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Alex Donley
amdonley@liberty.edu

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Alex Donley

Dr. Karen Prior

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“Goblin Market” and the Madonna-Whore Complex

“The woman question” refers to a centuries-long debate over what role women play—or ought to play—in society. In the Victorian age, halting strides toward gender equality narrowed the question to such subjects as what skills women and men had in common, what level of education was appropriate for a woman, and how women should or should not compliment their male counterparts. Responses were wide-ranging; most Victorians favored some form of gender roles, some sought their absolute destruction, and many fell between the two camps. Among these voices, Christina Rossetti’s stood out for the strength and acumen with which she sought to right societal wrongs. Her poem “Goblin Market,” for instance, features a pair of sisters who possess agency in their own story, undercut prevailing stereotypes regarding women, and end the story with a redemptive picture of feminine solidarity.

Responding to the Victorian sentiment that men ought to be society’s primary actors, “Goblin Market” centers its narrative on females and their experiences: “Morning and evening / Maids heard the goblins cry” (1-2). Human men never appear in the story. The main characters are Laura and Lizzie, sisters who run a farm without any mention of a father or brother figure to help them. The fallen girl Jeanie is the only other character relevant to the narrative. Even when the sisters are married by the end of the poem, their husbands go unidentified. The men are invisible. The only masculine figures in the story are the goblins, each loosely described as a “merchant man” (70). In their monstrous forms, however, they seem not to represent manhood

itself so much as a perverse masculine lust or temptation. Thus, Rossetti sets her poem in a microcosm of feminine solidarity; the lack of a strong male “hero” grants full subjectivity and agency to the poem’s female characters.

Between Laura and Lizzie, Rossetti recreates and then deconstructs the Madonna-whore complex of the nineteenth century. Victorian writers often uplifted the value of a virtuous wife, such as Coventry Patmore in his lengthy poem *The Angel in the House*:

No mystery of well-woven speech,
No simplest phrase of tenderest fall,
No liken’d excellence can reach
Her, the most excellent of all (25-28)

John Ruskin likewise said that a woman “must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise” (662). On the other end of the spectrum, however, was the morally bankrupt “fallen woman” or prostitute. Prevailing portraits of women at the time cast them under this binary—women were either angels or demons, Madonnas or whores. Rossetti’s nuanced approach to the subject upsets this binary. While on the surface the protagonists resemble opposite ends of a moral spectrum, their compassion and kinship bridges the gap between societal stereotypes.

Laura is a surprisingly sympathetic portrait of the fallen woman. When the goblins first approach with their goods, the poem states that Laura “bowed her head to hear” while Lizzie “veiled her blushes” (Rossetti 34-35). Much like the biblical figure Eve, Laura desires the forbidden fruit based on its appearance, saying of it, “How fair the vine must grow / Whose grapes are so luscious” (60-61). When she finally succumbs to the goblins’ temptation, in lieu of money she gives them a lock of her hair—a gesture that symbolizes the loss of virginity. The

language of the scene shifts from highlighting the sensual pleasure of the moment to foreshadowing Laura's regret:

Sweeter than honey from the rock.

Stronger than man-rejoicing wine...

She sucked until her lips were sore;

Then flung the emptied rinds away (129-130, 136-137)

Once she has tasted the goblins' fruit, Laura yearns to eat more, but can no longer hear the goblins. This parallels a prostitute's experience in Victorian society; once fallen, a woman lost the ability to be anything but fallen. Laura's consumptive sickness reflects the deprivation of dignity and opportunity that a prostitute experienced because of her work.

Lizzie represents the angel in the house, albeit a far less one-dimensional one than Patmore's. Her first line instructs Laura, "We must not look at goblin men, / We must not by their fruits" (42-43). She is prudent, hard-working, and cautious, always keeping in mind the story of the fallen friend Jeanie to help her resist temptation (312, 364). In many ways, she is Ruskin's image of an incorruptibly good, instinctively wise woman. Ruskin, however, also said that by "her office, and place, she [the woman] is protected from all danger and temptation" (661), which does not apply to Lizzie. As Laura comes close to death, Lizzie decides to retrieve the goblin fruit herself in an effort to save her sister. She walks headlong toward danger and temptation. When she attempts to take the fruit rather than eat it with the goblins, they "[hold] her hands and squeezed their fruits / Against her mouth to make her eat" (Rossetti 406-407). The violence she suffers brings her perilously close to becoming a fallen woman herself. Nonetheless, her steadfastness in virtue allows her to survive the encounter and save Laura. Lizzie's heroic, risk-taking attitude places an interesting twist on the angelic stereotype.

The interaction and intimacy between the two sisters subverts the conventional binary of women. According to Victorian wisdom, the angel and prostitute are opposites; one holds the household together with virtue, and the other tears it apart with seduction. Had she agreed with this binary, Rossetti could have written the story so that the sisters end with opposite fates. Perhaps Lizzie would be too pious or too meek to seek out the goblins. Laura's subsequent death would serve as a cautionary tale to young girls enticed toward prostitution. Thankfully, Rossetti's poem takes a far less didactic approach. Laura and Lizzie care deeply for one another, as shown in that they sleep "Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest" (546). The closeness of the sisters lends sympathy to the prostitute and moral conflict to the angel. Sickly Laura is no seductress, and Lizzie's syrup-covered invitation to "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices" (468) undermines her own image as a paragon of purity.

"Goblin Market" provides an unusual and refreshing answer to the Victorian woman question. Lizzie's willingness to sully herself outwardly on behalf of her sister illustrates the compassionate, self-sacrificial perspective that lies beyond the Victorian Madonna-whore complex. It settles for a restorative rather than retributive conclusion—one that does not seek redemption exclusively from men. In a famous article titled "The Great Social Evil," the author rails against the holier-than-thou attitude of nineteenth-century England toward fallen women:

you the pious, the moral, the respectable, as you call yourselves, who stand on your smooth and pleasant side of the great gulf you have dug and keep between yourselves and the dregs, why don't you bridge it over, or fill it up, and by some humane and generous process absorb us into your leavened mass, until we become interpenetrated with goodness like yourselves? (668-669)

Lizzie embodies this humane and generous process. Rather than treating her sister as a dreg of society, she does everything in her power to save her from suffering. This kind of care is sublime—as the poem says, “there is no friend like a sister / In calm or stormy weather” (562-563). The agency and intimacy in Rossetti’s sisters repairs harmful cultural molds with a newfound grace and humanity.

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