

The Economics of Desire in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Although I initially approached Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" with great admiration and even greater curiosity, I was puzzled by my inability to fully agree with just one single interpretation for the poem. Originally written for my ENL 10B class, my assignment was to interpret a work from the quarter as I wished, and while I immediately knew I wanted to choose "Goblin Market," I didn't know just how I was going to do it. Upon researching, I found out that the two most popular interpretations for the poem regarded it as either as a critique of Victorian capitalism or as a feminist exploration on gender. After several days of debating what to write and with time running out, I thought "why not combine the two?". I realized an opportunity to explore one of my favorite works of the quarter through a triple lens of sexuality, history, and economics, and despite worrying I was overreaching, I wrote my paper exploring how Rossetti's expression of female sexuality paralleled and defined its exploration of Victorian-era economic markets.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In Spring 2021, I taught English 10B as a large lecture class entirely on Zoom. This is a required course for the major, covering literatures in English from 1700–1900. Given that 10B is a requirement, that it was spring quarter, and that we'd all spent a year on Zoom, I expected the course to be rather dull. I thought the students would be tired and that I would have trouble engaging them through the distanced online medium. Imagine my delight when the students turned out, on the first day of class, to be a lively, curious group, full of enthusiastic readers who blew up the Zoom chat function

in almost every class meeting. On the day we discussed Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862), I thought the class would be even more talkative than usual, for the poem is typically a student favorite weird, wonderful, endlessly interpretable. But the chat that day was largely silent. Were the students finally worn out? Had they had it with poetry? Or were they just stunned into silence by one sister "warbling for the mere bright day's delight, / One longing for the night"? A few weeks later, to my surprise, it transpired that more than half of the students had chosen to write their final essay on "Goblin Market." Amanda Albrecht's paper was one of several truly excellent papers I was pleased to receive. It considers the poem's depiction of economics, currency, and exchange in conjunction with its vivid, unforgettable allegory of Victorian female sexuality and sisterly solidarity. Especially impressive in its integration of secondary sources and its creative close reading of the poem, Amanda's essay is a testament to the remarkable work our students produced during a very difficult academic year.

—Elizabeth Miller, Department of English

Nearly 160 years after its initial publication, Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" has continued to captivate readers and critics alike with the myriad of arguable interpretations that are able to be raised from within the text. Ranging from a didactic children's fairy tale to a reimagining of the figures of Eve and Christ, the poem's chameleon-like ability to adapt to any one given interpretation makes investigating the poem through a specific lens difficult. While many critics agree the poem offers a nuanced commentary on the pervasive nature of capitalism and consumerism in the nineteenth century and the alluring desire for participation it brings, few critics connect this to the way the poem parallels this desire with female sexuality and expression. Interlinking economic and sexual desires with the historical knowledge of the way women in the nineteenth century responded to these types of topics and using economic-related symbols to enhance the alluringly penetrating feelings of desire and control re-envision "Goblin Market" as a cautionary tale exploring the dangers and economics of desire.

In order to fully comprehend Rossetti's ability to skillfully combine marketplace politics with sexual desire, a brief understanding of both Victorian marketplace politics and the role of women in the nineteenth

century is required. Beginning in the Victorian era of England, commerce began to expand from a national to international scale, and Britain was in a great position, with sterling being the only “international currency whose value was wholly backed by gold reserves” (“Victorians: Commerce”). However, with such an expanding global economy and international presence, feelings of paranoia and uncertainty invaded the public sphere. In addition, the expression of sexuality (especially female sexuality) was a social taboo that ultimately created feelings similar to the uncertainty of the economic sphere, albeit fueled by sexual repression and tensions.

To begin with, women did not often participate in the economic side of the marketplace, but commonly did have jobs as homemakers or cooks, an idea that is expressed in Laura and Lizzie’s pastoral lifestyle: “Early in the morning / When the first cock crowed his warning, / Neat like bees, as sweet and busy, / Laura rose with Lizzie: / Fetched in honey, milked the cows” (Rossetti 199–204). While Laura and Lizzie seem to embody the role of typical domestic women, the subsequent lines reveal the strain that the goblin market has put on Laura’s relationship with her expected homemaker role: “Lizzie with an open heart, / Laura in an absent dream, / One content, one sick in part; / One warbling for the mere bright day’s delight, / One longing for the night” (210–214). With the prospect of a new type of freedom being offered to Laura, it sexually and economically challenges her idea of her expected domestic lifestyle, as she “longs” for freedom and is “sick” with want, challenging traditional Victorian social norms for women that prevent them from expressing desire, whether it be sexually or economically.

Shifting away from the women in the poem, the goblin men embody the unknown dangers and uncertainties of a newly expanding commercial English society with their abrupt appearance, which begins with the lines, “Morning and evening / Maids heard the goblins cry” (Rossetti 1–2). The emphasis on the liminal times of day enforces the constancy of the vendor’s presence, framed as an intrusion with the unpleasant tone of the word “cry,” rather than as a pleasant-sounding jingle or exclamation.

The goblin vendors, aware of their status, provide an array of fruits as the centerpiece of the marketplace. Composing the poem’s first twenty-eight lines, the fruits listed contain much variety in terms of their origin: cranberries (11) from North America to figs (28) from Asia and the Mediterranean, yet their origins remain abstracted from the

list. According to Victor Roman Mendoza, “In order for the fruits to be made exchangeable, their particularities must first be abstracted so that their value—and, later, their price—might be determined” (918). Being consciously aware that such fruit *certainly* has to have different places of origin while simultaneously not disclosing where these places are nor what their prices are gives the goblin vendors a sense of power in the situation, knowing what the customer does not and using it to their advantage. Similarly, the parenthetical line, “Men sell not such in any town” (Rossetti 101) reinforces the fruit’s unique and differing origins compared to the traditional marketplace, acting as an invading force.

Although short in length, line fourteen (Rossetti) states an important fact that “[the fruits were] all ripe together,” which would have been miraculous in the nineteenth century, considering the state of international affairs and trade capabilities, in addition to the lack of large-market grocery stores or vendors that could sell produce that differed either in origin or in seasonal availability. While the array of fruit undoubtedly shows off the economic prowess of the goblin vendors, the itemized presentation of the lines offers an alluring undertone that assures “consumer enjoyment . . . and is itself visually alluring and poetically seductive” (Mendoza 921). The tantalizing nature of the spondee “come buy, come buy” (Rossetti 14, 19, 31) reads almost as a sexual proposition, framing the list as a promise that feeds into the eroticism of the senses. Phrases such as “figs to fill your mouth” (28) entices the tactile, oral, and visual senses, and the self-awareness of the line “sweet to tongue and sound to eye” (30) reinforces the notion that the vendors are aware of the temptation they are selling and use the sensual undertones of their oral advertising as well as the fruit’s enticingly mysterious origins to allure their customers.

The knowledge of sensual presentation of the fruits is not possessed just by the goblin vendors. The poem’s two female protagonists, sisters Laura and Lizzie, possess a conscious awareness of the vendor’s allure, with Lizzie stating, “Their offers should not charm us, / their evil gifts would harm us” (Rossetti 65–66). Two distinct features of this line stand out, both within the phrase “evil gifts.” “Evil” is a description given to the fruits, but the fruits give off no indication of being corrupted, physically or morally; their only notable quality is being exotic, which raises the question of why are the fruits deemed as evil. The fruit’s exotic yet unknown origins and its sexual connotations are both inherent and—

as a result of the vendor's advertising—plays into the Victorian-era fears of both an expanding marketplace and a blossoming sexuality of women, which is why they are deemed as “evil”: they embody two of the biggest social fears and societal challenges that plagued the period in which the poem was written. In addition, the word “gift” is an interesting signifier of economic exchange; as mentioned, there exists abstraction within the itemization of the fruit, and throughout the poem, there is a lack of actual money ever exchanged. The act of receiving a gift does not have to be consensual, which attributes to the poem's pairing of sexual exchange coupled with economic exchange.

A statement made by Laura a few lines prior additionally reveals the sisters' awareness of the tempting situation: “We must not look at goblin men / we must not buy their fruits / who knows upon what soil they fed / their hungry thirsty roots?” (Rossetti 42–45). “Upon what soil” relates back to the blossoming international market that was evolving in England at the time as origins for goods started to become more varied. Additionally, the phrase relates back to the vendor's abstraction of the fruit's origins, which the sisters have noted as the vendors are clearly using an element of mystery to their advantage. “Hungry thirsty roots” is another phrase that warrants attention; as Jill Rappoport writes, “The enjambment carries us to roots that presumably belong to the fruits but whose adjectives ‘hungry’ and ‘thirsty’ better describe nineteenth-century stereotypes of rapacious savages sprung from an exotically other family tree” (866–867). While “hungry” and “thirsty” are adjectives that seemingly connect to the aforementioned “fruits,” the enjambment of the lines allows the words to carry a dual meaning in how they refer to the vendors: the goblin vendors are “hungry” and “thirsty” for participation in the economic and social spheres, framing them as invaders that carry with them a sense of uncertainty.

In economics, one of the key defining characteristics is exchanging money in order to receive goods—yet in “Goblin Market,” no such exchange ever occurs. The primary exchange is best described as “Laura's purity and innocence exchanged for mature sexuality, experience” (Cunningham 24). Laura is put into a position where her unexplored desire is being pushed to its limits, and she commits to sacrificing a part of herself to gain two things: economic freedom and sexual liberation. Laura provides a synecdochal form of gold by clipping “a precious golden lock” (Rossetti 126) of her hair. Laura sacrifices her bodily autonomy yet

is allowed to participate in the market, exchanging “monetary” goods for a chance at sexual freedom.

With reference to the abstraction of the fruits’ monetary value, for gold to be used as a currency for a means of exchange seems odd, considering how gold does not appear in the poem with “transactional value,” but rather with “use-value” (Mendoza 924). Gold so far has only been used as a descriptor, with “golden head” (Rossetti 184) and “golden dish” (58), meaning that the use of gold as a medium of exchange was chosen by the vendors themselves and was not set by an outside economy. By setting up their own rules and by allowing the synecdochal form of gold in exchange for the real thing, the vendors continue to exert power over their customers.

No longer a “virgin” of the economic market, Laura immediately “dropped a tear more rare than pearl / Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red” (Rossetti 127–128), with the onomatopoeia of the verb “sucked” and the phallic imagery of “globes” providing more than enough cues for this exchange to be read as sexual in nature. While prostitution is defined as “the practice or occupation of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment (“prostitution n1”), a more colloquial definition exists that defines prostitution and other sex work as “selling one’s body.” The method in which Laura pays for the fruit seems to fit this more colloquial definition: she gives away part of her body, and then performs what can be considered a sexual act in which “She sucked until her lips were sore” (Rossetti 136). While performing as a ritual for the loss of virginity, the scene connects the economic and sexual exchanges with the concept of a blossoming female sexuality and premarital sexual relations—two socially taboo concepts that permeated the Victorian social sphere.

While Laura’s bodily exchange with the vendors might read as a far-fetched interpretation, additional support can be derived from the unseen character of Jeanie. The only named characters are Laura and Lizzie, so the inclusion of Jeanie, although brief, stands out. Jeanie’s situation, narrated similar to an urban legend, acts as a cautionary tale to the sisters that skillfully narrates the dangers of interacting with the goblin men and the consequences of expressing sexual desire and freedom.

Jeanie’s story is told more in depth after Laura’s return from her interaction with the vendors; Lizzie gently scolds Laura by reminding her of the tale of Jeanie, beginning with “Twilight is not good for maidens; / should not loiter in the glen / in the haunts of goblin men” (Rossetti

144–146). The use of the word twilight creates a connection that is followed into the next line: “How she met them in the moonlight . . . / ate their fruits and wore their flowers / plucked from the bowers” (148–151). “Twilight” and “moonlight” come together to portray Jeanie as “a lady of the night” a euphemistic phrase for a female prostitute that was around well before the time of Victorian England (“lady of the night n2”). While “bowers” usually refer to gardens, the possibility that this exchange occurred in Jeanie’s bedroom is also possible, in which “plucked” combined with “flowers” clearly symbolizes a loss of virginity. Jeanie then begins to feel both sexually and financially liberated but, dependent on the vendors, she wastes away, with lines such as “Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey” (Rossetti 156) paralleling Laura’s own fate a few stanzas later: “Her hair grew thin and grey; She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn” (277–278), with direct parallels on the words “dwindled” and “grey.” Jeanie’s tale ends with Lizzie planting daisies on her grave that “never blow” (161), providing an image of infertility “that touches upon the personal and social ramifications of giving in to premature [sic], selfish sexuality” (Cunningham 25). As Laura begins to feel the ramifications of her act, which manifests as physical ailments such as the greying of her golden hair, the synecdochical version of gold returns; not only an abstraction for the loss of money, the golden hair now represents a symbolic loss of innocence, health, and happiness.

With the loss of her sister’s happiness heavy on her mind, Lizzie, not subjecting herself to the same fate as Laura or Jeanie, ventures out to meet the vendors, armed with “a silver penny in her purse” (Rossetti 324), which has been the subject of much debate from critics and literary scholars who attempt to deduce its greater symbolic meaning. Historically, in the nineteenth century, silver pennies were a highly valued form of currency, even beating out their copper counterparts. However, by the midcentury, the silver penny was no longer a regular form of currency, so “The goblins’ refusal to accept it as an equivalent for Laura’s hair may simply mean that one silver penny holds insufficient value compared to gold” (Rappoport 864). However, the silver penny, despite being an object of exchange, is a symbol of Lizzie’s domestic duty, which includes her healthy, strongly-bonded relationship with Laura—something that the goblin men will experience as a result of their malicious intentions.

Unable to form relationships that are not built on exchange, the goblin vendors’ ultimate desire is to consume their consumers and, like

the fruit they sell, “toss the rinds and pits away once they have found temporary satiety” (Christensen). Lizzie’s interaction with the vendors is immediately less tempting and more menacing than Laura’s and, “mindful of Jeanie” (Rossetti 364), she “tossed them her penny” (367). Despite giving away the very thing that grounds her and putting herself in a vulnerable position much like Laura and Jeanie, Lizzie “held out her apron” (366), a connection to her domestic-fantasy lifestyle, which she must let go of in order to save Laura. Lizzie puts on a facade of both pseudo and real vulnerability by letting go and revealing her comfortability in the domestic sphere, allowing the vendors to take full advantage of her.

The vendors witness Laura’s vulnerability and do not allow her to hold power in the situation by offering her to “Sit down and feast with us,” (Rossetti 380) to which she denies. Lizzie’s refusal to buy into the goblin vendor’s economics of desire angers them greatly, and they insult her with names “reserved for women who step outside the bounds of propriety and traditionally prescribed gender roles” (Christensen): “One called her proud, / Cross-grained, uncivil” (Rossetti 394–395). When Lizzie demands “Give me back my silver penny” (388), the goblin men respond with physical violence that leads to a scene undoubtedly representative of rape: “They trod and hustled her / Elbowed and jostled her . . . Tore her gown and soiled her stocking” (399–400, 403–404). All of the verbs that Rossetti uses are violent, sexually charged actions against Lizzie, who has gone from an agent of economic and sexual power to a patient of one. However, Lizzie’s refusal to give in and eat their fruits reinforces the power she exerts in the situation, despite being a victim, and moreover reveals the importance of domesticity and sisterhood as her key values; she subjects herself to sexual and economic theft by the male goblin vendors in order to save Laura.

After this scene, the men finally quit: “At last the evil people, / Worn out by her resistance / Flung back her penny,” (Rossetti 437–439). Rossetti’s use of the word “people” is the only non-specific gender label in the poem, which is significant because from a structural standpoint, “men” would have been a much easier rhyme. By using this non-gendered term for the first time, Rossetti “indicts Victorian society for its implicit role in perpetuating the rigid attitudes that limit female autonomy” (Christensen), ultimately broadening the scope of those who are the perpetrators of malicious economic and sexual thievery.

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Triumphant yet damaged, Lizzie returns home to Laura with “her penny jingle / Bouncing in her purse,— / Its bounce was music to her ear” (Rossetti 452–454). The final appearance of the penny and its onomatopoeic jingle parallels the goblin men’s earlier “iterated jingle / Of sugar-baited words” (233–234), showing the exchange of power that has occurred from the vendors to Lizzie as result of Lizzie’s persistence in her domestic values and her love toward her sister. The penny marks her status as a domestic caregiver and a loving sister that triumphs over the vendors’ conniving and tempting ways, as a symbol far more complex beyond its presented status as a means of monetary exchange.

By examining the complicated, exchange-focused relationships between female characters and the male goblin vendors in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” a picture connecting economic and sexual desires is created, aided by historical knowledge of economic and social features of Victorian England, as well as recurring economic-based symbols throughout the poem. Sexual and economic freedom is presented in a wish-granting-like fashion, yet the consequences of acting on temptation creates far more problems than just giving up metaphorical silver and gold. By linking the two heavy handed subjects together, a cautionary tale exploring the economics of desire is born.

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