Notes on the Stanza of Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel"

Author(s): Elizabeth Jackson

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NOTES ON THE STANZA OF ROSSETTI'S  
"THE BLESSED DAMOZEL"

STUDENTS of Rossetti have felt a certain amount of curiosity about the origin of the stanza of "The Blessed Damozel." The stanza itself is a matter of no great importance, but its study brings up two rather interesting points: (1) it throws some light on the development of one poet's feeling for verse; (2) it suggests the limitations of our ordinary metrical terminology. Described in conventional terms of accents, feet, and rhyme scheme, Rossetti's stanza is the stanza of "The Village Blacksmith" (which has a gratuitous rhyme in stanza 1, line 3), "The Slave's Dream," and "The Music Grinders." Yet, so far as I know, no critic has suggested the influence of Longfellow or Holmes, although the three American poems were published respectively in 1839, 1842, and 1836, and "The Blessed Damozel" in 1850. Nor do I think that, quite apart from the subject matter, any critic could mistake a stanza of "The Blessed Damozel" for the work of either Longfellow or Holmes. Waller, rejecting an Italian original suggested by Mégroz, mentions the six-line stanzas of "The Ancient Mariner," but doesn't seem to think highly of his own suggestion.

One could much more reasonably go to Coleridge than to Ciullo d'Alcamo for a model:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It ceased; yet still the sails made on} \\
\text{A pleasant noise till noon,} \\
\text{A noise like of a hidden brook} \\
\text{In the leafy month of June,} \\
\text{That to the sleeping woods all night} \\
\text{Singeth a quiet tune.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Although even here the rhythmical differences are immediately apparent.\(^1\)

Saintsbury apparently regards the stanza as an original but natural modification of ballad metre. "There is nothing very singular about the metre of this great poem, which is merely common measure prolonged to a six with an extra couplet."\(^2\) As a rule, writers on prosody seem satisfied to assume that the stanza is a ballad stanza and derived from Coleridge. I have not, however, come across any discussion of the extent to which Rossetti was conscious of Coleridge as a model, or any study of the "rhythmical differences" which Waller refers to. I shall try to show that Rossetti regarded the stanza originally as a ballad stanza and first used it when he was strongly influenced by Coleridge. I shall also try to

\(^1\) R. D. Waller, "The Blessed Damozel," _MLR_, xxvi (April, 1931), 139.
\(^2\) Saintsbury, _History of English Prosody_, iii, 310. Saintsbury goes on to discuss the effect of the rhyme scheme.
point out the nature of the "rhythmical differences" which later tended to conceal the stanza's origin.

There can be no question that, structurally, the stanza is identical with the six-line stanzas of "The Ancient Mariner." It is a six-line stanza 4 3 4 3 4 3, rhyming x a x a x a. Neither can there be any doubt that Rossetti was familiar with the stanza in Coleridge and elsewhere. William Michael Rossetti's note on his brother's reading, frequently quoted, refers to "boyish fancies for Walter Scott and Byron," to "the old English or Scottish ballads," and to "Edgar Poe and Coleridge along with Tennyson." . . . "But Coleridge was not so distinctly or separately in the ascendant at any particular period of youth as several others." There are six-line stanzas of this sort in the various collections of popular ballads, though they are less frequent in the early collections than in Kittredge and Child. In Percy's Reliques, for instance, there are only twenty-one in the three volumes, as against fifteen in "The Ancient Mariner" alone. Scott's Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border has four such stanzas in "The Young Tamlane" and one in "Erlinton." "The young Tamlane" is, of course, a charming poem, and one that Rossetti might be expected to like, but it bears no recognizable similarity to anything in Rossetti's early work. Scott did not use the stanza himself, so far as I know, except once in "Alice Brand." In "The Ancient Mariner," on the other hand, there are fifteen such stanzas, with a sixteenth rhyming a b a b a b. This stanza and a five-line stanza rhyming x a b b a are the two commonest variants. Three other variants Coleridge used a single time.

Another item in William Michael's list is Bailey's Festus. In that poem there is an inserted ballad, twenty-two stanzas long. Three of the first four stanzas and one later stanza are of the type under discussion. Although there are some striking similarities in thought between Festus and "The Blessed Damozel," the ballad itself has little significance. It merely confirms my theory that Rossetti was familiar with the stanza as a ballad stanza.

In fact, here was a fairly conspicuous stanza, ready-made and waiting for some one to take it and use it as a basic stanza instead of a variant. Longfellow, with very much the same literary background as Rossetti, used it twice before the date of "The Blessed Damozel,"—in "The Village Blacksmith" in 1839 and in "The Slave's Dream" in 1842. Holmes used it for humorous effect in "The Music Grinders," 1836. Here again, the "rhythmical differences"—and an extra rhyme in the first stanza of "The Village Blacksmith"—tend to conceal the structural kinship.

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3 Ellis, Collected Works (1911), Introduction, p. xv.
4 "The Village Blacksmith is in conventional ballad measure, but it is not an imitation of the folk ballad tradition." G. W. Allen, American Prosody (1935), p. 167.
Now for Rossetti's early handling of the stanza. He first used it in "The Ballad of Jan Van Hunks." Of this poem Waller remarks that "the stanza is that of "The Blessed Damozel," rather more carelessly managed." According to my theory the carelessness in the handling is not carelessness, but merely the evidence of an attempt to write in the ballad manner.

According to William Michael the poem was written "perhaps in 1846 rather than 1847, and nearly completed at the time." The available versions are late revisions, but in the Duke University Library Manuscript the stanzas of the first sheet seem to be from a very early draft. Strictly speaking, then, only the first 44 lines can be taken as evidence. On the other hand, there is no conspicuous metrical difference between the early stanzas and the late ones, and it seems safe to assume that metrical revisions were pretty consistently in the spirit of the original version.

Along with "Jan Van Hunks" it is interesting to consider Rossetti's translation of Bürger's "Lenore," made probably in 1844. This also is a ballad, and bears certain marked resemblances to "The Ancient Mariner." The stanza is an eight-line stanza. Bürger's stanza is 4 3 4 3 4 3 3 stanza, rhyming a b a b c c d d. Rossetti throws out the first rhyme, and lengthens the final couplet, so that his stanza consists of the English ballad quatrain plus two octosyllabic couplets (4 3 4 3 4 4 4 4, x a x a b b c c). For the reminiscence of Coleridge one need only compare two passages from "The Ancient Mariner" (not from consecutive stanzas) and two from "Lenore" (from consecutive stanzas).

**Coleridge:**

- About, about, in reel and rout
- The death fires danced at night.
- To and fro they were hurried about!
- And to and fro and in and out
- The wan stars danced between.

**Rossetti:**

- And faster, faster! ring, ring, ring!
- To and fro they sway and swing.
- In and out how the stars danced about,
- And reeled o'er the flashing heaven.

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6 The word ballad in the title cannot be taken as evidence. Its early title, apparently, was "The Dutchman's Wager."
8 There is no reeling or dancing in Bürger; in fact, no stars at all at this point.

- Haho! haho! ha hopp hopp hopp!
- Fort ging's im sausenden Galopp;
- Der volle Mond schien helle;
- Wie ritten die Toten so schnell!—
Now metrically “Lenore,” “Jan Van Hunks,” and “The Ancient Mariner” are closely related. I take it that certain metrical freedoms and peculiarities are to be regarded as part of the tradition of the literary ballad. They are not obligatory, but they are very common. I should cite (a) a vigorous rhythm with the stresses well marked, (b) a free use of anapests, particularly in the four-stressed lines, (c) a tendency to a strong caesura after the second foot in the odd lines, accompanied frequently by (d) internal rhyme. All these characteristics are present in “Jan Van Hunks” and still more conspicuous in “Lenore.” The first point can hardly be handled statistically, but the figures for the other three points are clear.

“Jan Van Hunks” is freely anapestic. There are 32 anapests in the 44 lines that we know to be early; over 150 in the entire poem (276 lines). Even allowing for differences of opinion about individual lines, well over half of the four-stressed lines seem to break definitely after the second foot. The internal rhymes are few in comparison with the 51 of “The Ancient Mariner” or the 26 of “Lenore,” but they do occur. (The internal rhymes of the “Lenore” are Rossetti’s addition. Bürger has only one. Scott’s “William and Helen” has 12.) Altogether, one can hardly read “Lenore” and “Jan Van Hunks” together without feeling that Rossetti was writing the same kind of verse in both poems, and writing it under the influence of Coleridge. That is to say, in “Jan Van Hunks” he thinks of his stanza as a ballad stanza and handles it accordingly.

Now we come to “The Blessed Damozel.” The metrical mannerisms of the ballad have almost completely disappeared. There are no internal rhymes. There are very few anapests, only nine in 150 lines. There is no violent halving of the four-stressed lines. The pronounced rhythm characteristic of the ballad is entirely missing. Instead, we have a kind of shifting, hesitant rhythm that is practically unique in English verse.

The special quality of the verse, as I analyze it, is due to the frequent juxtaposition of heavy syllables. I should say “the occurrence of spondees and almost-spondees,” except for the fact that there is considerable difference of opinion on the subject of spondees in English verse. But however you describe the phenomenon, certain unusual combinations of syllables repeat themselves in “The Blessed Damozel.” Two patterns in particular are conspicuous.

Let me illustrate these two arrangements by a single line of Tennyson, “Ring out wild bells || to the wild sky.” In the first half of the line, you have the semblance of three stressed syllables in a row. In the second half, you have two light and two heavy syllables, variously explained, according to the predilections of the prosodist, as pyrrhic plus spondee, trochee plus spondee, iamb plus spondee, or trochee (or iamb) plus iamb. Whatever the terminology, the fact remains that each time the word
wild, in an unstressed position, gets a very considerable emphasis.

In "The Blessed Damozel" I find as many as twenty instances of each of these types. Even allowing for differences in reading, the effect is still remarkable. Take for an example the third line of the poem: "Her blue grave eyes were deeper much." "Her grave blue eyes" might pass as iambic, but "her blue grave eyes" seems like a deliberate distortion of the iambic pattern. The following lines illustrate the same thing.

From that still look
The vast waste calm
In that steep gulph

Each of the underlined words calls for a definite intensity of stress.

To illustrate the second of the variations, take the second line of the poem: "From the gold bar of Heaven." Alden puts this first in a list of "examples of verses showing conflict between the normal prose-accent, where—as commonly read—the prose—(word) accent triumphs." Here again, though some lines may be susceptible of different readings, there are a good many that repeat the same pattern. Frequently, as in Alden's illustration, the most significant word is a monosyllabic adjective.

Was yellow, like ripe corn
Their virginal chaste names
To the deep wells of light
Went by her like thin flames

It is obvious, I think that departures from a metrical pattern are more important in short lines. In iambic pentameter the beat of the line is sufficiently established, and a substitution can be regarded as incidental. In iambic trimeter, on the other hand, a single trochee or spondee alters the nature of the line, and a trochee and spondee in the same line will leave only one basic foot and may thus entirely conceal the iambic norm. With this in mind, it is worth while considering the three-stressed lines by themselves. Of 75 lines (Germ Version, 1850) there are only 32 that I can regard as regularly iambic. Four lines have anapests; nine begin with a trochee (the commonest of all variations in English iambic verse); five have a trochee in the second foot, thus throwing two stresses together; four I am uncertain of. Eleven have the pyrrhic and spondee

10 There is one interesting line in the ballad from Festus, mentioned above: "In a dark cave, with one weak light." Otherwise, the metrical handling is conventional.
11 The second line of the famous symphony of names is debatable. If Margaret is a dactyl, the line is most unusual. Or did Rossetti say Marg'ret? Saintsbury feels that Margaret "is not indisputably an integral dactyl." (History of English Prosody, iii, 523 n.)
pattern; ten have three stressed syllables together. Certainly these figures show a remarkable range of variation in the handling of a short line.

In this connection it is interesting to see what Rossetti did when he revised the poem for *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856. He made 35 changes. Thirteen of them are metrically negligible (*from* to *in*, *cast* to *laid*, etc.), and certain others completely rewrite the line. Eleven of the changes, however, eliminate spondees or the juxtaposition of stressed syllables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Germ</th>
<th>1856</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Her blue brave eyes</td>
<td>Her eyes knew more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Than a deep water</td>
<td>Than waters still’d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the neck meetly</td>
<td>For service meetly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yet now, here in—</td>
<td>Yet now, and in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In which Space is</td>
<td>In which is Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She could scarce see</td>
<td>She scarce could see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The vast waste calm</td>
<td>Of worlds that swarm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In that steep gulph</td>
<td>Within the gulph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whose lamps tremble</td>
<td>Whose lamps are stirred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We were—being as then</td>
<td>Awhile, forever now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid the poised spheres</td>
<td>In distant spheres</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than half of the metrical revisions accomplish a single end; they make regular the iambic beat of the line. It seems clear that in Rossetti’s own mind the original line was *not* perfectly iambic.\(^{12}\)

One other interesting point is the treatment of the same stanza in “Algernon Stanhope.” The lines “Sacred to the Memory of Algernon R. G. Stanhope” exist in a dated manuscript of September, 1847. By this time Rossetti had freed his stanza from the conventional mannerisms of the ballad. There are only sixteen anapests; no internal rhymes; no marked caesuras. The three-stressed lines are pretty regular except for the familiar trochaic substitution in the first foot. The juxtaposition of stressed syllables, though less conspicuous than in “The Blessed Damozel,” is certainly present. There are twenty or more lines that

\(^{12}\) The revisions would have to be completely reconsidered in the light of the manuscript in the Morgan Library if that manuscript should be established as genuinely early. It is dated 1847. Knickerbocker (Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel,” *Studies in Philology*, 29, July, 1932, p. 496) says that “it will perhaps suffice here to say that the manuscript is certainly genuine and that the text apparently represents the earliest extant version of the poem.” On the other hand, Sanford has shown conclusively, I think, that the manuscript is later than it purports to be and probably very considerably later. (J. A. Sanford, “The Morgan Library Manuscript of Rossetti’s ‘The Blessed Damozel,’” *Studies in Philology*, 35, July, 1938). If it is later than 1850, it has no bearing on this particular discussion.
The Stanza of the "Blessed Damozel"

might be scanned with spondees, and a few that can hardly be scanned any other way.

At thy warm heart
Have their deep joys
And strange high thoughts
Let thy curl-shaded face
With the old childish grace
Like a bad dream
Make his breast heave and his pale brow
And wise calm Charity

Feeble as the poem is in almost every respect, it would be interesting metrically if it preceded "The Blessed Damozel" and could be regarded as an experiment in a new metrical technique.

No one can study metre and scansion without realizing the wide divergence in the reading of individual lines. Even so, two things seem clear. The "Blessed Damozel" stanza, as Rossetti first conceived it, was a ballad stanza in the manner of Coleridge. The metrical individuality of "The Blessed Damozel" comes largely from a tendency to vary the iambic pattern with spondees rather than anapests.

Elizabeth Jackson

University of Minnesota