of Leeds and one of the leading examples of a respected High Church Tractarian. Hook supported her writing career, and it was probably through his friendship that Keble was persuaded to write a brief (and slightly grudging) preface to *Hymns for Little Children* in 1848.⁶ Alexander's volume, like many similar collections, was published by Joseph Masters, a leading Anglo-Catholic firm. This fact, together with its appearance and formal structure, signalled the text's Anglo-Catholic leanings. *Hymns for Little Children* uses a Gothic font and illustrative devices standard in High Church poetry collections and consists of sequences of poems which reflect on the baptismal service and the adult promises it involves. After each promise is discussed, the following set of poems elaborates on it. For example, 'The Second Promise', 'To believe all the articles of the Christian faith', is succeeded by fourteen poems illustrating and expounding on each phrase in the Creed. The work as a whole therefore supports and enacts the promises made in the sacrament of baptism – it is dedicated to Alexander's godsons – and also neatly markets itself as an appropriate gift-book for this occasion.

When Alexander's best-known works, including 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', 'Once in Royal David's City' and 'There is a Green Hill Far Away,' are considered

⁶ On these connections see Wallace, 53-56 and 87-91.

apart from the context of this volume, the political calculation of her focus on baptism is obscured. There is nothing surprising in a High Church writer framing a collection for children around the sacrament of baptism. The Oxford Movement had always placed great emphasis on the doctrine of regeneration through infant baptism, as defended at length, for example, in E. B. Pusey's three Tracts on *Scriptural Views of Holy Baptism* (Tracts for the Times 67, 68, 69) from 1835, republished in a much expanded second edition in 1839. In the late 1840s, however, the issue of baptismal regeneration was particularly charged. Alexander could hardly have been unaware of the major controversy triggered by the High Church Bishop of Exeter's refusal to accept Charles Gorham for a living in 1847, on the grounds that his views on baptism were unsound and Calvinistic. The 'Gorham Controversy' produced a huge number of tracts and sermons either for or against the 'literal' interpretation of the baptismal rite as indicating regeneration and remission from original sin (the Tractarian view). Most significantly, when the case was referred to the civil authorities, their decision in 1850 to overrule the Bishop's judgment resulted in acute soul-searching about the relationship of the Church to civil authority and led to a number of defections to Roman Catholicism. Hook was one of many to publish an ostensibly mild-mannered defence of baptismal regeneration that observed, almost in passing, that the fact that 'the civil authorities will not assist the ecclesiastical authorities in maintaining the truth' was 'a course of conduct which must, if persevered in, lead to a separation between Church and State' (13). In effect, the controversy suggested to many that the temporal power was not on their side and that they might have to stand alone.

Alexander's volume was published before the judgement was known, but it should be read as part of the Tractarian defence of the baptismal rite. What *Hymns for Little*

Children arguably contributes to the debate is that rather than telling readers that children are made regenerate through baptism, it *shows* this through the use of a regenerate voice. The simplicity of Alexander's language cuts through the elaborate, complex, scholarly arguments about regeneration presented in prose tracts, and presents, from the perspective of an imagined child, a worldview that confirms the remission of original sin in the baptised child's absolute faith and trust in the rightness of God's law and the security of His love: 'How great is God Almighty,/ Who has made all things well' (28), with the potent double meaning on 'well'. The poem illustrating the first line of the Creed, for example, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty', for example, states in its second stanza:

There's no one in the whole wide earth,
Not my own mother even,
Who loves me half as well as He,
My Father high in Heaven. (26)

Alexander's poems enjoy a move in which what seems like childish exaggeration – 'the whole wide earth' – is shown to be literally true. She manages to find a confiding tone, as though the child speaker is revealing something that to him or her is fresh, new and astonishing ('Not my own mother even') – as, of course, it should be to all Christian readers, child or adult. Similarly, she writes in poem 14 in the section on the Creed:

Up in Heaven, up in Heaven,
In the bright place far away,
He Whom bad men crucified,
Sitteth at His Father's side,
Till the Judgement day. (34)

This gloss upon the line ‘He ascendeth into Heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father’ works through the inclusion of the colloquial ‘bad men’. This is the child speaker’s addition: there is no mention of the events or people involved in Christ’s death in the Creed. It reduces the varied degrees of guilt and betrayal in the Biblical narrative to a black-and-white truth; but of course Alexander’s point is that this is not a failure but an asset, in that the child’s inadvertently uncompromising position gets to the heart of the matter.

The lack of full understanding demonstrated by a child speaker also enables Alexander to show the principle of (unconscious) reserve in action. As I have examined briefly elsewhere ⁷, the second stanza of poem 12 in the ‘Creed’ sequence, on ‘Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried’ (better-known as ‘There is a Green Hill Far Away’) provides an outstanding example:

We may not know, we cannot tell

What pains He had to bear,

But we believe it was for us,

He hung and suffered there. (32)

‘May’ implies that it is not fitting for the believer to have access to this knowledge, which is both historically distant and unrecoverable, and of such a painful nature that the child believer in particular is mercifully shielded from it. Many of Alexander’s poems in this collection are similar in that they open with indirection – there is no reason to associate a geographically implausible green hill with the Crucifixion – revealing their link to a Biblical narrative only at the close of the first stanza. In the

⁷ I include a brief discussion of this poem and of Alexander as a typical Tractarian poet in ‘The Influence of the Movement on Poetry and Fiction’, forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of the Oxford Movement*.

original volume, this is more marked because the poems lack titles, so that the reader must identify the poem's subject in the act of reading. The poem we know as the hymn 'Once in Royal David's City', for instance, crucial in establishing Alexander's fame after its setting by respected church musician Henry John Gauntlett in 1849, opens like a fairy-tale in its 'once', the unspecified location, and the emphasis on royalty.⁸ By employing the circumlocution 'Royal David's city', rather than naming Bethlehem, Alexander initially conceals that this is a Christmas poem. The child reader would have to be familiar enough with Luke 2:4 ('the city of David, which is called Bethlehem') to decode the reference. For the knowing reader, this is an indirect way of inviting reflection on Christ as the heir of David and as the promised Messiah. The opening lines build up anticipation until Jesus and Mary are named at the close of the stanza:

Once in royal David's city,
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her Baby.
In a manger for His bed.

Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child. (30)

'Royal' helps to point the contrast with the 'lowly' cattle shed, another addition to the Biblical story. The power of the lines lies in their exposition of a narrative that in the opening, could theoretically refer to any mother and baby, at any time (this effect is stronger when the poem is read or sung aloud, when the telling capitalizations seen on the page are absent). The revelation in the decisive final couplet that the baby was Christ, retrospectively changes the meaning of the opening word of the poem. 'Once',

⁸ See J. R. Watson's excellent discussion of the opening verses of this poem (1997, 434).

from this perspective, no longer means ‘Once upon a time’ but *only* once: this is the unique event. The poem’s focus on the concrete details of the poverty and harshness of Christ’s birth, ‘And His shelter was a stable, / And His cradle was a stall’ (30), conveys the hardships potentially suffered by the infant Christ in simple and familiar terminology, and is more powerful because it does not dwell on or explicate these sufferings. Rossetti’s ‘In the Bleak Midwinter’, a comparable poem in its popular adoption as a Christmas hymn, makes a similar move. Nowhere does the poem state that the infant Christ is cold or comfortless. It does not need to do so: the reader can interpret for herself that the bleak winter setting, ‘Earth stood hard as iron, / Water like a stone’, impacted upon the newborn for whom ‘a stable-place sufficed’ (l.3-4, 14).⁹ As in Alexander, the strength of the poem, its affective force, lies in its oblique invocation of a baby shut out from the warmth and security of a family home, the kind of home presumably enjoyed by readers or singers of these poems.

There are of course class elements to this focus on simplicity and on Christ’s choice to live ‘with the poor, and meek and lowly’. Writing from a rural Ulster parish, Alexander’s imagined child speaker is implicitly himself or herself from a humble position in life, as the repeated references to ‘cottages’ (‘Saviour, to Thy cottage home’, or ‘Closely shut the cottage door’ (‘Morning Hymn’ 14; ‘Evening Hymn’, 16) suggest. The poem on the fourth commandment (the Sabbath as day of rest) addresses labouring-class readers, ‘Put the spade and wheel away, / Do no weary work to day’ (48). Like many authors of the period, Alexander sought to deploy simplicity to sell Anglicanism to the labouring-class parish children in Sunday school and their parents; her oft-quoted lines ‘God made them, high or lowly, / And ordered their estate’ (27)

⁹ References to Rossetti’s poems are from the Crump edition, references to the illustrations in *Sing-Song* are from the 1915 reprint.

are designed less to comfort the rich than to console the poor. Alexander's works are cross-audienced in terms of class as well as age. Middle-class children and adults might find in this volume a model of the meek and pure lower-class child that is both a fantasy and a promise of what the Church might achieve in devoting attention to the education of poorer children. *Hymns for Little Children* was itself intended to raise money for this purpose, with profits devoted to funding a school for deaf and dumb children in Raphoe, Derry. There is no doubt that Alexander's poems (like Rossetti's) are conservative and designed to enforce Establishment norms, yet her championing of the perspective of a 'humble' child, in a far more plausible linguistic register than that deployed by many other Victorian children's poets, does at times add an experimental and even radical edge to the volume's didactic and disciplinary aims.

Rossetti's religious poems for both children and adults strongly recall Alexander's best work in their indirect evocation of Anglican doctrines in deceptively simple form and language. Despite the substantial attention to Rossetti's religious verse and prose in recent criticism, *Sing-Song* has very seldom been considered in terms of its relationship to Rossetti's religious views. Barbara Garlitz, in an early article on the poem, argues for its relationship to 'moral children's literature' of the period, including poems by Watts and the Taylors (539). But her overview does not take into account the important denominational differences between these writers and Rossetti. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's fine study of text and illustration in *Sing-Song* does include analysis of its Blakean poetics and Christian designs, though this is not the primary focus of her broader assessment. *Sing-Song* has more often been read in relationship to the new popular poetics of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, in terms – borrowing Constance W. Hassett's phrase from her excellent discussion of *Sing-Song*

– of the ‘serious play’ of linguistic and formal experimentation. These relationships are vital for appreciating *Sing-Song*. Its status as a beautifully illustrated volume containing many poems based on puns, jokes and other kinds of linguistic play, separate it from the more austere and cheaply presented initial editions of *Hymns for Little Children* or *Hymns for the Sundays and Holidays of the Christian Year*, in which *every* poem is religious and didactic, as the title of the collection clearly signifies. Yet *Sing-Song*, like all of Rossetti’s poetry, cannot be treated as separate and distinct from her commitment to Christianity and her status as a devotional writer with Anglo-Catholic loyalties.

The opening poem, four lines of a bedtime prayer in the ‘Now I lay me down to sleep’ tradition, but spoken by a mother, should make this immediately evident:

Angels at the foot,
And Angels at the head,
And like a curly little lamb
My pretty babe in bed. (l.1-4)

Like the baby here, safely enclosed by protecting angels, each poem in Rossetti’s collection is enclosed in a wider context of Christian faith. The sadness as well as the security inherent in Christianity is indicated in the image of the lamb, recalling Christ as sacrifice and shepherd, as well as drawing in standard intertextual references to the innocent Christian child, as in William Blake’s ‘The Lamb’ or in the comparisons between children and lambs elsewhere in Rossetti’s collection (see Kooistra, 102-8). As Sharon Smulders notes in her important study of *Sing-Song*, Hughes’ illustration to the opening poem (which depicts cherubs and adult angels leaning protectively and adoringly over a crib, gazing at the sleeping baby) is mirrored by the final illustration

of a mother similarly leaning over a sleeping baby in its crib. This reinforces a sense of circularity and repetition that, as Smulders observes, is key to the collection as a whole: she perceives a temporal sequence in the course of the collection, as morning activities give way to later reflections and then to night. Smulders' article does not mention any religious aspects to this cyclical form, but this underlying structure does loosely connect *Sing-Song* to the more tightly focused daily and seasonal poem-cycles of Anglican collections, which were frequently centred on the repetitive diurnal and annual services of the Church.

As in Alexander's poems, the simplicity of the speaker's voice – whether as a child speaker, or an adult endeavouring to speak to a child – enables the poem to express an absolute and unquestioning conviction of Christian truths:

Our little baby fell asleep,
And may not wake again
For days and days, and weeks and weeks:
But then he'll wake again,
And come with his own pretty look,
And kiss Mamma again. (l.1-6)

This poem, fourth in the collection, is particularly affective because it follows a sequence of three celebratory and affectionate poems addressed by a mother to her baby. The illustration also repeats the opening illustration, but this time shows an angel carrying the baby out of the crib. The poem speaks to three essential questions, in a context where the death of young children was common, the question of how a parent can accept death themselves, how they might explain it to a child, and of how a child might understand death. As Kooistra comments in her discussion of *Sing-Song*

and its illustrations, 'Together, image and text work to convey the Pauline concept of death as a sleep with a sure awakening and to suggest that in the interim maternal care is provided by angelic surrogates' (106). To 'fall asleep' is in one sense an adult euphemism for death, rendering it comprehensible to children. But it is also a childish understanding of death that echoes a common Biblical phrase (see, for example, 1 Thessalonians 4, 'them also which sleep in Jesus'). Similarly, 'days and days, and weeks and weeks' is an understanding of the passage of time until the Last Judgement and the resurrection adapted for a child's understanding, in which 'weeks' is the longest imaginable period. At the same time, we should be aware that Rossetti's religious outlook included the common Victorian perception that the Last Judgement could occur at any moment. She famously cited her sister Maria's anxiety about visiting the Egyptian exhibits in the British Museum, because Maria worried about what would happen to the Egyptian mummies should the final Resurrection occur during a visit (1885, 128): for Rossetti, this is both a comic and entirely valid perspective on apocalypse and the end of days.

In this short poem, the speaker, like Keble's children, has no problem with the knotty questions and theological controversies that vexed mid-Victorian religious thinkers, such as whether family relationships would endure in Heaven, whether humans would be resurrected in the same physical bodies, and indeed whether the resurrection would, in a literal sense, occur at all. The situation is reassuringly simple: there is no need to grieve, because in the fullness of time the baby will 'wake again' and be restored to his family. The conversational tone and the use of echoes rather than definite rhymes, so that 'asleep' and 'weeks' are linked by assonance, and the 'k' of 'weeks' is picked up on by 'look', moves this poem away from conventional didactic

religious poetry in which clear end-rhymes tend to be the norm, yet the thrice-repeated ‘again’ provides a counterweight to this in its assertion of future return. Rossetti’s poem does not explain the Resurrection to the reader or include any specific references to religion, but it is, indirectly, a more powerful poem about the promise of resurrection and restoration because of this reserve.

The many poems on the natural world in Rossetti’s collection also deploy a Tractarian understanding of the sacramental aspects of nature, in which even the smallest aspects of nature are symbolic and work by analogy. As Tennyson observes in his important discussion of allegory and analogy in the Tractarian poets preceding Rossetti, and in Keble’s writings in particular, Tractarian authors saw nature ‘as a system offering a series of correspondences with qualities of her creator’ (97). A caterpillar, which will ‘Spin and die/To live again a butterfly’, for example, is a tiny creature that can help to teach children truths about resurrection and transformation after (apparent) death; its brief life, like the lives of the other little creeping things in Rossetti’s poems, an analogy for man’s fragile existence. Rossetti’s poems are thus also part of a long tradition, now reworked in a Tractarian context, of using allegory and analogy to help the child and adult reader understand central Christian doctrines. In several of Rossetti’s nature poems, innocent observations of nature similarly lead the reader – and sometimes, but not always, the speaker – to move from earthly to heavenly thoughts:

There are bridges on the rivers,
As pretty as you please;
But the bow that bridges heaven,
And overtops the trees,

And builds a road from earth to sky,

Is prettier far than these. (l.7-12)

While it might be expected that the child speaker would be familiar with the rainbow from Noah's ark and the book of Genesis, there is no mention in this poem of the symbolic importance of a rainbow in its Biblical context. The focus on 'prettiness' suggests an aesthetic appreciation, without clear awareness of the meaning that a rainbow holds for a Christian, as evident in many 'adult' religious poems including Keble's 'Third Sunday After Epiphany' (1827), which opens, 'I marked a rainbow in the north', using its light as a metaphor for faith (56). Yet the speaker has grasped intuitively both that the handiwork of God far exceeds man's work, which is a pale imitation of it, and that the rainbow provides a metaphorical 'bridge' between man and God by embodying God's promise of care. The adult or experienced Christian reader can see the deeper meanings that lie behind the child's instinctive appreciation of nature's glories.

The speaker of 'What do the stars do' is more conscious:

What do the stars do

Up in the sky,

Higher than the wind can blow,

Or the clouds can fly?

Each star in its own glory

Circles, circles still;

As it was lit to shine and set,

And do its Maker's will. (l.1-8)

This poem is clearly thinking of Jane Taylor's 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', but rather than asking what a star *is*, it asks what stars *do*, questioning the purpose of their beauty. The answer seems counter-intuitive: all the stars can do is to circle, never progressing. Yet in this they are examples of the steadfast and enduring will of God. As Rossetti wrote in her series of daily devotional meditations, *Time Flies*:

Stars, like Christians, utter their silent voice to all lands and their speechless words to the ends of the world. Christians are called to be like stars, luminous, steadfast, majestic, attractive. (2)

In *Sing-Song*, she does not allow Taylor's unanswered question, 'How I wonder what you are', to stand, perhaps partly because developments in Victorian astronomical investigations, as Anna Henchman has noted, tended to lead to literary depictions in which 'the soul is severed from the stars', as in the 'sad astrology' of Tennyson's speaker in *Maud* (1855) (2). Rossetti's poem gives a clear didactic response to such agonizing. The stars' obedience, and crucially their '*silent* voice', showing by quiet example rather than open exposition, models the correct behaviour for Christians old and young.

Sing-Song is not a collection of religious verse, but its poems are premised on a reserved yet unwavering faith in God. It contains a number of poems that would not be out of place, in terms of content, form and tone, in *Hymns for Little Children*, just as the reverse is also true. Rossetti, Alexander, and many other writers in this tradition counter the intellectual debates of the period, and what many perceived as a growing and dangerous tendency to question Christianity, by showing faith from a child's perspective, as natural, simple, and unquestionably easy to accept. Their effort in their

poems is not to depict ‘real’ children’s response to religion in this period, but to use the voice of the faithful child as a literary device in the service of a particular theological and ecclesiastical movement grounded in obedience to authority, discipline, the acceptance of human limitations, and reserve. As I suggest here, through this very brief survey, there is much more to say about how amenable the aesthetics of children’s religious verse proved to Tractarian ends.

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