

Critical Themes in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

Food has remained through history the most personally powerful object of barter. Judeo-Christian myth has it that innocence was bartered for an apple and paid in full. It is precisely in atonement for Adam and Eve's sinful consumption that parents are required to keep providing food; children are only to chew and swallow. It follows then, that the vitality of food becomes an indispensable tool for the manipulation of human bodies. Susan Honeyman, in her essay "Gingerbread Wishes and Candy(land) Dreams: The Lure of Food in Cautionary tales of Consumption", says "Food lures convey cultural expectations and challenges, providing fictive opportunities for self-expression or disempowerment." (*Marvels and Tales*, 195) Looking at "Hansel and Gretel" from this perspective can aptly rehistoricize our understanding and help trace a pattern to this tendency. It is not simply a consumerist cautionary tale about curbing one's sweet tooth but originally a pre-modern story about controlling basic hunger. The stepmother's plan to abandon her children would not seem historically unprecedented in times of famine. However, unlike those children who slip into the oblivion of eternal sleep, Hansel and Gretel manage to escape. Their gravest error is to use bread crumbs instead of pebbles to mark their trail so they can find their way back home—a waste of food. Their subsequent discovery of a gingerbread house is the first step in the system of barter—the lure of sweet bread and ephemeral confections in exchange for their careless waste of basic food. Despite repeated warnings, Hansel and Gretel voraciously partake of the edible house and are, predictably, taken captive by the owner who plans to consume them in turn. The system of barter finds its apt conclusion in the triumphant return of brother and sister to their home bearing spoils from the witch's house. Their triumph lies in their acquired wisdom about the economy of food and security. They have, in effect, earned their keep.

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) almost neurotically focuses on food production and consumption. Lizzie and Laura relay a rather complex message about food: one that implies more than the fact that it is simply good and necessary to eat.

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,

Aired and set to right the house,
 Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
 Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
 Next churned butter, whipped up cream,
 Fed their poultry, sat and sewed;
 Talked as modest maidens should. (ll. 199-209)

The girls are shown to be predictably busy in chores that are productive though not necessarily substantive. Of the eight chores listed, six involve food. The cakes are “dainty” and possibly made with bleached or processed flour. The decorative quality of the food they make can easily be reduced to gendered patterns. Even degrees of consumption can be considered to have gendered implications:

... [the] impression of abundance, which is the norm on special occasions, and always applies, so far as possible, for the men whose plates are filled twice..., is often balanced, on ordinary occasions, by restriction which generally apply to women, who still share one portion between two, or eat the left-overs of the previous day; a girl’s ascension to womanhood is marked by doing without. It is part of men’s status to eat and to eat well. (Bourdieu, 194-5)

While many attempt to read the poem simply as an allegory of The Fall, or at least a rewriting of that allegory, the extreme sensuousness and lavish details of food and gorging problematically go beyond this reading. Food, and the practice of eating, or eating satisfactorily, carried significant meanings for Victorian “maids”, especially for those in a comfortable economic position for the whole practice of food refusal that gained popularity among them and emerged as a bewildering medical issue called *anorexia nervosa*. To Susie Orbach “the anorectic’s struggle” in the twentieth century is “a metaphor for our age”, since the struggle specifically entails the “incompatible figurations of woman in a phallogentric consumer society.” Even more that this, in the Victorian bourgeois society, anorexia acted simultaneously as a very real experience as well as a metaphor, or as Deborah Ann Thompson puts it, “a metonym”, for the contradictory shapings of femininity in an emergent economy of female consumption. (Thompson, 90)

This brings us to the question, exactly how metaphorical, then, is *Goblin Market*? Vivid images of food, feasts and fasts, of hunger, binge-eating and purging are predominant in the poem. Additionally, the goblins’ fruits’ sensuousness is irresistible to Laura. These images have often tempted readers to decode them for symbolic meanings. But we cannot ignore the surface significations of these images, either. Jerome McGann observes,

“Rossetti’s poetry works precisely because it forces us to read everything *simply*, in literal ways.... [M]any of Rossetti’s poems formulate interpretive keys that can and should be applied to other poems in her corpus. But the keys themselves appear to us in need of other keys, and the doors they unlock, or the puzzles they resolve, only reveal other doors and further levels of puzzlement” (McGann, 12). McGann’s words ring uncomfortably true as the subject of metaphoricity in *Goblin Market* is particularly acute. The “plot” is both simple and provocative. Despite the cautionary messages to resist the “forbidden fruit”, Laura succumbs to temptation and binges voraciously on the fruit the goblins offer in exchange for a lock of her golden hair. After the feast, which is described in terms and phrases that are acutely sexual, Laura loses the ability to either see or hear the goblins again. She is unable to eat ordinary food, perform her daily chores, or even sleep. She literally hungers, pines and grows so thin and frail that it seems her death is imminent. While this episode has rich metaphorical significations, we cannot also deny the simple truth presented by Rossetti— the Victorian woman’s very real and physical experiences of anxiety about eating. Young Victorian women were raised to be “angels”. Their breeding was carefully engineered to instil fear in their minds about the monstrous “madwomen” they would become if they refused the submission, self-denial, compliance, docility and silence expected of them. “The injunction to be small, sylph-like, almost incorporeal and highly delicate creatures, taken to extremes, engendered diseases such as anorexia nervosa.” (Thompson, 92)

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their groundbreaking *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, read Rossetti’s own eating anxieties as significant causes for her writing anxieties. They romanticize the notion of creativity and see the “self” as there for the taking, over the limitations of social prescription. In the Victorian model, however, eating and the body, and also the humanist ideal of selfhood, can function as centres of, according to Foucault, “disciplinary mechanisms”. The body and its processes, especially appetite and sexual pleasure, are usually unable to supersede social force. The sisters, Laura and Lizzie, produce foods for their personal consumption. On an economic level, this can be seen as an enactment of the “hermeticism” of their domestic scene. Rossetti compares them to bees and the simile is strangely fitting: “they are bee-like not only in the quiet hum of their industry, but especially in their self-sufficiency, producing with their own labour food that sustains them.” (Holt, 133) This self-sufficiency suggests their empowerment (or its lack thereof): they are the “angel(s) in the house”. Preparation of food functioned in Victorian England as a woman’s means of self-expression as well as an indication of confined duty. If there was a change in a woman’s relationship

with food, it would immediately be construed as an act of rebellion: she would be protesting her assigned role in society. Indeed, after her encounter with the goblins, Laura changes and the change highlights her difference from Lizzie as well as her former self. She abandons her household duties, especially the acts of food preparation:

She no more swept the house,
Tended the fowls or cows,
Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat,
Brought water from the brook:
But sat down listless in the chimney-nook
And would not eat. (ll. 293-98)

If eating is a sign of complicity with the social norms of female consumption, Laura's non-eating can be regarded as a protest of those very social norms. Traditional Victorian feminine functions are dominated by food work. The market offers Laura a solution to the procurement of food without labour. Laura's refusal to "work" for her food seeks to prove her rejection of social imposition.

The goblins, also "men" and "merchants", stand in opposition to the "maids" and "households". Their language is predominated by terms of finance and exchange, economy and commerce: "buy", "offer", "sell", "money", "merchant", "golden", "precious", "fee", "coin", etc. The phrase "come buy" echoes throughout the poem as the goblins' "shrill repeated cry". Infusing their description of the fruits they sell with adjectives that emphasize their lucrative lushness— the cherries are "plump unpecked", peaches "bloom-down-cheeked", the pears are "rare, and the barberries "bright-fire-like"— the goblins perform their sale as experienced costermongers who know their target consumers. However, with its iterated cautions to the girls against these "goblin men", *Goblin Market* establishes that exchange and the market are the provinces of goblins, not of girls. The market is presented as dangerous to maidens who are far safer in the confines of their home. But then, the very safety of that home seems threatened by the potential intrusion of the goblins' readymade market-food. Food, and its preparation, primarily the forte of the woman, is now being commoditised and offered by "men". The attractiveness assigned to the fruits through their provocative adjectives underline a far more pressing truth: the lure of freedom from food preparation. The goblins' "haunted" glen, the market, and the girls' home are separated by "the heath with clumps of furze", a "steep" bank, and a gate. These agents of separation concretize the division set up by the poem between the "female" household and the "male" market. The sisters' domestic paradise is also distinguished from the goblins' market of exchange by Laura's economic powerlessness:

Good folk, I have no coin;
 To take were to purloin:
 I have no copper in my purse,
 I have no silver either,
 And all my gold is on the furze
 That shakes in windy weather. (ll. 116-20)

Laura's haven of domestic labour has no need for money and she has no means of getting it. Her lack of a coin bears testimony to the lack of economic freedom of Victorian women. The goblins' typically male response of equating her body with her value confirms the gendered system of exchange that Rossetti strives to display.

However, the insistence on the separation between the two domains fails to conceal the market's intrusion into the home. Even before her encounter with the goblins, Laura keeps house "in an absent dream", "sick in part" and "longing for the night" (ll. 211-14). Laura's lack of money is made up by Lizzie who manages to procure a coin in order to buy from the goblins. Lizzie's angelic virtue, too, is compromised as she goes beyond the position assigned to her by society, a position marked by the lack of a privileged term of gender. *Goblin Market*, then, provides a dramatic account of the Victorian woman's entry into the marketplace of a "rudimentary capitalist industrialist economy, both as commodities and the buyers of commodities." (Thompson, 97) The woman becomes, along with the commodity she purchases, a commodity herself, objectified thus by both the market and the male gaze. The brotherhood of the goblins in their man's world of commerce leer "at each other,/ Brother with queer brother,/ Signalling each other,/ Brother with sly brother." (ll. 92-96) As Jan Marsh's extensive studies show, women were more famous in Pre-Raphaelitism as objects painted than as painters themselves. The sisters' crossover into the goblins' world upsets this careful partitioning of the marketplace from household functions, of masculine from feminine, of consumers from servers. Laura's indulgence in market consumption and her subsequent refusal to settle back into her domesticated role marks a radical change in the sisters' way of living. While Lizzie reproaches her, her essential loyalty to her sister encourages her to break free from fear and social restraint. Empowered by her silver coin and unchained from gendered subjugation, Lizzie emerges a saviour, Christ-like, and presents herself to Laura as a kind of Eucharist: "Eat me, drink me, love me" (l. 471). Lizzie's heroism manages to alter the eroticized metaphors used to describe Laura's "fall" into positive images of female power.

The third and concluding part of *Goblin Market* shows the sisters reinstated in their domestic roles performing marital and maternal functions with ease and happiness. Still narrating the cautionary tales of goblin men to their offspring, Lizzie and Laura are no longer described to be confined to their domestic chores. Their lives are “bound up in tender lives”, yet another gendered paradigm, but they have managed to escape at least one premise of domestic labour. Discussing the “gender/ power axis” of the Victorian age, Susan Bordo reflects that it was a time when the roles of women were changing. It was a time of “the opening of new possibilities, the continuing grip of the old expectations... the old preindustrial order, with the father at the head of a self-contained family production unit, had given way to the dictatorship of the market, opening up new, nondomestic opportunities for working women” while displacing traditional female skills from the domestic sphere to the factory. (Bordo, 91) Laura and Lizzie, wives without the mention of husbands, assume both roles of nurturer and provider, triumphant in their economic independence. At the end of *Goblin Market* Rossetti presents not essentially a world without men, but a world where all people are permitted to play all parts, a situation that can only be brought about by the dissolution of the conventional male/female binary.

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MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between Lizzie and Laura in "The Goblin Market?"
 - a. Sisters
 - b. Mother and Daughter
 - c. Acquaintances
 - d. Cousins
2. What are the goblin men selling?
 - a. Delicious fruit
 - b. Exotic spices
 - c. Golden dishes
 - d. Beautiful silks
3. After Laura eats the goblin fruit, she wants more, but what prevents her from getting more?
 - a. Her sister dies
 - b. Her sister holds her back
 - c. She cannot hear or see the goblins any more
 - d. She dies

4. Who was Christina Rossetti's brother?

- a. Leonardo Raphael Rossetti
- b. Dante Gabriel Rossetti**
- c. William Vincent Rossetti
- d. Gabriel Dante Rossetti

5. What was the name of the group founded by Christina Rossetti's brother?

- a. The Midnight Club
- b. The University Wits
- c. The Movement Poets
- d. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood**

6. What was the name of the periodical published by The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood?

- a. The Bacteria
- b. The Microbe
- c. The Germ**
- d. The Algae

7. In Goblin Market, what is the name of Laura's sister?

- a. Jeanie.
- b. Lorrie.
- c. Lizzie.**
- d. Lauren.

8. In Goblin Market, what location of significance will not grow grass?

- a. Lizzie's yard.
- b. The market.
- c. The goblin glen.
- d. Jeanie's grave.**

9. In Goblin Market, with what does Laura's sister attempt to purchase the goblin fruit?

- a. A silver penny.**
- b. A song.
- c. A golden vase.
- d. Her golden locks.

10. How do the goblins in Goblin Market react to Laura's sister's attempt to purchase their fruit?

- a. They laugh and go away.
- b. They beat the sister.
- c. They disappear into thin air.
- d. They sell the sister rotten fruit.