

Events in History at the Time of the Poem

Evolution, race, and empire

Published just three years after Charles Darwin's landmark essay *On the Origin of Species* (also in *Literature and Its Times*), "The Goblin Market" resonates with concerns raised by evolutionary theory. Though the *Origin of Species* does not directly address the evolution of humans from animals (Darwin would not address this directly until his 1871 *The Descent of Man*), the essay fostered a widespread anxiety regarding the nearness of humans to other species. Positing a mechanism called "Natural Selection," whereby new species could evolve from old, the *Origin* implied that the apparently stable (some even said, a divinely ordained) natural order, which set humanity clearly apart from and above other species, was neither so stable nor so clear-cut. The lines between species were, it now seemed, impossible to draw for they were perpetually in flux. The essay thus destabilized certain comforting views of a permanent natural order for many Victorians. But at the same time it was used to reinforce beliefs that served the dominant Victorian culture. The social application of Darwinian theory, known as "**Social Darwinism**" began immediately upon (perhaps even before) the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Though biologists today insist that evolution has no particular direction, a number of Victorians interpreted evolution as progressing to increasingly perfect forms; older or more primitive forms, they reasoned, were less perfect. In this way, they translated the mechanism of **natural selection** into a hierarchy—a model of the world that understands some "species" as better or higher than others. (A number of Victorians also conflated the terms "species" and "race," often treating them more nearly as synonyms than we currently do.) Applying hierarchical versions of an evolutionary ladder to the various races (and classes, for that matter) of people, these Victorians went on to reason that some races were more evolved, or less primitive, than others. The idea emerged that Europeans stood higher on the evolutionary scale than Asians, who, in turn, stood higher than Africans; there were even some scientific textbooks of the era that implied this was the case.

The goblin men in Rossetti's poem embody all of these concerns. Their recurring animal traits—"One had a cat's face, / One whisked a tail"—blur the distinction between human beings and animals (Rossetti, "The Goblin Market," p. 2). Their portrayal also raises a question regarding their origins and overlays this concern with implications regarding the animality of foreigners. The dangers that the goblin men pose relate to an increasingly visible anxiety of otherness (fears of all kinds of difference, including gender, race, nation, sexuality, and species) that laced the Victorian discourse of empire more and more as the century progressed. The expansion of British empire during Victoria's reign, to its greatest size and influence in the 1880s, brought with it not only riches and power, but anxiety and guilt. In numerous ways, Victorians indicated their fear that the empire would

indeed strike back. Real rebellions such as the “[Indian Mutiny](#)” of 1857–58 gave rise to fears of out-and-out invasions, as fictionalized in novels such as *The Moonstone*, [Dracula](#), and *The War of the Worlds* (also in *Literature and Its Times*). Such fears manifested themselves on a personal as well as a societal level, in the representations of interracial rape that British women might suffer if they went abroad. It was alleged that they had been violated in this way during the “[Indian Mutiny](#),” raising a fear that tourism promoters worked to dispel by promising safe spaces for Britains abroad. There was, moreover, a fairly common sense that rebellion and “reverse colonization” (in which colonized people make their presence felt back in England) were not entirely unwarranted, and that they were payback for the highly questionable treatment of colonial peoples by the British.

Class, commerce, and dangerous imports

The anxieties about foreignness, or otherness, which “The Goblin Market” conveys, cannot be separated from the mobile nature of society produced by the changing economy of nineteenth-century England. The industrial revolution contributed much to the emergence of an increasingly powerful middle class. “The Goblin Market” seems to take place in rural England, but the buying and selling that defines the “goblin merchant men” suggests a specific concern with the commercialism stimulated not only by industrialism but also by the expansion of the British empire. British ships sailed all over the world, distributing products and passengers, and importing exotics in the form of goods and even of people. Some of these imports seemed as innocuous as fruit, including the staple that became so consummately English that we forget it was an import of the empire: tea. Other imports were more troubling. Opium, imported from China, was in common medicinal use alongside morphine and cocaine. Like these substances, opium was highly addictive. It figured as a centerpiece of Victorian drug culture, pervading the slums of London’s East End and in common use among many late-Victorian artists and intellectuals.

Nineteenth-century commercialism also brought with it a new mobility. The British toured the world, guided by the services of Thomas Cook (who, starting in 1841, organized the first package tours) and by such helpful publications as [Karl Baedeker](#)’s travel guides. Also, traveling salesmen toured the country, buying, selling, and earning commissions. Many people gained considerable wealth “in trade”—a phrase used to indicate that they earned their fortunes through commerce rather than inheritance and still laced with the disdainful tone of the upper for the lower classes. Indeed Americans are often confused by the complications of social class introduced by the possibilities of wealth due to commercialism and industrialization, since in Victorian England, class was not just about wealth but also about where that wealth came from. It was entirely possible to be decidedly middle class, if one’s income came from trade or industry, and to have a whole lot more money than many of the [upper class](#), whose income and position derived from land ownership, established in an earlier, agrarian economy. As often as society

saw middle-class wealth on the rise, moreover, it saw this [upper class](#) in decline, a phenomenon that led to the practice of marrying new money to save an old name.

Marriage, prostitution, and disease

On the surface a children's poem, "Goblin Market" can be viewed as a commentary on issues crucial to women's options and limitations in mid-Victorian society. By the 1840s and 1850s, traditional views of women's roles were coming under fire. The middle-class insistence that women must marry was harder and harder to sustain under evidence from the 1851 census that said women outnumbered men in the population, men tended to marry younger women, and almost half of all women over 20 had no spouse to support them. The unmarried women were called "redundant" or "odd," and there were few respectable ways in which they could support themselves, since the middle classes still frowned upon a woman's working outside the home. (Of course, most working-class women, which is to say most women, did work outside the home at the time.) Such work went against the idea that men and women should occupy "separate spheres"—his public, hers private. This put the middle-class woman in a difficult position, which was further sustained by certain ideologies of womanhood that praised the female for her "moral greatness" as well as for her asexuality, building a myth that had its most popular expression in the phrase "The Angel in the House (originally the title of a poem by Coventry Patmore, which sold about a quarter million copies in the second half of the century). A physician, William Acton, is known for his observation that "the majority of women . . . are not much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind" as well as for his 1857 book on prostitution, which argued for sympathy and humane treatment of prostitutes, who should be viewed as victims rather than seducers (Acton in Tucker, p. 126).

Though Acton's views on women's asexuality were by no means universal, his book showed a preoccupation with prostitution as a social concern that increased throughout the late century. At the same time that Victorian commentators celebrated the virtues of self-control and marital fidelity, prostitution became a more and more visible feature of middle-class life. Middle-class men, with an ambition to rise in the world, postponed marriage until they were well-established, often seeking out prostitutes in the meantime. Aside from the full-time professionals, some, mostly working-class women, struggling to make ends meet on notoriously low wages, sought to supplement their incomes with the occasional exchange of sex for pay. Prostitution, among the Victorians, was not necessarily the full-time occupation we currently imagine it to be, though Victorian legislation played a part in this shift of attitudes. With the [Contagious Diseases](#) Acts of 1864, 1869, and 1870, prostitution came under state regulation and the women involved in sex for money began to be considered prostitutes, *per se*. These acts mandated compulsory genital inspection of women suspected of being prostitutes; they were screened for venereal disease (syphilis, in particular, was extremely common), and those women who were infected were detained in lock hospitals, or hospitals

containing venereal wards. This legislation itself was largely motivated by concerns for the spread of such diseases among enlisted men in naval ports and army garrison towns. But these men were never inspected or detained (after all, that would have been humiliating to the soldiers and might lower morale), and by 1870, the inequity of this treatment became the focus of feminist protest. The campaign against these acts brought to light many of the inequities as well as the errors of the Victorian sexual double standard, although the language of protest often drew on traditional views of middle-class femininity. Protesters argued, for example, that not only prostitutes but married women were the innocent victims of male promiscuity, as men (much like goblin men) brought diseases such as syphilis from the ports and into the home. The acts were repealed in 1886.

Victorian sexualities

Though often read to children, “The Goblin Market” was written also for adults and can be read for its complex portrayal of Victorian sexual concerns. While people today associate Victorianism with not only a sexual double standard but also a pervasive prudishness, Victorian views on sexuality were in fact far more diverse and open than is often assumed. The work of avant-garde poets and artists of the 1850s and ‘60s—[Robert Browning](#), [Algernon Charles Swinburne](#), [Dante Gabriel Rossetti](#)—is full of erotic content, enough to have given rise to the so-called “fleshly school of poetry” (Tucker, p. 131). Mid-to-late Victorian medicine is fascinated with sex and sexuality in a wide variety of forms. “Deviant” sexual preferences and practices, especially masturbation and inversion (similar to what would come to be called homosexuality), were favorite topics. William Acton’s views on women’s asexuality (see above) were by no means generally held; indeed, many felt that sexual desire in women remained latent until awakened, at which point it became insatiable, and others seem to have supported views that many would consider enlightened, even today. Female orgasm was also a subject of considerable medical attention, not least because some people of the era believed that it was necessary in order for a woman to conceive. Among the general population, limiting conception was a common concern, and contraception seems to have been in wide use by the 1860s, to judge from the shrinking size of England’s middle-class families. On the other hand, the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the use of [artificial insemination](#) on humans; 1884 marks the first recorded [artificial insemination](#) using donor (not the husband’s) semen, a practice that became visible enough by 1897 for the Pope to ban it as adulterous.

The nineteenth century also saw the invention of the concept of the homosexual. Sex between men, which had been around forever, was re-construed. Formerly understood as a behavior or series of acts, it became, by the end of the century, a defining category closely associated with political identity. One no longer merely happened to have sex with men; one was an invert or a homosexual. The term “heterosexual” followed. But lesbianism, as we think of it, would not be visible until even later. This invisibility stemmed in part from a common inability or un-

willingness to imagine sex as sex without the presence of male genitalia. Nonetheless, erotic connections between women were probably common—facilitated, in fact, by some of the more traditional sexual ideology of the Victorian era. The myth of women’s asexuality served to mask women’s erotic lives. And the doctrine of separate spheres so effectively divided middle-class men from women that each could readily form intimate relationships within one’s own sex. This is not to say that there weren’t also plenty of close and highly sexual marriages between men and women, in the middle and other classes. Nonetheless, there had been a long tradition of “romantic friendship” among women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and when we look at the letters and diaries of Victorian women, many of them read with the intensity and passion of love letters. This does not indicate differences in modes of expression alone. It points also to intense emotional commitments, and the existence of bodily erotic practices.

The Poem in Focus

The contents

Like all the other maidens, as they go about their daily work, sisters Laura and Lizzie routinely hear the cry of the goblin merchant men hawking their forbidden fruits. Evincing a wide range of animal characteristics—a cat’s face, a rat’s pace, a cooing like doves—the goblin men entice young women to buy their fruit, after which they vanish from the sight and hearing of those who succumb. The sisters know that they are not supposed to look at the goblin men or buy their fruits, and though Laura is the first to voice this injunction, she is already peeping as she does so. From peeping, she moves to looking in earnest as Lizzie warns her not to.

Lizzie recounts the story of Jeannie, who ate the goblin fruit, “who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died” (“Goblin Market,” p. 9). And such is the effect of the goblin fruit that even Jeannie’s grave proves infertile, barren of grass, and unable to support the daisies that Lizzie plants. But it is too late. Laura has already sought the fruit. Having no silver currency and no gold but what is on the land in the form of yellow flowers on the shrub and her golden hair, she trades a lock of hair, drops a tear, and secures the fruit.

After tasting the goblin fruit, Laura wants more. Her mouth waters as she begins to pine. But though other maidens, including Lizzie, can still hear the goblins cry, Laura hears nothing. She tries to grow her own from the “kernel-stone” or pit that she had saved. She even waters it with her own tears, but nothing grows from it. Laura’s health gets progressively worse, and her interest in domestic duties flags. She re-fuses to eat.

Lizzie, unable to sit by and watch her sister’s decline, and mindful of Jeannie’s fate, sets out to look for the goblin men. Cautious, she brings a silver penny in her purse to purchase the fruit. But when she finds them, the goblin men refuse her

offer of currency, inviting her to sit and eat with them instead. She refuses, and they grow violent. They start by calling her names, but their aggression escalates until they have “tor[n] her gown and soiled her stocking” (“Goblin Market,” p. 11). They try to force her to eat, coaxing, bullying, pinching, kicking, mauling, and mocking to no avail; Lizzie “Would not open lip from lip / Lest they should cram a mouthful in” (“Goblin Market,” p. 12).

Frustrated, the goblins eventually scatter, and Lizzie triumphs. She departs in possession of the “juice that syrugged all her face” as well as of her penny, jingling in her purse (“Goblin Market,” p. 12). Inviting Laura to “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices” Lizzie reveals that she has braved the goblin men for the sake of her sister (“Goblin Market,” p. 13). And the antidote—the juice—works. After a fiery struggle, Laura recovers and is back to her old self.

Years later, when both are wives and mothers (though husbands are conspicuously absent), it is Laura who recounts to their children (all daughters, it would seem) the tale of the goblin men, and impresses on them that “there is no friend like a sister” (“Goblin Market,” p. 16).

Dangerous desire

Manifestly a story of forbidden fruit, “The Goblin Market” is one of the juiciest poems—literally and figuratively—to grace the pages of Victorian literature. The poem can easily be understood to be dealing with the extramarital sexual seduction of adolescent girls. A cautionary tale from this angle, it establishes clearly that dangerous men will love you and leave you. Beyond this, “The Goblin Market” suggests that the penalties for promiscuous sexuality may be even more severe. With it come the threats of disease, infertility, and even death. The poem recounts the destiny of Jeannie, who ate the goblin fruit and then “for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died,” which can be taken to mean that she forfeited her virginity with fatal consequences (“Goblin Market,” p. 9).

Moreover, the danger in the animalized goblin men relates not only to their masculinity but also to their strangeness. It is clear when Laura first utters an injunction against looking at goblin men that they embody a wide range of Victorian fears of otherness:

We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits,
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?

(“Goblin Market,” p. 2)

Whether “they” refers to the goblin men them-selves, or to their sexualized fruits (an image which evokes the sexual temptation the men represent, or even their

private parts), is extremely ambiguous, and may imply any number of other questions: Upon what “soil” have they fed? Where do they come from? Are they English or foreign? What are their “roots?” Upper class or lower? Or alternately, Where have they been? Who have they been with? In what “soil” have they planted their phallic, penetrative, “hungry, thirsty roots?” And what “soil”—what dirt, contamination, disease—have they brought with them?

One set of anxieties that the poem evokes is the possibility of mixed (race or class) coupling, as the lily white sisters, landed though cashless, mix with the decidedly foreign goblin men. Another anxiety is the ever-too-easy slippage into prostitution, as Laura trades a piece of herself (“Buy from us with a golden curl,” the goblins suggest for the fruit she so desires (“Goblin Market,” p. 4). As Laura pines away, her attempts to grow her own fruit can be seen as an attempt to regain fertility lost through contracting a vaguely specified sexually transmitted disease. But Jeannie’s fate suggests the hopelessness of Laura’s efforts; Jeannie’s infertility persists even in her death: “While to this day no grass will grow / Where she lies low; I planted daisies there a year ago / That never blow” (“Goblin Market,” p. 5).

Another Victorian anxiety surfaces in connection with what Laura’s encounter may imply about female sexuality and desire. In the poem, even the most well-trained of Victorian girls (for it is Laura who first voices the prohibition against goblin men) cannot resist the lure of the fruit. And Laura’s previously latent desire, once awakened, becomes insatiable: “I ate and ate my fill, / Yet my mouth waters still” (“Goblin Market,” p. 5).

Other kinds of female desire suffuse the poem as well—including a desire to enter the market-place, not as an object but as a subject performing the exchange, not as goods or currency but as a buyer or seller. That is to say, the poem contrasts the woman who is positioned as the desired object, for whom a prospective husband (in marriage) or a client (in prostitution) might barter, and the woman who wishes to go out into the world with money or goods to buy or sell. The poem can be seen as one that expresses considerable anxiety and ambivalence about the woman’s making this move into the public sphere, which leads to a continual threat to violate the woman who tries. When Lizzie enters, armed with currency and ready to buy, the goblin men refuse to sell to her in ways that suggest the escalation of sexual harassment from flirtation (“Nay take a seat with us, / Honour and eat with us”), to bullying (“One called her proud, / Cross-grained, uncivil”), to physical assault and even rape (“Goblin Market,” p. 11):

They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her,
Clawed with their nails,
Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking . . .

(“Goblin Market,” p. 11)

But Lizzie preserves at once her silence and her virginity, as she “Would not open lip from lip” (“Goblin Market,” p. 12). Through Lizzie’s silence, the poem may also be articulating the female writer’s ambivalence about entering the public sphere, as suggested by the words used to describe the pain involved when the goblins “pinched her black as ink” (“Goblin Market,” p. 12). But, though silenced, Lizzie manages to reverse the usual double standard, as she absconds with the juice of the goblin fruit and still in possession of her money (why buy the fruit when you can have the juice for free?). Her penny—representing at once her sexual self-possession and her financial independence—still jingles in her purse. Not only does the poem thus protest women’s objectification in the marketplace, it also posits an alternative model of fe-male love and community.

When one reads the poem as commentary on female desire, that desire takes a new form at this point, as Lizzie’s love of her sister is represented as deeply passionate and manifestly erotic:

“Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices....
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me... ”

(“Goblin Market,” p. 13)

Through the depiction of this highly eroticized sisterly love, Rossetti promotes salvation for women through sisterhood (a term that we can read more broadly to imply identification with other women). In doing so, she evokes her own work with fallen women and at the same time suggests that fallen women are not a category apart from so-called honest women, as the dominant culture would have it. Instead, these categories prove temporary and incidental. Neither sister is ruined; neither is even unmarriageable

A NEW SPIN ON FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Most readers familiar with the biblical story of the [Garden of Eden](#) will see echoes of the story in Christina Rossetti’s “The Goblin Market.” In the biblical tale, a serpent tempts Eve with the forbidden fruit, and she, in turn, tempts Adam. Both then realize that they are naked, become embarrassed, and cover themselves up. God, angry that they have disobeyed him, expels them from the [Garden of Eden](#). This story has frequently been used in Western, Christian-dominated cultures to justify unequal treatment of women, who (along with Eve) are held responsible for the [fall of man](#). Undoubtedly, Rossetti’s fruit-bearing goblin men have animalistic (if not precisely serpentine) characteristics, and function as dangerous tempters of women. As in the Garden of Eden story, the fruit can represent sexual temptation,

and Laura experiences an awakening to sexual knowledge not unlike Adam and Eve's. But Rossetti refuses to adopt the dominant interpretations of women as temptresses of men. She rewrites the story in such a way that Laura is never responsible for anyone's fall but her own, and even then, she is posited very much as an innocent victim. Rossetti, moreover, rethinks religiously based concepts of fallen-ness (as applied to women), purity, and the possibilities for salvation. Resisting irreversible categories such as the fallen woman (a concept based on the religiously driven idea that once a woman has sex, especially extramarital sex, she can never go back, never regain her lost virginity), Rossetti insists that so-called fallen women can be saved. Purity, the poem suggests, is less about virginity and more about one's personal integrity, goodness, and capacity to love. As Lizzie helps to restore her sister, Rossetti speaks not only to the [Old Testament](#), but also to the [New Testament](#), in which Jesus is said to sacrifice himself to save all of mankind from its original fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. By creating a female Christ-figure, Rossetti not only refuses to blame women for the fallen state of mankind., she also suggests that salvation (traditionally seen in Christianity as the province of man, and only one man at that) is something that women can do for each other. In this way, she feminizes the idea of salvation itself, even as she suggests that it is something that can occur any or every day.

or for that matter, infertile; the poem brings us to a moment "Afterwards, when both were wives / With children of their own" ("Goblin Market," p. 15). The end of the poem, when one reads it as commentary on female desire, seriously rethinks what constitutes a family as well. The anxieties of infertility, the stealing of the goblin juice followed fast by the proliferation of children, gesture ever so subtly to the possibilities of artificial insemination. That all the children seem to be sisters further suggests a fantasy of predominantly female community, wherein the implicit presence of husbands serves merely to lend social sanction to Rossetti's alternative version of the happy ending. Unlike so many other fairy tales, which end with the union of man and woman, it is a new generation of girls who are now joined "hands to little hands" as Laura bids them "cling together, / For there is no friend like a sister ("Goblin Market," p. 16).

Sources and literary context

Though largely intended for an adult audience, "The Goblin Market" reads like a children's poem in its rhythm and rhyme as well as in its strong moral tone. By the end of the nineteenth-century, it had found its way into Victorian school anthologies, a surface reading of it fitting nicely with moralistic writings that encouraged children to be good, stay within boundaries, and avoid talking to strangers. Rossetti's poem combines the concerns of earlier religious tracts for children, which focused on what children must do to achieve salvation, with the concerns of Victorian children's fiction, which tended to locate the source of the child's problems in the errors of the surrounding adult population. Since raising children was considered the particular province of women, few would object to a

woman writing children's stories. In fact, women were welcomed to this genre because of traditional gender roles, and they shrewdly took advantage of the freedom they had in it. It was quite common among Victorian women writers to subtly question, even subvert, traditional female roles through their stories. In its creation, Christina Rossetti joins many Victorian women writers who found the children's story a safe, even tactful medium through which to wrestle with a number of highly vexed social, sexual, and religious issues.

The religious character of the poem is manifest, though what it has to say about religion is quite subtle. Perhaps the most obvious literary source for "The Goblin Market" is the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. Explicitly a tale of the "fruit forbidden," the poem takes up the biblical themes of temptation and salvation with its undercurrents of sexual knowledge. The animalistic goblins are

A REPUTATION ON THE RISE

Upon her death, Rossetti's work enjoyed a surge of popularity and eulogistic praise. At last, she vied for critical popularity with the most prominent female poet of the Victorian era, [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#). By the early twentieth century, Rossetti's popularity seemed to exceed Browning's; her treatment of troubled love (as compared to Browning's many depictions of happy and fulfilled love) appear to have come into vogue. In the early twentieth century, critics turned more of their attention to the biographical elements of Rossetti's work, as well as to the figure of Rossetti as a distinctly *female* writer. These concerns led to their understanding the line "there is no friend like a sister," for example, to be a reference to Christina's elder sister Maria, who helped save so-called sullied women and joined the Anglican order of the All Saints Sisterhood. Increasingly at this time, Rossetti's work was placed in the company of the great male religious voices. And in *A Room of One's Own* (1929; also in *Literature and Its Times*), Virginia Woolf identifies Rossetti as the female counterpart to the celebrated poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. Now, with the growing body of feminist scholarship, earlier images of Christina Rossetti as only a minor female poet or merely the younger sister of her famous brother have been almost entirely dispelled.

readily compared to the serpent, and Laura, to Eve. But "The Goblin Market" is no simple allegory, and further one-to-one correspondences to biblical characters and events begin to elude the reader: Where is Adam? Is Lizzie another Eve? Jesus? In this way, Rossetti builds on a tradition of poetic biblical revision. A perhaps inescapable source of religious literary material in the Rossetti family was Dante, though "The Goblin Market" is more directly a response to the writings of Milton, specifically his [Paradise Lost](#) (1667; also in *Literature and Its Times*), as well as his *Comus* (1634). Drawing on such influences, Rossetti rewrites the biblical story of the savior with a female Christ figure (Lizzie); salvation now comes through sisterhood.

Other literary sources came to Rossetti through members of her family. The first of these is the more subtle: her connection to sensation fiction and more particularly, the vampire story. Rossetti's uncle, John Polidori wrote *The Vampyre* (1819), one of the founding texts of the subgenre of vampire fiction that would climax in the nineteenth century with the 1897 publication of [Bram Stoker](#)'s *Dracula*. Like Polidori's vampire Ruthven, Rossetti's not-quite-human goblin men inspire both fear and desire in their female victims. But just as Rossetti introduces important changes to her religious sources, so too does she revise her vampire source. In *The Vampyre*, Ruthven's female victims fall by the wayside—beyond the point of salvation, they are no longer of interest to the text. In contrast, the pair of females victimized by the goblins in Rossetti's poem save themselves and each other and emerge as the heroines. No longer divided into the innocent and corrupt, women in "The Goblin Market" are grouped together in the more general category of sisters, among whom such distinctions as pure versus fallen women are only superficial. Rossetti's depiction of the sisters as desiring and as sexual subjects, moreover, places her poem in the realm of the 1860s sensation novels, such as *Lady Audley's Secret* (by Elizabeth Braddon), whose heroines possess a disturbingly seductive sexual autonomy.

Another literary source from Rossetti's family life is that of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, among whose founders were both of her brothers. The pre-Raphaelites sought to resist what they saw as the materialism, artificiality, and formality of mid-Victorian painting. To do so, they looked to the past—especially to the medieval period, which they viewed as a simpler and less repressed time—for inspiration on new ideas of value, behavior, and aesthetics. Devoutly religious (in contrast to the many pre-Raphaelites who claimed to be without religion at all), Christina Rossetti at once draws on and resists the movement's elaborate sensuality. "The Goblin Market" exhibits many of the characteristics associated with pre-Raphaelite art, including its lush imagery, its preoccupation with love, its association of the visible and natural world with the unseen and even sacred, right down to the sensuous implications of a woman's hair. Also, like the pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti counted among her favorite poets [John Keats](#). "The Goblin Market" has echoes of Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," which also depicts wasting away, following an encounter with a magical other being.

Reception and impact

Always a well-received poet, Christina Rossetti's work seems to have risen steadily in popularity and critical interest from her day to our own. And though, until very recently, her work seemed to be overshadowed by that of her famous pre-Raphaelite brother, the painter and writer [Dante Gabriel Rossetti](#), some contemporaries felt that Christina enjoyed a wider reputation as a poet and larger readership in their day. During her lifetime, Rossetti's greatest recognition came with the publication of *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881). "The Goblin Market," though widely read and commented on after its publication in 1862, received

mixed re-views. The fact that the devotional poems published with it received unanimous praise suggests that not all readers were equally pleased with this poem's considerable sensuality, its revisionist treatment of religious subject matter, or its fusing of the real and the unreal. Though conservative critics objected to the elements of fantasy in her work—finding something “grotesque and disproportionate in it,” something that makes the two girls seem “inhuman and unreal”—fans found it to be a poem of “singular sweetness” (Charles, pp. 31, 32). Contemporaries compared the depiction of the goblin fruit with the vivid colors of her brother Dante Gabriel's painting. And, they debated the religious character of Rossetti's heroine Lizzie: Was she a saint, a savior, or merely a “little girl struggling to prevent the little goblin-men from pressing their fatal fruit into her mouth” (Charles, p. 61). The possibilities would continue to entrance readers from Rossetti's era to our own, continuing all the while to elicit admiration for this, her best-known poem, still considered a work “of fantastic subtlety, of airy grace, of remote and curious charm” (Charles, p. 35).

—Barri J. Gold

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