The Woman Question. Sisterhood, sexuality and subversion in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”
This essay aims to explore the rich and interlinked themes that constitute and inform Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market", focusing on the representation and signification of gender roles, gender imbalances and non-normative sexualities in the text. It also aims to demonstrate the interplay of the Gothic mode of writing, religious and social themes – particularly that of the "fallen woman" in Victorian England – and the motifs of sisterhood, "falleness", the market, narrative and discourse. Any such analysis of "Goblin Market" cannot claim to be exhaustive without touching upon certain elements of Rossetti's biography and her relation to and understanding of the issues discussed.

Tracing Gothic elements and motifs – especially those of death/sleep, the entrapped heroine and the sublime – throughout Christina Rossetti’s work is not at all difficult, but her treatment of the Gothic convention is substantially different than that of the "canonical" Gothic writers, like Ann Radcliffe. In "Goblin Market" as well as in other poems by Rossetti, Gothic elements are distinctly noticeable. The very world of the poem – with its indefinite, dreamlike quality – is a liminal place, a place where boundaries between two realms are blurred and distorted, inviting invasion and transgression. These realms – the "real" world inhabited by Laura and Lizzie and the goblins' haunted glen – can stand for a number of opposites: rural/urban, the domestic/the public, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/non-heterosexual. This blurring of boundaries, characteristic to the Gothic, is in stark contrast to the constitution of Victorian society, where the public and the private were explicitly gendered and kept strictly separate. A "public woman" was a most disconcerting being, threatening the very rules upon which the existence of that society depended, and no definite line separated her from the "fallen woman" – a term which was used predominantly in reference to prostitutes, but more generally associated with “illicit” female sexuality.

Blurred boundaries and the possibility of transgression, as many feminist critics writing on Gothic point out (see, for instance, Gilbert and Gubar, 1979), represent a special possibility for the archetypal entrapped heroine. In such a world, she can both clearly perceive the conditions of her oppression (enacted virtually exclusively by men) and find a means of liberating herself. "Goblin Market" exploits this possibility to the fullest, advancing a bold vision of breaking heterosexual male dominance in the economic and sexual spheres.

The goblins – consistently referred to as “goblin men” – are the symbols and agents of that dominance. In their presentation, again, Rossetti's unique handling of Gothic themes and
tropes demonstrates itself. Typical Gothic creatures – ghosts, monsters and so forth – are most usually meant to evoke terror and disgust; their appearance, an irruption from the world "beyond" or “outside” (and quite often from the past), can be properly called a haunting – a sublime or uncanny alien presence. The goblins' first description, in contrast, is a spectacle of familiarity. The creatures are likened to numerous animals, and while a careful look reveals that none of these animals carry especially positive connotations (e.g. rat, snail, cat, wombat, ratel – the first two are obviously meant to be rather repulsive, the rest are predators), the goblins are, at first glance, rather curious than otherworldly.

Nevertheless, the goblin men, or rather the fruits they sell, which sap the consumer of his/her vital powers, clearly allude to one of the conventional Gothic monsters – the vampire. The analogy can be carried further by noting the obvious mesmerizing power of the creatures and their fruits, and their association with a seductive, yet utterly destructive sexuality. The fact of their familiarity and apparent harmlessness, therefore, starts to evoke an effect of the uncanny as soon as their sinister motives are revealed.

Another Gothic trope in “Goblin Market” that warrants examination is that of the double. The Gothic double – a character uncannily similar to another one – stands for that which is hidden, locked away, repressed, for intertwined fates and the dark side of an individual’s nature. While it can readily be seen that Laura and Lizzie function as doubles for each other, being similar in looks, but very different in character, we can hardly write Laura off as Lizzie’s repressed subconscious longings. First and foremost, the sisters are portrayed in a way that stresses not duality, but unity, like in the passage:

*Golden head by golden head,*  
*Like two pigeons in one nest*  
*Folded in each other's wings,*  
*They lay down, in their curtained bed:*  
*Like two blossoms on one stem,*  
*Like two flakes of new-fallen snow,*  
*Like two wands of ivory*  
*Tipped with gold for awful kings.*  
*Moon and stars beamed in at them,*  
*Wind sang to them lullaby,*
Lumbering owls forbore to fly,
Not a bat flapped to and fro
Round their rest:
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Locked together in one nest. (lines: 184-198)

The sisters are harmonious even in their looks – both are described in terms of whiteness and gold, while Gothic convention would demand that a double be, at least in some ways, an inversion of the doubled character – with dark hair where the other’s is fair, and so forth. While it is possible to read “Goblin Market” in its didactic dimension, as a strongly Christian tale of temptation, sin and redemption, the text nevertheless does not pass judgment on Laura, reserving all negative valuations for the goblin men. Certain facts from Christina Rossetti’s biography – especially her work at the St Mary Magdalene home for “fallen women” at Highgate Hill – will serve to elucidate the text’s moral stance.

Rossetti spent some time working with “fallen women” at the Highgate home, which was funded and run by the Diocese of London. The inmates at Highgate were offered a stay of two years, during which they were taught skills other than selling their bodies (mainly housework, to enable them to at least secure employment as maids upon leaving the home), as well as received religious and moral education. Rossetti’s experiences at Highgate are a likely source of inspiration for "Goblin Market", as well as a probable purpose for the poem – no doubt she would have read it to the women as a means of moral instruction. As a fervent and lifelong Anglican, she must have felt that helping others work towards their own redemption is more valuable than condemnation. Rossetti’s devotional prose commentary on the Revelation, *The Face of the Deep* (quoted in Helsinger), also reveals that she was acutely aware of the underprivileged position of women in society, and probably of at least some of the facts about the situation of prostitutes.

Prostitution – "the great social evil" – was a widely discussed and highly important issue in Victorian England. Although it is hard to be certain about the actual statistics, as various sources gave wildly differing accounts of the phenomenon (according to the London police, there were 2,000 prostitutes in the city at the time; the Society for the Suppression of Vice considered the number to be about 80,000), a plausible estimate is 70,000 prostitutes in London alone. This extremely high number was a result of numerous economic, social and
cultural factors. A brief outline of these factors is necessary, but a comprehensive account is beyond the scope of this essay.

The demand for prostitutes in a society obsessed with sexual repression was extremely high. There were only four real career options available to women, barring marriage: becoming a maid, a governess, a factory worker, or a prostitute. Considering, however, that maids earned very low wages, that a governess had to be educated and “respectable”, and that factory work was extremely unsafe, even deadly, prostitution was quite a popular choice – and a profitable one. For example, one night with a virgin was worth, on average, 25 pounds (over 40 per cent of a skilled worker’s yearly income); just one night of prostitution, therefore, could set up a woman with enough money to support herself for a few months. The darker side of the business was slavery: pimps from cities lured young country girls with promises of work and instead forced them to sell their bodies. Furthermore, the legal age of sexual consent was 12 years, which translated to very many cases of child abuse. A girl under 12 was worth about 400 pounds on the black market. Connected with child abuse are the obsession with virginity, and somewhat consequently, the idea that sex was inextricably linked with pain and torture.

The “fallen woman”, which Laura becomes in “Goblin Market” through purchasing the goblin fruit with a lock of her hair, i.e. paying with her body, thus prostituting herself, can be read as an “abject”, a term proposed by Julia Kristeva to describe that which is neither subject nor object, that which is disgusting and needs to be cast out, shamed, humiliated, destroyed and sacrificed to preserve the coherence of the subject. In Lacanian terms, which form the basis of Kristeva’s work, the status of woman-as-subject is already uncertain: her "I" that speaks is never her own, but an imitation of the masculine, phallic Other, the father with his power of naming which she cannot possess. The relation of the speaking subject and the (O/o)ther is demonstrated by what Jacques Lacan calls Schema L:
The woman occupies the ego-position, which is not only made possible and mediated through the Other, but also prefigured as masculine; when she speaks, she masquerades as the whole, male “I”. Femininity is that which the masculine subject needs to cast out and define himself against, as “not-it”; it is, thus, already predisposed for abjecthood. As Amanda Anderson illustrates, the Victorians had an intense desire to define themselves against the “fallen woman”, to be everything she is not, and to reduce her to non-human status.

What is being forced into the position of an abject, then, is femininity, female sexuality, but also more specifically lesbian sexuality (which will be discussed at length later in the essay) – no longer hidden away, but self-aware and self-conscious, as represented by the eating of the fruit, which can stand for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The fruits, just like the market and all discourse – particularly the discourse of sexuality – are owned and controlled by men, and thus a woman who aspires to this knowledge needs to be cast out as “fallen”. The reason for this becomes obvious in the scene of Lizzie’s confrontation with the goblin merchants – self-aware female sexuality, a sexuality that neither needs nor desires men, is terrifyingly dangerous. The motif of abject can be further traced in Laura’s loathing of food: “But sat down listless in the chimney-nook and would not eat” (l. 297-298) and her sickness. The aversion towards food and nausea are the first experience of “abjecthood”, according to Kristeva:

“Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk - harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail pairing - I
experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs
shrive up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.” (p. 3)

The fruits are not “evil” or poisonous in themselves – they are “But poison in the blood”
(l. 555) precisely because of this self-identification with the abject they evoke. Laura is
disgusted with herself – sick -- when she becomes aware of her abject position and a state of
“fallenness” that she has cast herself into.

The common perception of “fallen women” was that their fall was ultimate and irreversible,
and the downward path that awaited them afterwards – short and concluded by a miserable
death. Rossetti’s treatment of Laura’s fall is drastically different. Even a strictly allegorical
reading, in which Laura succumbs to curiosity and temptation, overwhelmed by the richness
and variety of the goblins and their wares, does not open up the possibility for her outright
condemnation. While the likely biographical reasons for this attitude, outlined above, can
serve as an explanation, there are also certain textual leads which we can pursue in relation to
this fact, and a number of meanings that we can arrive at. The endlessly controversial lesbian
theme in “Goblin Market”, for instance, suggests a reading in which non-normative sexuality
plays a central part.

The unmistakably sexual character of the scene of Lizzie’s return from the goblin market
can lead us to assume that the “sisters” are either not sisters at all, or are engaged in an
incestuous relationship. Nowhere in the poem does the incest taboo make itself felt, explicitly
or implicitly, and although an analysis of this silence and omission is possible, it is sufficient
to acknowledge the existence, or emergence of a lesbian relationship between Laura and
Lizzie. This opens the way for a reading of “Goblin Market” as a story of Laura’s coming to
terms with her (homo)sexual orientation.

The act through which Laura “falls” – buying the fruit from the goblin men with a lock of
her hair, which metonymically stands for her body – is her initiation into sexuality through
heterosexual prostitution (in fact, in "Goblin Market", heterosexuality equals prostitution).
Her desire finds a socially acceptable outlet in the goblin men and their phallic fruits, but
simultaneously, the fruit is immediately denied to her; she no longer sees the goblins or hears
their cries. This tension illustrates the conflict between the obligatory heterosexuality that
society forces on Laura – and the demand that her sexuality be cast in terms of trade and
Indeed, she has no language in which to describe herself and her sexuality, save that which she borrows from the goblins. Therefore, her dissatisfaction with the goblin men and her longing for another kind of experience, a longing so completely unacceptable and conflicting with the societal standards which she has internalized, cannot manifest itself in words, or indeed in her consciousness; it takes instead the form of “removing” the goblins from her perception completely. This internal conflict literally burns Laura up from the inside – she weeps, suffers and falls ill. It is only when Lizzie provides her both with the words to articulate her needs and the actual sexual contact that she so desires that Laura is at last able to perceive that the goblin fruits taste bitter; embracing her "sister", she also embraces a lesbian identity and is able to be at peace with herself.

The ending of the poem, which mentions that the “sisters” are married and have children, does not contradict such an interpretation. Although they are referred to as “wives”, their husbands are never mentioned at all, and neither is the nature of their relationships with Laura and Lizzie – suggesting, perhaps, a sort of "white marriage" for the sake of Victorian propriety. In the light of this reading, Lizzie’s perception of the goblins as dangerous and her ability to resist their attempt at rape can be attributed, at least in part, to the strength stemming from her awareness and acceptance of her sexuality; the silver coin she takes with her signifies economic independence, but also the moon and thus femininity. The image of the sisters sleeping together, which puzzlingly follows Laura’s return from the goblins – no doubt a betrayal of their "sisterly" relationship – testifies to the strength of their bond, which allows them to oppose the oppressive norms of society and define themselves as individuals. At the same time, the very word “sister” indicates the necessity to conform, at least in some measure, to those norms, which designate lesbian sexuality as nonexistent, impossible or threatening (or nonexistent because it is threatening to the patriarchal Victorian social order).

Nevertheless, the analysis of “Goblin Market” need not restrict itself to questions of sexuality, especially because Laura and Lizzie’s relationship is not depicted solely in sexual terms, but as a mutual, caring, loving and supportive partnership – a bond between women that can properly be called sisterhood. The idea of sisterhood is central to the text, and was definitely important for Christina Rossetti herself. It is inseparably linked both with her

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1 Similarly, any power that the goblins can be said to possess is both economic and sexual in nature; when Lizzie, who does not conform to their notions of sexuality, challenges them, they are powerless against her.
relations with her sister and her perception of women’s position in society, often expressed in her poems – notably, but not exclusively, in those which allude to the works and life of her brother, the pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

By mentioning Jeanie, a “fallen woman” who “fell sick and died” as a result of consuming the goblins’ fruits, “Goblin Market” alludes directly to Dante Gabriel's poem "Jenny", a dramatic monologue in which the speaker describes a sleeping prostitute – seemingly sympathetically, but, in fact, subtly depriving her of her voice, subjectivity and personhood. Christina’s reactions to her brother’s treatment of women (both in life and in art) – for instance, “In an Artist’s Studio” and “In Progress” – are powerful critiques of male objectification and entrapment of women. “In an Artist’s Studio” comments directly on Elizabeth (Lizzie) Siddal, Dante’s wife and model, and the way she is transformed, through his paintings, from a person into an ideal of beauty. Likewise, “In Progress”, a short poem about a deeply miserable wife, may be read as a sarcastic comment on Dante’s painting, The Blessed Damozel.

Christina Rossetti’s view of the gender inequalities inherent in the Victorian social order is strongly expressed in those of her poems which concern themselves with the fates of women abandoned or betrayed by their lovers. “Prince’s Progress” depicts a bride who waits endlessly for the return of her inconstant and foolish husband, and ultimately dies; numerous other poems like “An Apple Gathering” or “Cousin Kate” also explore similar themes. Rossetti sees women as occupying a losing position on the “marriage market”, where, according to society’s standards, they are to trade their beauty and sexual availability for the security provided by a husband. On this market, it is the men – just like the goblin men – who dictate the conditions of the exchange. Women’s only bargaining power, which is dependent upon their looks, is not only fleeting, but also illusory, as men are in no way obligated to stay true to their commitments and will often exchange one woman for another; thus, every woman entering this market is, in fact, selling herself – prostituting herself – without any guarantee that the man will fulfill his part of the bargain, and the distinction between wife and whore does not make a significant difference. Victorian sexual morality stressed the fact that men are driven by powerful and uncontrollable urges, and thus cannot be held fully responsible for acts of infidelity.
Laura’s fall is therefore predestined by her gender: as a woman, she has no money of her own, and thus no power in the market; to get what she wants, she needs to sell herself, be consumed, become an abject. The market does not permit other positions than consumer and consumed. Lizzie, however, is able to resist the rape and degradation that the goblins attempt to force on her, because she comes into the market with a coin in her purse. She has bargaining power, however little, that does not depend on her body, and does not need to trade with the goblins on their conditions.

“Goblin Market” envisions a world in which women can, through the power of sisterhood, gain at least some measure of control over their fates and a degree of independence. The cautionary example of Jeanie shows how women deprived of sisterhood’s support will be consumed, figuratively and literally, on the “marriage market”; the aid that Lizzie is able to provide Laura with, in contrast, shows how they can secure their individuality and happiness. The idyllic nature of the poem’s resolution, where the sisters are “wives” of absent husbands, may seem unrealistically optimistic, but it contains within itself a project through which patriarchal standards may be at least partially resisted or avoided. Laura and Lizzie cannot completely retreat to a world without men – as they have both entered the market, they can leave it, ultimately, only as whores or wives – but, through mutual aid, they can retain their autonomy and happiness.

Looking at the exact nature of Lizzie’s help for Laura, we cannot overlook the Christian themes pervading her “sacrifice” for her sister and many other aspects of the poem. While Rossetti was, as it has already been mentioned, strictly religious throughout her life, it would not be fair to restrict the reading of “Goblin Market” to a simple Christian allegory of sin ad redemption; religious themes, however, are prominent and cannot be overlooked. Lizzie is associated with white and blue – the colours of the Virgin Mary – but also gold; her self-sacrifice to save her sister clearly designates her as a Christ-like figure. Her request to Laura: “Eat me, drink me, love me” (l. 471), can thus be considered as analogous to the consumption of the flesh and blood of Christ during communion. The goblin fruits, as it has been mentioned previously, evoke the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden, signifying temptation, sin, the Fall and knowledge.

Perhaps the most significant influence of Tractarian religious doctrine on Rossetti’s poetry is the concept of Soul Sleep. According to this belief, souls of the dead do not go directly to
judgment and Heaven or Hell, but remain suspended in a state between life and death until Christ's Second Coming and the Final Judgment; the time of this suspension is also when a soul's particular judgment takes place. Soul Sleep is a state in which the soul can receive visions of Paradise (or everlasting torment), a liminal period of uncertainty and ambiguity, but also tranquil rest. The importance of Soul Sleep, in which death and dreaming are interwoven, for Rossetti’s poetry cannot be overstated. The time after death is connected with freedom, especially of the imagination; all restrictions, which weigh so heavily on women during their earthly existence, are relaxed. The death-like lethargy into which Laura falls after being “healed” by Lizzie is an obvious manifestation of Soul Sleep. No glimpse into the process of Laura's particular judgment is given, but her return to life means that the verdict was favourable; reconciled with her sister and her sexuality, she is destined for a sort of heaven on earth, the paradise of sisterhood.

Both the religious themes and the idea of sisterhood can be traced back to Christina Rossetti's close, but rather troubled relationship with her sister, Maria Rossetti. Maria had a huge influence on Christina: it was she who introduced the poet to the orthodox Tractarian movement. Most likely, it was also she who persuaded Christina out of her two important relationships with men – the Catholic Collinson and the agnostic Cayley – on the grounds that Christina shouldn't marry outside of the Church of England. The sisters' relationship can provide certain hints as to how Christina formed her ideas about relationships between women. Her attitude to those relationships, expressed in her poetry, betrays a certain ambivalence; on the one hand, she praises sisterhood in “Goblin Market”; on the other, poems like “Cousin Kate” and “Maude Clare” depict jealousy and hostility between women.

The key to understanding this apparent contradiction is the fact that for Rossetti, the reason for resentment between women is always a man. Having to compete with each other for the economic security which men provide becomes the reason for negative emotions, which are, however, misplaced – invested in "the other woman", instead of the man. In contrast, in “Goblin Market”, the sisters’ relationship is never actually threatened by the goblins. Immediately after returning from her feast, Laura sleeps together with Lizzie in perfect harmony. This can as easily be ascribed to the lesbian nature of their relationship as to the power of sisterhood; however the sisters’ perceptions of the goblins may differ, the creatures are in no way their equals, and therefore cannot pose a significant threat to their partnership.
As has been mentioned before in the discussion of lesbian themes in “Goblin Market”, the issues of language, discourse and narrative – specifically, the question of who controls the discourse and how this fact affects the protagonists' subjectivity – play an important role. It will perhaps be enlightening to compare two stories about sisters – “Goblin Market” and Jeffrey Eugenides’ “The Virgin Suicides” to demonstrate this point. In Eugenides’ novel, although it concerns itself chiefly with women, the narrator is male; it is his voice that attempts to make sense of women’s experiences and put them into the form of narrative. Feminist critics have traced this phenomenon throughout Western literature and culture, from Milton to Freud, interpreting it as a way in which male authority positions itself as the objective voice of reason and relegates women to a subordinate position, from which they cannot speak as independent subjects – the only discourse in which they can express themselves is the one that inherently excludes them.

With “Goblin Market”, the case is different. While the speaker of the poem does not reveal his/her gender, the control of language within the text is shown to be flexible and dynamic. The poem opens with an immense display of the goblins’ eloquence in peddling their wares – obviously, at the outset, they own the language and are fully aware of it. Laura, peeking at them through the bushes, attempts a description of what she sees – a description that terrifies Lizzie, for she definitely hears in her sister’s speech the faint echoes of the goblins’ voices:

‘Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie,
Down the glen tramp little men.
One hauls a basket,
One bears a plate,
One lugs a golden dish
Of many pounds’ weight.
How fair the vine must grow
Whose grapes are so luscious;
How warm the wind must blow
Through those fruit bushes.’ (l. 54-63)

This becomes even more noticeable in the scene of Laura’s return from the goblin market – obviously, she has taken for granted the words they use. This is the last time when Laura speaks directly, until Lizzie returns from the haunted glen to save her. Becoming aware of the threat which the goblins pose, she cannot express herself in their words anymore, but she has
none of her own to supplant them. Lizzie, in contrast, is “full of wise upbraidings” (l. 142), or
perhaps that is how Laura perceives her; the next day after their first encounter with the
creatures, the sisters talk “as modest maidens should” (l. 209). This, along with Lizzie’s
behaviour at the very beginning ("She thrust a dimpled finger / in each ear… and ran” – l. 67-
68) suggests that she herself feels threatened by the goblins’ discourse and does not believe
that she is capable of any alternative mode of speaking. Her confrontation with the goblin
men, however, proves otherwise – for her firmness and determination, she is called "cross-
grained, uncivil" (l. 395). Likewise, the way she speaks to Laura upon returning does not
appear to have anything in common with talking "as modest maidens should". Through her
dramatic encounter with the goblins, Lizzie has discovered a language for herself and actively
uses it to redefine herself and her circumstances. Likewise, she helps Laura find her own
discourse, so that the poem’s conclusion presents Laura as telling her narrative, and thus
herself, to children, in open defiance of the absent or nonexistent husband’s patriarchal
authority.

“Goblin Market”, therefore, can be read as a powerfully subversive text which exposes the
stranglehold of men, goblin or otherwise, on discourses of economy, gender, sexuality and
desire. The richness of its imagery directly corresponds to a variety of meanings emerging
from its reading; the utopian vision which concludes it is, like all utopias, deeply
revolutionary. It puts forward a project through which women can – by the mutual aid of
sisterhood – cast off the oppressive norms of gender and heteronormativity and actively work
towards their own liberation.
The Blessed Damozel
Primary sources


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