

Can I know it? — Nay: An Alternative Interpretation of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

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Reconciling the disparate aspects of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" is no easy task. The ambiguous quality of the poem's tale — the overtly Christian message coupled with hedonistic abandon, the free-flowing play of the poem's meter halted by the rigid formality of its close, the embodiment of female autonomy undone by a retreat into the domestic sphere — offers the reader many clues to meaning but no definitive answers. Perhaps the key to understanding "Goblin Market" lies not so much in pinpointing one particular meaning but in accepting the poem's deliberate ambiguity. As in "Winter: My Secret," Rossetti tantalizes us with what is unspoken, with what may or may not be. In the poem, as in her increasingly reclusive life, Rossetti consciously draws the reader deep into the heart of the story, only to reveal nothing. "Goblin Market" is not so much a cautionary tale as it is a construction of a mystery. By advancing through the major sequence of events that make up the poem's fairy-tale story while exploring the tensions created by the poem's sets of opposing doubles, we begin to see "Goblin Market" as a microcosm of the unknowability of the human soul.

"Goblin Market" divides into four major sections making up the story's plot. This division allows us to explore the tensions at work in the poem within the context of its major themes — temptation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Critics have employed these terms in their studies of the poem, but they have not formally applied them as a means of describing the spiritual journey of the sisters. While this naming offers some definition of the poem in terms of its Judeo-Christian ethical stance, I might as easily have used the model outlined in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and named them departure, initiation, and return (30). The poem need not (and should not) be interpreted solely through the veil of Rossetti's [Anglo-Catholic](#) faith.

The first two lines of "Goblin Market" ("Morning and evening / Maids heard the goblins cry") set up for the reader the conditions of the poem. The language, which is both immediate and general, creates a sense of an ongoing and constant state rather than any specific situation. We have yet to meet the female protagonists and have no specific information about their goblin seducers; we cannot even name them as seducers at this point. Yet these lines do provide two pieces of information that will be crucial to our understanding of the unfolding of the text. First, the only human beings mentioned are women, whom the narrator describes as "maids." The use of the single word without any descriptor points to the fact that these women are not only virginal but also young (they are not "old maids," but simply "maids"). Second, the only other creatures mentioned place the story firmly within the realm of the fable or fairy tale. These two facts establish the poem's first tension — that of sexual difference. Although the poem has yet to define the goblins as men, traditional depictions of these creatures have always described them in male terms. Further, the narrator suggests their gender because only maids hear the goblins' cry, whereas women and men do not.

One of the most lusciously rendered descriptions of fruit in Western literature follows. The language of the goblins' litany of enchanted fruit is sensual and indulgent. Given the probability that the poem was intended to be read aloud to an audience (whether it be composed of inmates at the Highgate Penitentiary, as has been suggested, or of men belonging to a workers' union, as was the case on one known occasion), one can see Rossetti's use of language that is both oral and aural in nature. The voiced and unvoiced bilabial stops and the plosive quality of phrases such as "Plump unpecked cherries" (line 7) or "Rare pears and greengages, / Damsons and bilberries" (23-24) immediately connect the fruit described to the experience of eating. While at this point in the poem no connection has yet been made to any moral consequence of eating the fruit sold by goblins, there is undoubtedly a temptation at work in the goblins' cry. Although the second line of the poem has described the hearers of the goblins' tempting call (maids), another seduction is taking place — one between the poem and the reader. In this early stage, Rossetti has already begun to implicate her audience in the story's moral question, even before the question has been raised.

Once the narrator has established the conditions of the world of "Goblin Market" — that goblins tempt maids to taste and purchase their fruits — the poem moves into the story of two specific maids, their attempted seductions by the goblin men, and their individual responses to being tempted. The narration appears at first objective, but a layered manipulation is at work. By beginning with the general and narrowing to the specific, Rossetti brings her readers from their passive position as observers into a participatory one in which they will partake of experience with both Lizzie and Laura. The specific in "Goblin Market," however, represents possibility rather than definition. The narrator offers no value judgment regarding how the reader should approach the work. While the poem has definite ethical assumptions, the narrator does not explain it; she merely displays it. The second stanza of "Goblin Market" provides an understanding that eating goblin fruit has a moral consequence, but that understanding does not express reveal the exact nature of the consequence or even why maids should not eat the fruit. Laura merely states, "We must not look on goblin men, / We must not buy *their* fruits" (42-43; emphasis added), citing only the mysterious origins of the fruit as the reason for not eating.

Although Laura is the first to state that goblin fruit is taboo, it is she whose curiosity is piqued and she who must be admonished by Lizzie for looking at the goblin men. Further, Laura (after having established the idea that goblins must not be looked upon) encourages her sister to look. The result of this exchange is Lizzie's flight home ("She thrust a dimpled finger / In each ear, shut eyes and ran" [67-68]) and Laura's decision to stay, watch, and listen. Although the text has not yet referred to them as sisters, we perceive an apparent bond between Lizzie and Laura — not only in the similarity of their names but also because they represent opposing responses. Neither sister understands why she should not eat the fruit; they only know they should not and that some harm may come to them if they do. Both react out of this ignorance: Lizzie's flight represents not so much her moral stance as her fear, whereas Laura's decision to stay expresses her desire for understanding, for knowledge.

Here for the first time, Laura describes the goblins as men as she brings Lizzie's attention first to their mercantile qualities:

Down	the	glen	tramp	little	men.
One		hauls	a		basket,
One		bears	a		plate,
One	lugs		a	golden	dish
Of many pounds weight. [ll. 55-59]					

However, when the narrator describes these men, they are portrayed as animal-like. While it is never clear whether or not the goblins actually are part animal, the narrator, describing what Laura sees, focuses on the attributes that separate them from human men. They are likened to cats, rats, snails, wombats, and ratsels, prowling creatures that creep close to the earth. Rossetti makes a distinction between the ways in which Laura and the narrator perceive and describe the goblins. Laura first notices only their economic qualities while the narrator highlights their menacing, bestial aspects. Later, the one association Laura does make between the goblins and animals is that to her they seem to coo like doves (77). The goblins' difference from men draws and repels Laura, for she see them both as harmless creatures and as representations of animal lust.

Laura's act of watching and listening is the first of a series of three clusters of images that represent her attempts to assert selfhood by standing. Laura's initial move toward self (interest) comes when she reveals her presence to the goblin men. She stretches out her neck toward the goblins; this move is further described in a series of similes. We may view this attempt to stand not so much as a representation of solidity but as a kind of momentum. Laura is compared to a swan sticking its neck out from a cluster of rushes, a lily drooping over a brook, a poplar branch shimmering in the moonlight, and an unmoored ship moving out to sea. This move on Laura's part is ambiguously described, for, although she is choosing to entertain temptation (which will result in a fall), each image used to illustrate the move is white, representing purity. This symbolic color reinforces what is at stake should Laura partake of the fruit.

The exchange precipitated by Laura's thirst for knowledge or experience reveals most transparently that the response to this temptation will have moral consequences for the young maid. The goblins, now

described as brothers — again, naming their sex and setting them in direct opposition to Lizzie and Laura, who will soon be identified as sisters for the first time — "leer" and "signal" to each other; they are called "queer" and "sly" (93-96). As they display their fruits, one weaves a crown of "tendrils, leaves and rough nuts brown" (100). This activity stands out sharply against our knowledge of these creatures as fruit sellers. The woven crown appears to be an oblique reference to Christ's crown of thorns — an odd association to make with Laura, as Lizzie is generally acknowledged to be the Christ figure of the poem. Yet the crown of thorns represents not so much the idea of a redeemer as of a sacrifice. Laura likewise sacrifices her self, not for the good of others, as is the case with Christ, but out of self-interest. Rossetti, although a staunch [Anglican](#), is quite comfortable appropriating biblical imagery in "Goblin Market" to point toward (without prescribing) possible meaning.

Laura's lack of a coin with which to purchase the goblins' fruit places her in the precarious position of dependence on the goblins. Terrence Holt attributes the tenuousness of the situation to Laura's inability to understand the logistics of the marketplace (55). Her acknowledgement (after stating that she has no copper or silver coins) that the only gold she possesses is to be found on the furze begins a short negotiation that takes place, in which each party offers an alternative form of payment. Laura's suggestion of the yellow flowers on the bush is rejected in favor of a more personal payment: a lock of her hair. This payment defines the exchange on several levels. Her hair is golden, so it is associated with monetary value. Also, it is literally a part of Laura — something she must cut from herself in order to give to the goblins. In this way, the act is another example of Laura's active role in her own downfall. Holt sees the hair cutting as a type of castration. Given the fact that Laura cuts her own hair, there is an apparent contradiction in his theory that women in the marketplace are acted upon by others. However, if we consider that some women were sometimes agents in the perpetuation of male control in society, we can reconcile this seeming inconsistency. Laura's act "only confirms her in a tradition already hers" (56). Finally, hair is a biblical symbol of a woman's glory; for a woman to cut her hair is to defile herself in the eyes of her religious community. Specifically, gold hair in Victorian society represented innocence threatened by defilement and was connected to commerce by the associative color, according to Elisabeth Gitter (943). The single tear Laura sheds betrays her knowledge that she is literally selling her self in order to experience the fruit. Later in the poem, as Laura begins to languish under the effects of the enchanted fruit, one of the first physical signs of her weakened condition is the loss of the golden color from her now-thinning hair. The glory that made her marriageable by signifying her purity was gone (Gitter 946).

Laura's fall is clearly a reference to The Fall in Eden that occurs when Eve partakes of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Like her Old Testament counterpart (and more specifically, Milton's depiction of Eve in *Paradise Lost*), Laura's eating of the fruit results in an awakened knowledge, a departure from the safety of innocence. But unlike Eve, Laura's hunger becomes insatiable, because the fruits taste more delicious with each bite. Laura's acquiescence is typified by a move from an observatory stance to a participatory one. Although we generally associate this type of action as a positive component in the development of the growing character of the individual, we find that, in Laura's case, there is little movement forward. In fact, her actions are infantile. Like the lotus-eaters of *The Odyssey*, her enlightenment is not actual knowledge, but only a narcissistic fantasy of fulfillment.

Laura's fall is even more compelling when contrasted with Lizzie's flight home. One senses a difference between the two when Laura arrives home after dark and is met with Lizzie's "wise upbraidings" (142). Lizzie speaks only from second-hand knowledge, citing the premature death of Jeanie. Her warnings, although sound (i.e., "wise"), are not born of experience. Laura, on the other hand, enters the cottage vibrating with experience. No longer a naive maiden, she takes on the voice of the goblin men in describing the fruits of which she has partaken:

You	cannot	think	what	figs
My	teeth	have	met	in,
What		melons		ice-cold
Piled	on	a	dish	of
Too	huge	for	me	to
What	peaches	with	a	velvet
Pellucid	grapes	without	one	seed:

Odorous indeed must be the mead
Whereon they grow. [ll. 173-181]

The descriptive language employs the same pleasing aural qualities we hear in the goblins' own descriptions of the fruits they ply. Laura has essentially adopted the language of the market.

Laura's interruption of Lizzie's story reveals, for the first time in the poem, that these two are sisters: "'Nay, hush' said Laura: / 'Nay, hush, my sister'" (163-64). This literal sisterhood, while further binding them together, accentuates the only real difference between them; the two are interchangeable, except that each responded to temptation differently. The narrator takes great pains in the following stanza to establish the fundamental similarity between the sisters:

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-fall'n snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipped with gold for awful kings. [ll. 184-92]

"Golden Head by Golden Head" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. [Click on thumbnail for larger image.]

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's original illustration of this section depicts the sisters as identical women sleeping in each other's arms, highlighting the importance of their connected identity. The narrator further stresses this connectedness through a series of anaphoric lines comparing the pair to objects associated with purity (pigeons here most likely refer to doves). This single identity, despite the difference in each sister's response to the goblins' call, is essential to the poem; it allows for the redemption of the fallen.

The verse continues the theme of difference within similarity as the sisters go about their domestic duties. The stanza begins with a rather placid, idyllic depiction of the daily lives of Lizzie and Laura. However, three revelations, expressing the contrasting internal states of each sister undermine any hope of Laura surviving her fall unscathed:

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. [210-14]

This description is reminiscent of William Rossetti's observation that faith brought consolation to his sister Maria but only discomfort to Christina: "Some believers, perceiving themselves to be undoubted Christians in faith, become serenely or perhaps exuberantly happy in their inner selves: it may be said that Maria Rossetti was of these, for . . . she felt the firmest confidence of salvation." Of Christina, he states that she "always distrusted herself, and her relation to that standard of Christian duty which she constantly acknowledged and professed" (liv). Like Maria and Christina, Lizzie and Laura occupy the same spiritual center but respond differently to it.

In addition to their responses, the sisters' levels of spiritual grounding are at odds. Lizzie, who has maintained her innocence, possesses the rudimentary understanding that one's moral response to evil (the troop of goblins) should be to avoid it. Now that she has succumbed to temptation and has fallen, Laura has no such moral compass and can no longer hear the call of evil. This realization is horrifying to her, not

because of a moral conviction that she has transgressed, but rather because she no longer has access to the pleasure-giving fruits. Moreover, Laura's fall and subsequent declining health are linked to the fruit and to fruit-bearing plants; she is described in terms of her own inability to bear fruit. The narrator states that her "tree of life" — an important biblical and pagan symbol — "drooped from the root" (260). Later, when Laura tries to cultivate a fruit tree from the kernel stone of one of the goblins' fruits, watering it with her tears, the pit does not take root and grow. This could be a reference to a loss of reproductive ability, but the language is more indicative of biblical imagery regarding the soul: New Testament Christians are known by the fruit they bear.

This latter reading is evidenced in "Goblin Market" through Laura's physical deterioration as well as her lack of industry. She ages prematurely:

Her hair grew thin and grey;
 She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
 To swift decay and burn
 Her fire away. [277-80]

Her face bears this decay as well. The narrator notes Laura's "sunk eyes and faded mouth" (288). In addition, her uncontrollable weeping and gnashing of teeth are references to biblical descriptions of souls in torment. Her lack of initiative is also a sign that her tree is not bearing fruit. Laura, unlike Lizzie, no longer tends to household duties: she neglects the livestock, stops baking, and, instead of keeping the house tidy, sits by the fire. Laura's refusal to attend to these chores further places her outside the domestic sphere, because she can no longer perform the tasks that will someday give her value as a marital partner. That marriage is the goal of maids in the context of the poem is supported by Lizzie's musing over Jeanie's fall and subsequent death. Jeanie should have been a bride, but because she partook of the pleasures of the marriage bed before marriage, she fell sick and died.

In the context of Jeanie's (and, by extension, Laura's) fall, the fruit takes on a sexual significance that will become more apparent through Lizzie's interaction with the goblins. Jeanie died "in her gay prime" (316). While the adjective *gay* in this context refers to Jeanie's light-hearted youthfulness, by 1825, *gay* was already being used to [refer to prostitutes](#) ("gay"). The word used in the context of Jeanie points to a sexual fall without explicitly stating it. Rossetti's careful choice of words allows her to create a poem that she can claim is nothing more than a fairy tale but which conveys the possibility of allegorical meaning. The inclusion of Jeanie in relation to Laura's transgression is necessary not only as a warning but also as a contrast of attitudes toward the concept of fallenness. Jeanie dies because of her transgression, but Laura is restored. Jeanie represents the archaic belief that the fallen woman is bound to die early. In Laura, Rossetti asserts her belief in redemption and restoration for the woman who transgresses. That the composition of "Goblin Market" coincided with the period during which Rossetti worked at the Highgate Penitentiary attests to this belief. Another way to understand Jeanie and Laura's transgression is to look at the women in biblical terms: Jeanie must die because she is under an Old Testament (law-based) system of belief in which death is the end result of sin, while Laura's transgression occurs under (or perhaps prompts the occurrence of) the New Testament (grace-based) view of forgiveness and redemption. Rossetti's own doctrine affirms a gospel of forgiveness and hope, yet the poet herself appears to have lived her life under conditions of judgment and damnation. For her, salvation seems to apply to others and she is thus associated more with the dead Jeanie than with Laura, who is able to receive forgiveness and obtain salvation.

Laura is unable to save herself; she has transgressed, and the state into which she is flung (and over which she obsesses) prevents her from the possibility of ever finding restoration on her own. Lizzie, who has maintained her maiden innocence, becomes the redeeming agent in "Goblin Market." Yet Lizzie's purity is naive and untested. She has run from every encounter with the goblins. In this way, Lizzie and Laura represent a dichotomy: Laura's physical deterioration and near-death state make up the impetus that forces Lizzie out of the safety of a childish fantasy — an eternal state of domestic and sororal existence — and into the world. In this way, each sister represents opposing responses to the construct of marriage: Laura craves experience without the domestic reality, while Lizzie hides within the safety of the home, fearful of sexual experience. Leila May also explores this dichotomy; she describes Victorian sorority as

an arena in which to explore difference "within a framework of sameness" (135). Lizzie and Laura's similarity is created to better accentuate their fundamental differences.

The second half of "Goblin Market" is primarily Lizzie's story of self-actualization and coming of age. In order to save Laura, she must face the same temptations her sister faced and, not succumbing, stand. In other words, she must become a type of Christ.

Lizzie's development into the redeeming hero of the poem begins when she allows herself to look at the world around her:

Then Lizzie weighed no more
 Better and worse;
 But put a silver penny in her purse,
 Kissed Laura, crossed the heath with clumps of furze
 At twilight, halted by the brook:
 And for the first time in her life
 Began to listen and look. [322-28]

The most significant lines in this passage, lines 327-28, reveal Lizzie's limited experience with the world outside of her sphere. Although the world she has inhabited up to this point is the home, this environment does not represent the domestic sphere. It is an attempt at domesticity, but it is also a separatist fantasy that has allowed her to appropriate the trappings of the home without having to confront her fear of the marriage bed. While the goblins do not represent domestic reality itself, they do appear to be manifestations of Lizzie's unrealistic fears of sexuality. The goblin merchants are men (but not the men of the village — "Men sell not such in any town" [101]) who dominate women; they consume their prey like the fruit they sell, tossing the rinds and pits away once they have found temporary satiety, as Laura did.

The description of the goblins' approach once they notice Lizzie's "peeping" (330) is relentlessly oppressive. In Lizzie's ears, they are not cooing and "full of loves" (79) as they were in Laura's. The goblins appear, displaying their more fearsome animal qualities:

Helter skelter, hurry skurry,
 Chattering like magpies,
 Fluttering like pigeons,
 Gliding like fishes,
 Hugged her and kissed her,
 Squeezed and caressed her. [344-49]

One can already see a deeper level of menace at work in Lizzie's encounter with the goblins than in Laura's. This realization appears to be Lizzie's own sense as well. As the goblins offer their fruit to her, she is fearful and remembers Jeanie. Although her intention is to save her sister, Lizzie's more immediate necessity in the midst of impending temptation is to save herself. She gives them her penny and holds open her apron, a tie to her domestic fantasy. Ellen Golub uses the image of apron strings to explore the psychoanalytic impulses of the oral child attempting to free herself of her mother's control (161). Lizzie's vision and creation of a home with her sister is an attempt at self-sufficiency away from the restrictions of parents and the perceived threat of male sexuality; however, it is a suspended vision, a stunted construct. In order to overcome her childish fantasy and assimilate into the world of adulthood and domestic reality, she must confront her fear.

Lizzie attempts to purchase the fruits with which she will save her sister. But because the goblin men wish to consume the women they seduce, they deny her the opportunity to wield consumer power. Thus, Lizzie cannot truly buy from the goblin men; she must taste their fruits first. When she discovers that she cannot assert such power in order to buy the fruit that will save Laura, she asks for her silver penny back so that she can return home. But her refusal to enter into the goblins' politics of exchange angers the

creatures, and they begin to upbraid her, calling her names reserved for women who step outside the bounds of propriety and traditionally prescribed gender roles:

One called her proud,
 Cross-grained, uncivil. [394-95]

The goblins' assault on Lizzie for refusing to eat their fruit can only be described as a metaphorical image of rape. They violently claw and tear at her, shoving their fruits at her tightly closed mouth. The imagery is unmistakably sexual. In 1973, artist Kinuko Craft created an illustration for "Goblin Market." Using Arthur Rackham's illustration for inspiration, he depicted Lizzie's encounter with the goblins ("White and golden Lizzie stood" [408]). In Craft's illustration (which first appeared in *Playboy*), however, Lizzie stands — her clothes all but torn off — amid a horde of goblins carrying various fruits, all of which resemble male and female sex organs. Most notable is the fact that Craft chose for inspiration an illustration that was specifically intended for a children's publication, as opposed to the earlier illustrations of the poem by Gabriel Rossetti and Laurence Houseman (Kooistra 243). While this mingling of childlike fairy-tale imagery with Boschean pornography may amount to an extreme reading of "Goblin Market," the fact remains that Rossetti's fairy tale is erotically charged. Craft's illustration merely exploits the sexual imagery Rossetti employs, making obvious what in the poem is veiled.

Lizzie's resistance to the goblin attack is described in a series of anaphoric lines that echo Laura's earlier straining to contract with the same men:

Like a lily in a flood, —
 Like a rock of blue veined stone
 Lashed by tides obstreperously, —
 Like a beacon left alone
 In a hoary roaring sea,
 Sending up a golden fire, —
 Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree
 White with blossoms honey-sweet
 Sore beset by wasp and bee, —
 Like a royal virgin town
 Topped with gilded dome and spire
 Close beleaguered by a fleet
 Mad to tug her standard down. [ll. 409-21]

Laura's earlier craning to peep at the goblins is expressed in terms of breaking out of restraints, while Lizzie's act is to withstand an onslaught of violent attack. The upright symbols of her resistance are phallic in nature, leading some to assert that Lizzie must appropriate male power in order to successfully withstand the goblin attack. Marsh describes the imagery associated with Lizzie's stand as "orgasmic" (234). At the same time, the white, blue, and gold colors described, as well as the reference to a virgin town, link Lizzie by association to the Virgin Mary. D. M. R. Bentley and Diane D'Amico also note the Marian imagery in this scene. This association is important because Lizzie will step into the role — or will birth a new aspect of her development — of a redeeming Christ figure. She maintains her essential humanity while assuming deification in order to save Laura. Lizzie is able to stand and assume this role because her act is driven by selflessness and sacrifice.

As the goblins' assault upon Lizzie grows more violent (they now cuff, pinch, kick, and maul her [424-29]), Lizzie grows in strength. As the merchants smear fruit against her mouth in an attempt to force her to eat, Lizzie smiles and laughs "in heart" (432). She has discovered that Laura cannot be saved by simply giving her purchased goblin fruit. Redemption must come through the sacrifice of Lizzie's physical body. The attack ends when "[a]t last the evil people" (437), worn out by her resistance, throw her penny back at her and disappear. This is the first and only time that Rossetti's narrator uses a non-gender-specific label (apart from the term goblin, which traditionally refers to a male creature in English folklore). The word "people" appears at the end of a line, but it is not rhymed with another word. Consequently, it appears to be an intentional word choice (given the fact that Rossetti could have inserted the easily-rhymed

and more-frequently-used label men). By removing the gender association, Rossetti broadens the scope of evil and, in doing so, implicates the society out of which the evil emanates. Rossetti indicts Victorian society for its implicit role in perpetuating the rigid attitudes that limit female autonomy.

Lizzie's victory over the goblins — her ability to stand — is as transformative for her as it will be for Laura. Not only by looking and listening to the goblins, but also by resisting the temptation to eat their fruit, she has proven herself a worthy redeemer. She runs home, no longer threatened by the goblins — "Nor was she pricked by fear" (460) — but prepared to save her dying sister. Because Lizzie has gained experience without sullyng her own character, she no longer has to fear the sexual implications of marriage, and she can restore her sister. Through her act, Lizzie is able to transform the cankerous quality of the enchanted fruit into a "fiery antidote" (559) that heals Laura.

The erotic nature of the means by which Lizzie saves Laura is not so much a homoerotic display (as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest) as an acknowledgement of Laura's transgression and its sensual nature. The battered and bruised Lizzie returns home, happy to have endured the attack for the sake of her sister. Her language is that of a victor returning from the battlefield: "For your sake I have braved the glen / And had to do with goblin merchant men" (473-74). However, she also appropriates the language of the goblins in her exhortations to Laura to partake of the now-healing juices:

'Did you miss me?
 Come and kiss me.
 Never mind my bruises,
 Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
 Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
 Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
 Eat me, drink me, love me;
 Laura, make much of me.' [465-72]

But Lizzie, like Rossetti, reconstructs the meaning in order to suit her purposes; by adding Eucharistic imagery to her call to Laura, she transforms herself into a kind of Christ. The interaction, D'Amico suggests, is an "affirmation of the spiritual over the sensual" (78). Lizzie bears Laura's transgression (the fruit), but she does not allow its potentially harmful effects to overtake her.

Lizzie's return prompts three responses from Laura. First, she displays fear that Lizzie has also crumbled under the temptation of the goblins. This fear is born of a full acknowledgement of her fallen state. Like the encounter between Nancy and Rose Maylie in *Oliver Twist* or the reconciliation between Magdalene and Norah Vanstone in *No Name*, the reunion of Laura and Lizzie is marked by contrasting states of fallenness and purity. Like her other literary counterparts, Laura expresses a feeling of worthlessness as a result of her transgression: "Must your light like mine be hidden, / Your young life like mine be wasted[?]" (480-81). In her worry over her sister, Laura expresses the fundamental difference between her and Lizzie. Like Lizzie, however, Laura appropriates biblical language when she describes herself. Her hidden light is a reference to Christ's words in the New Testament: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house" (Matt. 5.14-16). In her statement, Laura conveys the isolative result of transgression and the negative effect it has upon community.

Laura's second response to Lizzie's return is an erotically charged assault upon her sister that echoes that of the goblins. Her tears refresh her eyes, just as her kisses hydrate the dried juices that cover Lizzie. These kisses at first express her love for Lizzie, but they quickly degenerate into a lust to again taste the forbidden fruit. In this respect, Laura's act is as rape-like as the goblins' attack; she replaces agape with eros, entering into an act typified by a desire to take rather than to give. Rossetti creates tension in the poem by again intermingling two opposing ideas. The act of sucking the juices from Lizzie's body is what redeems Laura, but the act itself is selfishly conceived out of a lust for satiety.

Laura's third response is also the third attempt in the poem for a character to stand; like the previous two attempts, it is described in a series of anaphoric lines of similes:

Like the watch-tower of a town
 Which an earthquake shatters down,
 Like a lightning-stricken mast,
 Like a wind-uprooted tree
 Spun about,
 Like a foam-topped waterspout
 Cast down headlong in the sea,
 She fell at last. [514-522]

Unlike Lizzie, Laura fails in her attempt to stand, because the momentum propelling her upward (i.e., self-interest) is overtaken by the greater "flame" of Lizzie's sacrificial love. The juice of goblin fruit, once "[s]weeter than honey from the rock," is now a bitter but necessary banquet: "That juice was wormwood to her tongue, / She loathed the feast" (129, 494-95). Laura's literal fall (or inability to stand) under Lizzie's healing act is the only way she can be restored to the state she inhabited before her spiritual fall.

Rossetti suspends knowledge as to whether Laura will die or live as a result of Lizzie's act. In doing so, she prepares an audience accustomed to the idea that the fallen die early as a result of their transgression for Laura's complete restoration. After a long night in which Lizzie sits at Laura's bedside nursing her sister, Laura awakens "as from a dream" and "[l]aughed in the innocent old way" (537-38). In addition to her purity, her health and youth are fully restored. Laura's restoration includes a successful return to society; the last stanza of "Goblin Market" moves to "Days, weeks, months, years / Afterwards" (543-44), when both are married and have children. The two sisters have grown out of their childlike fantasy of domestic sorority and have exchanged it for the reality of the traditional family. Lizzie is able to accept the sexual component necessary to create a family, while Laura can once again return to the domestic sphere with a responsibility created by a deeper sense of connectedness.

The poem's final lines — after Laura has told the story to her children, and in which she expresses the tale's moral — comprise the most problematic aspect of the poem:

Then joining hands to little hands

Would bid them cling together,
 'For there is no friend like a sister
 In calm or stormy weather;
 To cheer one on the tedious way,
 To fetch one if one goes astray,
 To lift one if one totters down,
 To strengthen whilst one stands.' [560-67]

This didactic close, which contrasts with the entire poem that precedes it, represents the final opposition in "Goblin Market." Formal in tone and unsatisfying in content (it doesn't appear to speak at all to the heart of the message of Lizzie and Laura's tale), these final eight lines disappoint after the wild exuberance (in both meter and message) of the preceding 559 lines. Yet within the context of the fairy-tale motif, the inclusion of the oversimplified moral can be better understood. Because Rossetti herself describes "Goblin Market" as a fairy tale, we can look at the poem's moral from the standpoint of how such tales approach meaning. Writing for children, authors of fairy tales and fables use morals to make the meaning easier to remember, to ascribe meaning to what has just been experienced, to buffer the reader from some of the more troubling aspects of the story, and to create a bridge one crosses to return to the real world. In "Goblin Market" — which we can assume had an intended audience of both children and adults — this understanding of the use of morals allows adults to connect with the story's more mature themes of temptation, fallenness, redemption, and restoration while children can read the poem as pure story and still glean a meaning regarding the importance of community. Rossetti's final stanza also serves as a portal out of the realm of sensual experience, providing a means to return to grounded understanding. One can never remain in fairy-tale land.

At the same time, because the poem's moral is trite, it hints at the possibility of a deeper meaning. Rossetti may use the ending as a device to bring the reader closer to the heart of the poem's meaning while further obscuring that meaning. This act of revealing only to cover is indicative of several others of her poems — poems that employ possibility in order to express mystery. Joyce Carole Oates echoes this idea in her Afterword to a 1997 edition of "Goblin Market," which she defines as a mystery: "For contemporary readers, it is the elusive subtext of "Goblin Market" that seizes our imaginations, provoking us to wonder at the poem's more subtle and possibly more subversive meanings" (64).

It is the unknowability of the poem that becomes, in the end, its most distinguishing feature. It may appear contradictory to praise a poem for its inability to be comprehended; however, in the case of "Goblin Market," the mystery of its meaning is so pregnant with possibility that the unresolved ambiguities become the reward for the reader. For centuries, the Western church has expressed the divine intervention of God in the lives of people through the Eucharist as a great mystery. Perhaps "Goblin Market," in the hands of Rossetti, approaches mystery in this religious sense, as a rich, transformative gift.

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