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Query: An Unpublished Letter by Christina Rossetti

On 16 March 1995, an autograph letter signed by Christina Rossetti was auctioned at Phillips, Son & Neale of London for £420. It was four 8vo. pages long, dated 9 September 1872 and addressed to 'Dear Sirs'. A brief excerpt in the American Book Prices Current (1995) shows Rossetti discussing the price of her poems: 'Welford however has sent me a cheque ... and I fear it may be supposed that I accept this as payment in full. On the contrary...' 'Welford' is in all likelihood Charles Welford of the New York book-importing firm Scribner & Welford, who was living in London at the time. The date of the letter suggests that the cheque was for one or more of Rossetti's poems in Scribner's Monthly. 'A Christmas Carol' and 'Days of Vanity' were published in January and November 1872 respectively. 'A Bird Song' appeared in January 1873. On 29 August 1872, Rossetti had written to the editor of Scribner's to inform him that ill health prevented her from 'writ[ing] a fresh piece for the Xmas no.: but if any, or all, of what I send you can be of use for any no. of the Monthly I shall be pleased' (L496).¹

¹ Quotations from Rossetti's letters are taken from Antony Harrison's digital edition The Letters of Christina Rossetti. Parenthetical references are by letter number in this edition.

The auctioned letter does not appear in Antony Harrison's edition of Rossetti's letters, nor does it seem to have been published elsewhere. The brief passage offers a tantalizing glimpse, testifying to Rossetti's continued concern with the monetary value of her poetry. Already in the early years of her career, when financial difficulties let her to submit material to Macmillan's and other magazines, and accept payment by check in exchange for the copyright, editors' unpredictable ways occasionally caused anxiety and disappointment. The seven-stanza poem 'Light Love', for example, published in Macmillan's for February 1863, was printed in two columns rather than one, earning Rossetti £2, 2s., half of what she had expected to earn. '[F]or the future I think I must be more careful' (L180), she wrote to Alexander Macmillan on 2 February 1863. By contrast, when the following month Macmillan paid her the same amount for a poem of just ten lines, 'The Bourne', she replied: 'Is it possible that your system involves such a rate of over-pay for such a trifle?' (L184), and duly refunded one guinea. Written at a later stage in her career, when she apparently felt more confident about the market value of her work, the letter auctioned at Phillips in 1995 may provide further insight into Rossetti's financial dealings with the periodical press. If anyone knows who bought the letter or where it is currently located, please email me at Marianne.VanRemoortel@UGent.be.

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