Christina Rossetti's Sapphic Song and Her Songs of Sappho : Analyses of Narrative Poems and the Poets as Protagonists

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Introduction

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), a poet of Victorian Britain, is well known for the variety of her literary works and many of her poems have often been the focus of feminist criticisms and studied or examined in relation with feminism. Rossetti's choosing Sappho as a protagonist of her earlier poems and her depiction of this ancient Greek poet have mainly been analyzed within the context of feminism, and the narrative structure of Rossetti's poems has often been studied within this context either. The narrative structure of her earlier poem such as "What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her.", which was composed in 1848, has been analyzed in terms of the narrative of "repressed" poet protagonist, Sappho, and it has been recognized that Rossetti superimposed her own voice on the voice of this ancient Greek poet in order to express herself as a poet. The purpose of this paper is to reexamine the narrative structure of Rossetti's earlier poems and to clarify the relation between the narrative structure and the poets as protagonists. In reexamining the poets as protagonists, Maude Forster, a young poet heroine of Rossetti's narrative prose, "Maude", a posthumous work which was written contemporarily with her poems of Sappho, is also studied.

Ⅰ. The Voice of Narrative Poems by Christina Rossetti

i. Christina Rossetti's "Voice" as a Poet

The poems by Christina Rossetti and the voice of her narrative poems have often been discussed by feminist critics. The critiques have

regarded the speaker's voice or narratives as the ones being equivalent to the voice of the poet herself. Both the voice of the protagonist of the poem and that of the poet have been characterized as getting "repressed" or "mute" with which the poetic achievement is finally recognized as one completed by the woman poet. Such conclusion derives from the struggling as well as ambiguous position of women poets in the 19th century, and Margaret Linley states as follows:

> Literary women themselves throughout the nineteenth century also manipulated the irreconcilable inconsistencies within the category to display and exploit femininity, to criticize the gender politics of representation, to interpret and shape literary history (and their own location in it), and to protest the social subordination and dispossession of women.(1)

Within "(this) self -contradiction"(2) of women poets indicated in Linley's study, Christina Rossetti's composition of poems has been recognized as the one that "stands for female experience within patriarchal culture" (3) as is suggested by Dolores Rosenblum in her study of Rossetti and her poems. Rosenblum explains the reason why Rossetti chose Sappho as her narrative voice or as a protagonist in her early composition saying "because Sappho, the model for all women poets, is the exemplary model of renunciation."(4) One of Rossetti's narrative poems, "What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her." depicts the wandering Sappho, the poet of the ancient Greece, whose first person narrative indicates her suffering and repressed agony after losing her love and being discouraged to live on. The repressed narrative of Sappho as a protagonist characterizes the renunciation of a poetical figure, and this theme of renunciation is also seen in Rossetti's narrative prose. "Maude", a novella about the life and death of a young poet, Maude Forster, is defined by Gilbert and Gubar as "a semi-autobiographical novella . . . into which (Christina) set a number of her most accomplished verses,"(5) and refer to the protagonist as "a surrogate self."(6) What their studies indicate is that the voice of the protagonist often reflects or is based on that of the poet. In examining the narrative structure of Rossetti's

poems and the poets as protagonists, the relation between the voice of the protagonist and that of the poet should be examined first.

ii. The Speaker of Narrative Poems

In many former studies, the voice of Christina Rossetti's poems has been regarded as the one echoing or reflecting that of the poet herself. As to the voice of the speaker of the poems, Jonathan Culler says that "the key question has been the relation between the act of the author who writes the poem and that of the speaker or 'voice' that speaks there,"(7) and states that "[t]o read (the poems') words is to put yourself in the position of saying them or else to imagine another voice saying them —— the voice, we often say, of a narrator or speaker constructed by the author."(8)

Following the statements of Culler, the first person narrator of Rossetti's poems should be regarded as "fictional imitations of personal utterance."(9) In one of her earlier short poems, "Sappho" (1846)(10), the speaker laments her unrequited love:

I sigh at day-dawn, and I sigh
When the dull day is passing by.
I sigh at evening, and again
I sigh when night brings sleep to men.
Oh! it were better far to die
Than thus for ever mourn and sigh,
And death's dreamless sleep to be
Unconscious that none weep for me [.] (1-8)(11)

As the title of the poem shows, the speaker is Sappho, whose image as a poet of tragedy after her unrequited love and her following death widely pervaded in the 19th century. As is indicated in the former paragraph, however, the voice of Sappho can be the one with which Christina Rossetti is imitating or imagining as that of herself. In examining the narrative structure of Rossetti's poems, the speaker of each poem should not be regarded just as the fictitious voice nor as the voice of the poet herself completely, but as the voice whose speech is

reflecting that of the poet, or the voice which the poet is superimposing on or imagining as that of herself.

Ⅱ. The Image of Sappho in the Nineteenth Century

i. Sappho as a "Model" of Poets

Sappho, one of the exquisite poets of the ancient Greece, is considered to have played the role model of women poets in the 19th century. Christina Rossetti composed the poems in which Sappho as a protagonist laments and seeks for her lost love. However, Aaron Poochigian argues the problem about "relegating Sappho to a separate 'female' league for poetry,"(12) and insists that "Sappho is greatly influential on subsequent poets, both male and female,"(13) and states that "[t]he mainstream of Western poetry flows through Sappho and on down through the centuries."(14) Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), for instance, depicts the poetic inspiration gained from Sappho in one of his narrative poems, "A Singer Asleep." This narrative poem published in 1910 is Hardy's remembering of the fellow poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909). In this narrative poem, the first person speaker thinks about the poet, Swinburne, and describe the "meeting" of him with Sappho as follows:

> — His singing - mistress verily was no other
> Than she the Lesbian, she the music - mother
> Of all the tribe that feel in melodies;
> Who leapt, love- anguished, from the Leucadian steep
> Into the rambling world-encircling deep
> Which hides her where none sees. (VI, 27-32)(15)

One cannot help noticing the stereotyped image of the woman poet in depiction such as "[h]is singing - mistress" (27) or "the music-mother" (28) both of which evoke the metaphor of productivity of mothers and the poets. The fatal death of Sappho after losing her love is also referred to, but Hardy rather emphasizes the close poetic ties between Sappho and Swinburne:

> One dreams him sighing to her spectral form:

'O teacher, where lies hid thy burning line;
Where art those songs, O poetess divine,
Whose very orts are love incarnadine?'
And her smile back: 'Disciple true and warm,
Sufficient now are thine.' . . . (VIII, 39-44)

Hardy adapts the neutral word "teacher" (40) for Swinburne's calling for Sappho while maintaining her goddess- like image as "poetess divine[.]" (41) In his narrative poem "A Singer Asleep", Hardy focused on depicting Swinburne's life seeking his muse after all, and this narrative poem indicates that Sappho could still have been both a model and a muse of the poet during the early 20th century.

ii. Christina Rossetti's Sapphic Song

Not only Christina Rossetti composed poems in which Sappho, the protagonist and speaker laments her lost love but she also adopted Sapphic style in her poetic composition. As Rosenblum indicates, "Sappho's poetic gesture can be considered as a model for Rossetti's gestures of renunciations as in the figure of the singer who weeps while she sings."(16) In her "Song" (1848), the singer/speaker laments the lost love while weeping for the past:

She sat and sang alway
By the green margin of a stream,
Watching the fishes leap and play
Beneath the glad sun-beam.

I sat and wept alway
Beneath the moon's most shadowy beam,
Watching the blossoms of the May
Weep leaves into the stream.

I wept for memory;
She sang for hope that is so fair; ——
My tears were swallowed by the sea;

Her songs died on the air. (1-12)

This lyric consists of a pondering or a soliloquy of the speaker. The singer / speaker laments for the past of both "I" and "she." As the tears or weeping of "I" were "swallowed by the sea" (11) and the song of "her" finally "dies on the air [,]" (12) the song concludes the unfulfilled memory of the past and love. This is also a poem inserted in Rossetti's narrative prose "Maude", which was published posthumously in 1897, but Rossetti seems to have started composing the prose earlier when she was writing poems of Sappho. A poet and protagonist, Maude Forster privately consigns this Sapphic song to her cousin, Agnes, while she is in dismay to keep on writing verses. This action of Maude indicates that her composing poems is not meant for publication nor is intended for getting broader public attention. The theme of this Sapphic song inserted in "Maude" and Maude's attitude of renunciation are aligned with here. Maude's choice of poetic theme and her attitude of writing poems are correlated within this fiction and it can be considered that Rossetti's voice as a poet is superimposed in the attitude of the protagonist as well.

iii. Maude, a Poet Protagonist

Though the theme of the Sapphic song is pessimistic as well as repressive, Maude as a protagonist is not always introvert nor submissive. At the birthday party of Agnes' sister, Mary, Maude, wearing a wreath of bay leaves (the symbol of the poet) on her hair, plays the leading role at the competition of sonnet-making (bouts-rimes) [17] saying as follows:

> "Bouts-rimés: it is very easy. Someone gives rhymes, Mamma can do that, and every one fills them up as they think fit. A sonnet is the best form to select; but if you wish, we could try eight, or even four lines." (269) [18]

Maude leads the competition of writing sonnets whose other participants are Agnes and Miss Magdalen Ellis, an acquaintance of theirs. Even if her role at the gathering is rather amateurish, one can evoke some kind of Sappho's literary role in the acts of Maude. Maude's literary attitude

can be compared to that of Sappho's if one may refer to the statements of Poochigian because Maude behaves as if she were a "'teacher' of young women"[19] while proposing and making comments about writing sonnets and plays the part of "an aristocrat who had a position of leadership over a group of consisting of females, most of whom were in a state of premarital adolescence."[20] In the behaviour of Maude Forster leading other female competitors on the competition of bouts-rimes, one may recognize and evoke the image of the Greek poet, Sappho.

Maude does not cease writing verses although she publicly declines reciting or publishing them almost a year after the gathering of sonnet writing. Although she dislikes being praised as a poet, Maude's willingness of writing poems is still seen in her words and action. She refers to her own writing in an epistle to Agnes while promising to send one to Sister Magdalen who has taken a veil and has lived in a convent saying, " —— if Sister Magdalen will accept it, I will try and find her something admissible even within Convent walls [,]" (275) and asks her cousin to enclose her verses to the Sister assuring her that "my verses are honoured even in my own eyes by her acceptance" (275-276). As to the reaction of Sister Magdalen of which Maude is to hear about in a reply from Agnes, her talent is referred to as "[a]t last (Sister Magdalen) mentioned the verses (Maude) gave her months ago, which she knows by heart and values extremely[,]" (285) and even Magdalen's slip of her tongue, "no doubt [Maude's] name will be known at some future period[,]" (285) indicates that she recognizes Maude's exquisite talent as a poet. It can say that after the gathering, each young woman of the "poet group" still has been keeping her own role in connection with the poetry: Maude, a leading poet still continuing writing verses, Magdalen, a fan of literature, who can well recognize the value of poems and verses, and Agnes, being consigned poems from her cousin, acting as if she were a mediator. In her novella, "Maude", Christina Rossetti succeeded in depicting the life of a young poet whose life and background echoes the trace of Sappho's songs and her poetical group of women.

Ⅲ. Narrative Structure of "What Sappho Would Have Said Had Her Leap Cured Instead of Killing Her."

i. Sappho's Wandering and Seeking for Muse

In her narrative poem, "What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her." (1848), Christina Rossetti depicts the figure of Sappho wandering and seeking her love / muse. While Sappho is well known as a tragic poet who leapt from the cliff after losing her love, Rossetti's Sappho narrates her final decision to live on again even after being discouraged of keeping on living. The narrative of wandering Sappho begins with the invocation of her love.

> Love, Love, that having found a heart
> And left it, leav'st it desolate; ——
> Love, Love, that art more strong than Hate,
> More lasting, and more full of art; ——
> O blessèd Love, return, return,
> Brighten the flame that needs must burn. (1-6)

The stanza begins with Sappho's calling for her love. Her love is also her muse, for the lyrics of Sappho were often related with her confession of love, which was the very source of her poems. Sappho's words beginning with the imperatives emphasize her wish of getting back her lost love. The imperatives function as depicting anything that is yet to be achieved, and her narrative shows the protagonist's facing the situation surrounding her. While calling for her muse, the wandering Sappho seeks a flower which meets for her head:

> Among the stately lilies pale,
> Among the roses flushing red,
> I *seek* a flower meet for my head,
> A wreath wherewith to bind my veil:
> I *seek* in vain; a shadow-pain
> *Lies* on my heart; and all in vain. (7-12, my italics)

The narrative turns into the indicatives in the second stanza, and Sappho's narrative is told with simple present tense. Both the indicatives and the simple present tense indicate the circumstances

that the protagonist are facing; the "reality" which is surrounding her and the wish for which she still continues to seek her muse. Sappho has confirmed that she can still live on as a poet while she "seek[s] a flower meet for [her] head, / A wreath wherewith to bind [her] veil [,]" (9-10). This vain attempt of the protagonist rather functions as her postponement of having to admit the complete loss of her love. Referring to her seeking for flowers with descriptive style, the protagonist speaks with the indicative simple present in order to make her confession nothing but straight and clear.

After directly expressing her wish of meeting her lost love / muse, Sappho's narrative turns to be more static and descriptive. Leaving from people and civilizations, she walks into the wilderness whereas the blooming of flowers seems to be far detached from her:

> The rose hath too much life in it;
> The lily is too much at rest.
> Surely a blighted rose *were* best,
> Or cankered lily flower more fit;
> Or purple violet, withering
> While yet the year *is* in its spring. (13-18, my italics)

Sappho's narrative is switched to the subjunctives at the fifteenth line and turns to the indicatives at the eighteenth line. This switch of mood indicates Sappho's pondering and dismay, and her seeking for a flower for her wreath made up with the withering one implies that she accepts the possibility of living as a poet soon coming to an end. As she keeps on wandering, and her narrative turns into the mixture of the indicatives and the subjunctives, her wishing for final rest intensifies rather than her seeking for her love:

> Methinks this is a drowsy place:
> Disturb me not; I fain would sleep:
> The very winds and waters keep
> Their voices under; and the race
> Of Time seems to stand still, for here
> Is night or twilight all the year. (25-30)

Sappho's statement of seeking the place for rest should be interpreted as the suspension of seeking for her love / muse. A place where "[t]ime seems to stand still" (29) and "night or twilight all the year[,]" (30) may also function symbolically as a place of the suspension of her living as a poet. It is noticeable that Sappho's sojourning so far has been the one being together with the natural surroundings. At the last moment, Sappho looks back on her own wandering:

I would have quiet too in truth,
  And here will sojourn for a while.
  Lo; I have wandered many a mile,
Till I am foot-sore in my youth.
I will lie down; and quite forget
The doubts and fears that haunt me yet.

My pillow underneath my head
  Shall be green grass; thick fragrant leaves
  My canopy; the spider weaves
Meet curtains for my narrow bed;
And the dew can but cool my brow
That is so dry and burning now. (43-54)

Sappho lies down for a while and is together with the natural surroundings. After wandering, she is now secluded from anything having been giving her pain. Her thought goes deep into for the final rest until she asks for "the dew that can but cool [her] brow" (53). The dew implies a one that heals her thirst: her actual thirst as well as her thirst for her love / muse. Her following statement, "Ah, would that it could reach my heart, / And fill the void that is so dry [,]" (55-56) can be interpreted as her last asking for healing of her pain, which should have been achieved with the invocation of her muse.

ii. Sappho's Final Decision for Living on and the Final Death of Maude

After asking for healing of her thirst, Sappho's wandering finally compels her to face the "reality" to bear her pain. Her narrative once

again turns to the imperatives as if she were making her statement. The final part of her narrative consists of the use of "must" and this auxiliary verb indicates necessity or obligation so that the last stanzas emphasize Sappho's recognition of the action which is required for her: she must show her will to live on.

It is in vain, is all in vain;
I *must* go forth and bear my pain.

Must bear my pain, till Love shall turn
To me in pity and come back.
His footsteps left a smoldering track
When he went forth, that still doth burn.
Oh, *come* again, thou pain divine,
Fill me and *make* me wholly thine. (59-66, my italics)

Sappho finally recognizes that she needs to face the reality and her wish to get back her love continues as long as she keeps on seeking for her muse. While her wish is still to be achieved, Sappho can live on and her leap "cured" means that she has revived as a poet. What is depicted in this narrative poem is a trajectory of Sappho seeking for her love / muse by which the poet can live on while her wish is yet to be fulfilled.

A wish of Sappho depicted in this narrative poem is echoed in Rossetti's another narrative poem, "Three Nuns" (1849). This poem is also the one inserted into "Maude". Maude finally shows this sequence of narrative poems in her epistle to Agnes, after she has met a mysterious and fatal traffic accident. This "swan song" of her consists of the songs of three nuns whose narrative tone reminds that of Sappho's. In "Three Nuns", the song of the bird reminds the first nun of her childhood and her words, "And I must turn back again / To that aching worse than pain / I must bear and not complain," (40-42) indicate that she recognizes that she has to live on while recognizing the situation surrounding her just like Sappho after losing her love, and the sayings of the first nun, "Sing, that is thy song I may / Dream myself once more a

child / In the green woods far away," (43-45) show that she still persists in her dreamy past which is associated with the romantic aspiration for the past time. The second nun, while waiting for her death, still wishes former beloved's happiness which may echo Sappho's calling for her love. The third nun's statement that, finally waiting for the Land of Lord, "[her] Hope deferred seems to numb [her] heart" (204) may be associated with the "desire that feeds on loss and absence"[(21)] which can be the very theme of Rossetti's poems.

Leaving her poems to Agnes, Maude dies from the wounds of the accident. Her death can be interpreted as a final result of the poet's renunciation, and Agnes carries out what was imposed on her by her cousin; she destroys most of Maude's works and put some into her coffin, so that they will decay with her but she finally takes some copies of Maude's works:

> Piece after piece she committed to the flames, fearful lest any shall be preserved which were not intended for general perusal: but it cost her a pang to do so; and to see how small a number remained for Mrs. Forster. Of three only she took copies for herself. (296)

Most of Maude's works died with her, but it should be noticed that Agnes has decided to leave some pieces of her so as to remember Maude as a poet. By selecting some pieces of her poems, Agnes has played the role of an editor, so to say. The poems remain after the poet's death. To put it more clearly, Maude has died, but her poems are not dead. One of her poems copied by Agnes ends as follows:

> And buds and flowers and berries half unseen;
> Then if you happily muse upon the past,
> Say this: Poor child, she hath her wish at last;
> Barren through life, but in death bearing fruit. (27-30)

The last stanza implies that Maude should be remembered as a poet "in death bearing fruit" (30) just as her talent was once recognized by Sister Magdalen. The song of Maude will not die on the air but has been kept and remembered by Agnes and even by Magdalen, both the

members of the former "league" of young poets.

Conclusion

In choosing the poets as the protagonists of both her poems and prose, Christina Rossetti superimposed her voice as a poet on her works. Making Sapphic song or choosing poets as protagonists such as Sappho seeking her love / muse, or Maude Forster whose life was actually devoted to writing verses, Rossetti showed that the poet's life itself can be the theme of literary works. What has been made clear by Christina Rossetti's choosing of her literary theme is that both the life and death of the poet are not directly connected with nor bound with the evaluation of the poet's character nor their literary achievement. It is Christina Rossetti's literary attitude which can be regarded as renunciation that finally led her success of creation as a poet.

Notes

（1） Margaret Linley, "Dying to Be a Poetess : The Conundrum of Christina Rossetti," Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, eds. *The Culture of Christina Rossetti : Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, (Athens / Ohio : Ohio University Press, 1999) 291.

（2） Margaret Linley, 291.

（3） Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti : The Poetry of Endurance*, (Cambridge and Edwardsville : Southern Illinois University Press, 1986)7.

（4） Dolores Rosenblum, 12.

（5） Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "The Aesthetics of Renunciation," Tess Cosslett ed. *Victorian Women Poets*, (London / New York : Longman, 1999)130.

（6） Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 130.

（7） Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory : A Very Short Introduction,* (1997, Oxford / New York : Oxford University Press, 2000) 74.

（8）Jonathan Culler, 74.
（9）Jonathan Culler, 74.
(10) In her early years as a poet, Christina Rossetti composed many lyrics. Most of them were posthumously published. The year following the title of each poem indicates the year of the composition.
(11) R. W. Crump and Betty S. Flowers, eds. *Christina Rossetti : The Complete Poems*, (London : Penguin, 2001) 613. (Every citation of the following poems of Christina Rossetti except for the pieces inserted in the prose "Maude" is based on this text. The numbers at the end of each citation indicate the lines of each poem. As to the poems inserted in "Maude", the citation is based on *Christina Rossetti : Poems and Prose*, Ed. Simon Humphries, Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.)
(12) Aaron Poochigian, "Introduction," Aaron Poochigian and Carol Ann Duffy eds. *Sappho : Stung with Love : Poems and Fragments*, (London : Penguin, 2009) xxxviii.
(13) Aaron Poochigian, xxxix.
(14) Aaron Poochigian, xxxix.
(15) James Gibson, ed. *Thomas Hardy : The Complete Poems*, (London / New York : Macmillan, 2001) 324. (The following poem of Thomas Hardy is cited from this edition. The lines of the stanza are indicated by the numbers within the brackets.)
(16) Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*, 12.
(17) The brothers and sisters of the Rossetti family often enjoyed writing sonnets. Bouts-rimes are competitions of composing sonnets following the theme indicated first.
(18) Simon Humphries, ed. *Christina Rossetti : Poems and Prose*, (Oxford / New York : Oxford University Press, 2008) 265-298. (Every citation from the novella "Maude" is based on this text, and the page of the citation is indicated in the brackets.)
(19) Aaron Poochigian, "Introduction," xix.
(20) Aaron Poochigian, xviii.
(21) Dolores Rosenblum, 11.

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