

# The Feminine Predicament Exploring the Unique Vitality of Rossetti's Poetry Vis-à-Vis Mill's Approach to Feminism

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**Abstract** This study re-examines the Victorian Feminine Predicament by formulating a comparison – placing parallelly and contrasting two key texts, namely, Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women*. Both works are spiritual adjuncts in terms of their focus and intention: speaking for women, for women's equality, and for establishing women as not merely the equivalents of men but, in some respects, even superior. We explore the very different avenues the authors choose to tread on as we uncover pivotal themes of salvation, spiritual redemption, unabashed 'same-sex' erotic desire, the 'prostitute' and the promiscuous, insanity, domesticity, and 'slavery' disguised as marriage. The tricky roadmap for Rossetti, dotted with milestones inscribed with an unyielding dedication to the 'fallen' of the species, races through radically sharp turns and twists often lightly veiled under the pellucid charade of children's literature, with a rebellious pace. Mill, on the other hand, would not take risks beyond calculated ones. If a colossal open-air bonfire of female sexuality is Rossetti's challenge, radical ideas garbed in 'decorous' and philosophical language are all that Mill offers.

**Keywords** Christina Rossetti. Goblin Market. John Stuart Mill. Abstinence. Christianity. Commodity culture. Desire. Female literacy. Gender relations. Liberalism.



## Peer review

Submitted 2024-06-04  
Accepted 2024-11-17  
Published 2025-03-07

## Open access

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**Citation** Ghosh, Atrija (2024). "The Feminine Predicament". *English Literature*, 11(1), 157-174.

"Goblin Market" (1862) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869) navigate a wide spectrum of the female stance. Both are radical pieces of revolt in the respective regions of femininity they venture to explore. Mill's essay assumes a mutinous position against the predominant patriarchy and its prevailing partisan ideas within the parameters of polite protest. However, "Goblin Market", preceding it by seven years, severely shocks us with its unabashed kindling of the bonfire of female orgasm. Mill does attack a revered institution like marriage, making masters of the morality of his time queasy, with denudation of the despotic dominance and brawny masculinity that found its gratification in the husband's rape of the wife. But Rossetti, despite being a woman, had already surpassed him in terms of bold radicality by delineating things like female homoeroticism. Both works, ahead of their time, make us think, wonder, and realise that female liberty is yet a mirage, and women have a long way to go until they reach their dream dawn of emancipation.

*The Subjection of Women*, rooted in the liberal and utilitarian principles of Mill's philosophy, is one of the strongest pleas made in the nineteenth century for entitling women to suffrage, education, and employment, while being a means for the cognisant Mill to delve into factors that impede societal progress and betterment. Mill's work, accepted by feminists across the eras as a prudently reasoned argument for the inclusion of women in the political war field, remains one of the significant manifestos of Mill's liberalism, which momentarily impacted the nineteenth-century national movements and the efforts for bringing women within the circle of attention. Mill argues staunchly in favour of situating women on a platform of equivalence with men and deems it the sole remedy for the cultural and intellectual stagnation of society. He defines "the legal subordination of one sex to the other" as not only "wrong in itself" but "one of the chief hindrances to human improvement" (Mill 2006, 1).

Mill maintains that the 'subjection of women' draws its justification from the biased view that women are naturally inferior to men. According to him, women's subordination is a relic of the age-old practice of domination through brute force, which has also rendered the 'natural' tag to male domination. The thoughtless acceptance of this order and the consequent socialisation create pliant women who submissively conform to this order. Mill argues that we cannot claim to know the true nature of women based on their behaviour because it is a product of social conditioning which has obscured and repressed their true inclinations and potentials. Mill argues in favour of equal opportunity for women because he views male-female equality as essential to a friendship that would constitute the success of the institution of marriage and ensure the progression of human society. Despite its preoccupation with equality, the essay, on a deeper level, explores the male-female relationship and the consequent unification

or true friendship necessary to establish a marriage, as Mill desired, as a “school of genuine moral sentiment” (Mill 2006, 31). Mill insists that the subjection of women could be ended by law, the reformation of education, opinions, habits, and finally, of the dynamics of family life itself because many men are reluctant to relinquish their material advantage and dread the idea of sharing space with an equal.

Mill’s essay, alongside denouncing the misogynist overtones of the nineteenth-century attitude towards women, stridently indicts the hypocritical society that denied women not only enfranchisement but their very existence yet maintained the façade of acknowledging their reality. The married woman was practically a commodity owned by her husband, with all her rights and liberties as well as material or immaterial wealth subject to his approval and authority. Mill repeatedly uses the ‘master-slave’ or ‘master-servant’ binary to describe the husband-wife relationship. He terms the dependence of women upon men as the extant form of “the primitive state of slavery” (Mill 2006, 4), subsequently defining the wife as “the actual bond-servant of her husband” (22). The particularly vicious form of masculine domination over women, according to Mill, is marital rape because of its legal sanction. *The Subjection of Women*, much like Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”, is a radical challenge to the glorified notion of a heterosexual union, i.e., marriage.

Mill states that the law of superior strength has prevailed since the days of yore, and even though it does not entitle one to rule the other, it does form the inherent power dynamics of the civilised human race. He further says that the true nature of the two sexes is marked by “forced repression” (16). He notes a certain kind of despotism in nineteenth-century English marriages – starting from issues of gaining custody of children post-separation to laws permitting physical abuse and preventing property inheritance in the case of women. Mill knows true equality in marital relations would leave little to no scope for masculine evils. Women essentially needed suffrage to ensure equal consideration. While talking of rulers, Mill points out the fact that while unfit ‘men’ are not excluded from systems of selecting the ruling class, “ladies of reigning families are the only women who are allowed the same range of interest and freedom of development as men” (39). Women were deemed inferior in aptitude and ill-suited for governing. Mill argues that women shall remain intellectual inferiors as long as they are denied access to the elaborate preparation and training required to enter male domains, particularly science and philosophy. He vehemently advocates for legal equality in marriage and increased female employment to put an end to the male supremacist propensity. Female education would serve the entire society, guaranteeing its well-being. For Mill, the restrained freedom of any individual, man or woman, would make humankind less free. Mill brings all together, irrespective of the social

construct of gender, as he writes – all humanity is born with minimal variation in their genetic potential for learning. But Mill soon surprises us with views that place mental and spiritual pleasures on a pedestal higher than bodily pleasure, even expecting one to sacrifice these lower carnal pleasures in pursuit of higher ones – for it is only this pursuit that would eventually help a society advance. Thus, the greater the number of citizens involved in such pursuits, the more significant the progress. Half of the population, i.e., uneducated women, could hardly participate in or contribute to such social developments. Herein lies the inadequacy of a phallogentric society, for only educated women can add to the totality of human knowledge – a reality impeded by society itself.

Victorian England's married women lacked the mechanisms to free themselves from their tyrannical husbands, much like a despot without a ballot box to register her vote. Mill's ethical and political philosophies were intertwined. He was particularly interested in Thomas Macaulay's ideas on the subordination of women. He rejected Auguste Comte's psychological theory, which said that the mind depends on the body and, therefore, inferior feminine intellect directly results from a physiologically smaller brain. According to Comte, women would continue to be subordinated as long as the physical size of their brains would not change – women, he believed, are capable of 'permanent childishness' and devoid of 'abstract reasoning'. Nonetheless, Mill's essay was influenced by Harriet Taylor Mill's intellectual ability – she set a standard for Mill to judge the mental potential of educated women. Like Harriet, literate women would seek active political participation; they would be unwilling to be represented by their husbands' voices and votes. Mill wrote that an improvement in family life could be brought on only by women's involvement in politics and allowing them to become unrestricted, confident and equal partners.

The prevalent belief that women are more emotional than rational and lack the intellectual capabilities of men is firmly repudiated in *The Subjection of Women*. Mill's argument favouring women's equality is founded on the anticipated decline of selfishness. It would unite people in their aspirations for achieving the greatest happiness instead of narrow individual pleasures, laying bare the intellectual elitism running through Mill's ideas. However, *The Subjection of Women* is marred by contradictions, as in ideas that married women should not be entitled to other career options, that the married woman's role is to 'adorn and beautify' her husband's life, and that as per the division of labour, men should opt for sturdy tasks. In contrast, women constrict themselves to the fine arts. We must understand that Mill's fundamental effort is to promote equality. Still, when a few of his ideas are deeply interpreted, they seem to be going against his utilitarian, pro-women endeavour. However, the statements disproving

his pro-liberal stance are scarce and form a minority of the entire work. Although a forward-thinking assessment of women's position, the essay fails to take note of the discriminatory dynamics that entitle men to both a career and financial freedom as well as the pleasures of the home but compels the woman to choose between the two. Mill's stance vis-à-vis these issues is an exposure of the flaws in liberal feminism that his futuristic notions seem to promulgate. Critics and analysts have repeatedly focused on these failings, simultaneously acknowledging Mill's intention's sincerity. Mill is known to have actively supported women's movements and assisted in founding the Representation of Women Society. He believed the love of power and liberty would always stand in antagonism. He remained true to his cause: he was attempting to convey a full realisation of the feminine potential, a removal of legal constraints and a relegation of civil rights to women.

Rossetti's "Goblin Market" stands as a deviation from the middle-class ideals of Victorian women, with recurrent animal images, carnal instincts, and imageries of otherness: she, as an iconoclast, stripped apart all pretensions and reinvented the insipidness of contemporary morality with an uncompromising personal vision. "Goblin Market" is Rossetti's most discussed and debated poem, with sisters Lizzie and Laura as protagonists – while Lizzie rejects the luscious goblin fruit as 'evil,' Laura purchases it with a lock of her hair and later wastes away, yearning for more. After the goblins almost force the fruit into Lizzie's mouth, Laura is finally cured by tasting the juices smeared on her sister's face. Rossetti responded to the Oxford Movement's call for the spiritual and physical restoration of sick, poor, and unprivileged women. Most daunting for her was the mission of rescuing prostitutes on London's streets and probably also providing religious instruction to the young women residing at St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary. "Goblin Market" is born of Rossetti's volunteering for 'fallen women' – a sympathetic response to the female predicament, compelled to negotiate bodies and desires vis-a-vis renunciation, consumerism, and carnal cravings. Through Laura and Lizzie, Rossetti exposes the perilous world of Victorian women, replete with 'goblins' hungering to disfigure and devour their existence.

Rossetti and Mill's works are spiritual adjuncts subscribing to one agenda: the avowal of equality for women. But that's where the kindredship ends because Rossetti and Mill have drastically different approaches to the advocacy of female liberty. Mill is a typical philosopher propagating his ideas in the essay, while Rossetti is a rebellious radical who unshackles herself daringly from the bounds of conventional values a woman of her time was expected to adhere to. Mill maintains the decency of quintessential nineteenth-century elites, putting his unconventional opinions forward in a language dressed in the decorum befitting a gentleman from the upper crust

of society. The unabashed celebration of female orgasm is nearly unthinkable for a philosopher of Mill's stature, who was so very conscious of somewhat radical statements made within the garb of polite civility. While a colossal bonfire of sexuality was Rossetti's challenge, Mill didn't take risks beyond calculated ones.

According to Elaine Showalter, women in nineteenth-century Britain were linked commonly with madness. Madness, as a concept, labels one's mental machinery as abnormal or deviant and can, therefore, be associated with rule-breaking. Foucault's analysis posits madness as opposite to rationality. Showalter opines in this context that while women are situated close to irrationality, silence, nature, and body, men are placed on the side of reason, discourse, culture and mind. Therefore, madness, even when experienced by men, remains essentially *The Female Malady*. Sally Shuttleworth in *Body-Politics* locates an essential contrast in Victorian gender discourses: "While male health was believed to be based on self-control, woman's health depended on her very inability to control her body" (Jacobus, Keller, Shuttleworth 1990, 56). Showalter says: "English folklore reflects in 'mad-songs' and ballads an ancient association of madness, confinement, and women" (1980, 159). Women abandoned by their husbands, widows with children, or women with illegitimate children would be sufficiently judged based on their respectability. Female adolescence was considered an episode of "miniature insanity" (172). This was because, often, growing ladies would be rebellious, reckless, snappish and full of mischief at the onset of puberty. F.C. Skey warns, as Showalter notes, that a hysteric could be "a female member of a family exhibiting more than usual force and decision of character, of strong resolution, fearless of danger, bold riders, having plenty of what is termed nerve". Women's unconventional sexual behaviour, including erotic fantasy, obscenity or orgasmic excitements, was clinically termed nymphomania, i.e., 'overtly sexual' women too were supposedly insane. Thus, 'madness' was a derogatory explanation for any ambitious act of female self-assertion. Florence Nightingale comments in "Cassandra" that women, who were kept away from meaningful work, were so distraught with unspent energy that they felt like they were going mad every night. The relationship between insanity and femininity was, however, a cultural construct, devised strategically to contain women and transgression.

The Victorian era was 'afraid' of sex, especially when its manifestations were observable in women. Besides, the Victorian idea of romantic love stressed matrimony's spiritual quality and even 'sex' was another way to strengthen such a spiritual bond. But surprisingly, women allegedly were far more enthusiastic about the 'sexual act' rather than its effect of enhancing their emotional closeness to their husbands. In fact, coitus was a tool of power used by women in their private sphere, and by withholding it, they could effectively retain

control over their husbands and households in an era when women had little to no power over decision-making. Alternatively, according to Campbell, women rarely were involved in sexual relations due to a fear of pregnancy and did not require more than a minimal amount of sexual intercourse. Young girls of that era were exposed to a norm favouring sexual restraint, which led them to internalise conservative ideologies of abstinence. Restraint governed all life endeavours for women, even if it meant suppressing one's desires. The Victorian woman held power in the arena of 'moral laws' – a compensation that supposedly justified her lack of civil rights. The female mindset was thus fraught with sexual or social anxieties. Most of the nineteenth century fallen women were either innocent ladies led astray owing to seduction, exploitation, rape, or otherwise, were adulteresses. They were all motivated by romantic feelings. Yet, women's sexuality remained oddly unspoken as it kept following men's mandates. Sexual secrecy was the Victorian woman's truth.

The female body in "Goblin Market" is subject to consumption. Rossetti constructs a marketplace in which 'appetite' jeopardises a woman's life, but it is restored not by practising any sort of self-control but by turning to another woman. "Goblin Market" pushes normative heterosexuality and phallocentrism to a far end. During the Oxford Movement, the common fear of 'contamination' or 'moral pollution' resulted in men wanting to keep their sisters away from fallen women, their path of life and acts of rebellion. "Goblin Market" could be interpreted as a cautionary tale of these times, but it is not. In fact, it stands as a brave example of the female gaze, which permits women to celebrate the female form. On the other hand, it is also a case study of women's common plight amidst the Victorian sexual economy. In the poem, the goblins' description of their fruit is sexual and suggestive of voluptuousness: such graphic language is intended to encourage imagining the pleasures of eating the fruit.

Rossetti also emphasises the sisters' bodily response to the goblins and possibly to each other, as they crouch close together, hiding – with "tingling cheeks and finger tips" (Rossetti 2017, l. 39). They are apprehensive but also curious, and sexual curiosity, as believed by Victorians, was dangerous to women. As we can anticipate, the exotic fruit that initially frightens Laura later excites her. It mirrors the European fear of foreigners coming from colonised nations, who were considered primitive, sinful, and overtly sexual. While Laura unknowingly transgresses the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour, Lizzie's fear of the consequences of her sexual desire is intense enough to push her to abandon her sister.

On the other hand, the goblins – resembling animals – are wild, untamed, dangerous, and predatory. They realise that Laura is more susceptible to their persuasion when she chooses to linger. They convince her to offer a lock of her hair in exchange for the fruit,

symbolically transforming her hair – rather than her entire self – into a commodity of commercial value. This act aligns her with the concept of the “fallen woman” in Victorian culture. Laura eating the forbidden fruit ominously foreshadows her metaphorical fall, much like Eve. Her suckling of the fruit “until her lips were sore” (Rossetti 2017, l. 136) is a sensual imagery juxtaposed with Biblical references. “Honey from the rock” (l. 129) and “man rejoicing wine” (l. 130) allude to God’s generous provision of good things to faithful followers – the fact that the goblin fruit seems sweeter than ‘honey’ and more robust than ‘wine’ suggests that its goodness is merely illusory. By accepting it, Laura is led away from God. Jeanie’s story foretells Laura’s probable fate. Read metaphorically, this story reflects a typical trajectory for fallen women – once they experience a sexual ‘fall’, they are abandoned by their seducers to die eventually. The barrenness of Jeanie’s grave signifies how she is robbed of opportunities for ‘marriage and motherhood’: the ideal state for Victorian women. A woman is defined in Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* as: “Her disposition is devout | Her countenance angelical [...] The faithless, seeing her, conceive | Not only heaven, but hope of it” (1866, Book I, Canto IV, Preludes I). Victorian women without husbands faced social obliteration. Though the situation somewhat improved with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870, areas of injustice, such as frequent childbirth and physical brutality, prevailed, making it hard for a woman to picture an image of bliss when it came to domesticity.

“Goblin Market”, while undoubtedly didactic, traces a compelling arc of temptation, fall, and redemption. It is rich with vivid imagery, exploring themes of violation, complex familial relationships, and same-sex desire. The love between sisters is validated, and obligatory heterosexuality is straightaway rejected. In Rossetti’s work, we notice a kind of contempt for such pre-established norms of morality and sexuality. Instead, she would seek pleasure often in seeking out characters that are clumsy, unpleasant or unethical, even though novelists around the time, such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë and many others, subscribed to the idea that facial characteristics correspond with mental and moral qualities. Rossetti engineered “Goblin Market” as an enchantingly ‘problematic’ poem, infused with elements of fantasy and obvious sexual undertones – depicting Laura and Lizzie as Freudian children and “sisters” in the feminist sense. “Come buy, come buy” – the reiterated cry of merchant men punctuates the poem, the principal preoccupation being the sordid act of buying and selling. Following most narratives of fallen women, Laura, too, purchases pleasure only to realise that it is her own body that is eventually consumed through her act of barter. However, she is never excluded from the company of so-called ‘moral women’. Both sisters are described interchangeably with imagery emphasising their



'purity'. Rossetti steadfastly rejects the beliefs that view fallen women as impure and contaminated and gives them a shot at redemption. We are aware of how Victorian morality, while privately endorsing a massive system of prostitution and pornography, publicly advocated uncompromising codes of chastity.

Further, the nineteenth-century establishment of the medical profession around the very same time led to assertions that women were entirely dominated by their reproductive systems. Sexual desire, though unavoidable for men, was seen as deviant and pathological in women. Female sexuality at this juncture faced a central opposition between the Madonna and the Magdalen. A cult of domesticity too developed with the separation of the 'home' and 'workplace', with the early nineteenth-century businessmen requiring a geographically and socially separated space for work. Increasingly, women came to be defined as domestic beings. If the home was the site of normal 'respectable' sexuality, the streets produced deviant forms – public arenas were certified as domains of the promiscuous and immoral. The 'prostitute' became the focus of social concern during the middle decades of the nineteenth century: she was an agent of chaos, bringing with her disruption and disorder. Prostitution was perceived as a threat due to its visibility, regarded as a conduit of disease, spreading infection to respectable society. The 'prostitute image' of a wretched outcast, ravaged by remorse, was carefully constructed to deflect the power of subversive woman figures. Christian lessons systemically warned women of the wages of sin, calling forth unified moral responses.

The several sisters appearing in works such as "Goblin Market" itself, "The Queen of Hearts", and "Sister Maude" are reflections of Rossetti's very own inner being. Her psychological life was one of withdrawal and obscurity. Rossetti repeatedly brings 'sisters' together, and in their struggles with and against each other, we find representations of her understanding of the fragmented self. Rossetti moves her protagonists, Laura and Lizzie, through a tumultuous trajectory of innocence to physical degeneration and finally takes on marital responsibilities, thus finding some balance. The two sisters are contrasting parts of a single self – "like two blossoms on one stem" (Rossetti 2017, l. 188) – and while Laura is the part with no restraint, Lizzie seems wise and judicious. They are 'self' and 'anti-self.' The goblins also symbolise a state of mind that is undoubtedly sensuous but can also potentially drag one to their psychological death: they stand for a fanciful, hallucinatory mental state, a far cry from reality. Like Rossetti's Lizzie and Laura, Nietzsche recognised the eternal polarities of oneself in *The Birth of Tragedy* – Dionysian and Apollonian. While the Dionysian self is pulled towards tragedy, much like Laura – the Apollonian resists. In Rossetti's work, the entire self is aware of the dangers of associating with the goblins, yet

only a part of it succumbs to primal instincts. After drifting apart, two selves are eventually drawn back together; however, a part of the self, as Jeanie represents, is lost forever. Despite this, Rossetti consistently envisioned the reconciliation of multiple selves.

Rossetti's usual tendency to highlight two parts of oneself through her characters may at times mask the possibility of a 'lesbian' relationship as we know it today. Still, the world of "Goblin Market" undoubtedly is covertly homosexual. Emotional affinity between women here is the driving force of female lives, and a woman's sexual orientation holds great sway over her consciousness. Adrienne Rich, writing in the twentieth century, reveals the problematics of female existence in a similar context: "[W]omen will remain dependent upon the chance or luck of particular relationships and will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives" (Rich 2003, 659). Drawing from Rich, we infer that heterosexism aims to wipe out discourses of free sexuality, stressing the fact that women can find emotional or physical pleasure only through a male. We also recall the works of Lillian Faderman, who defines lesbianism precisely as a relationship characterised by women's strongest affections towards each other, which may or may not include sexual touch. Even though the 'lesbian' connotation came into existence much later, the problem of recognising such relationships characterised by 'same-sex desire' essentially lay in the fact that misogynist societies would forcefully censure them. Faderman's argument in *Surpassing the Love of Men* is that passionate love in female 'friendship' or 'sisterhood' would not always be labelled unusual because women were perceived as asexual until around 1900. So, Rossetti creates a world solely characterised by sisterhood, intentionally excluding men but cleverly using Biblical stories of Eve and Christ. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, males assume the power to redeem. And the female, like Eve, needs saving. The female is either associated with carnal love or takes the secondary position of nurturing the male – both roles inferior to that of the male figure. However, several women's writings from the era prove that women did not always perceive themselves as powerless. A 'female Christ' concept, where women helped in moral resurgence, was common among such writers. They believed women's maternal nature could help them guide the race. Mrs. Ellis says, in *The Women of England*: "But women do know what their sex was formed to suffer; and for this very reason, there is sometimes a bond existing between sisters" (Ellis 1847, 224) while also mentioning how women are potentially stakeholders in the country's moral worth. She viewed sisterhood as a kind of sexual identification.

"Goblin Market" has pivotal scenes of "sucking" in the lines "kiss me, suck my juices" (Rossetti 2017, l. 468) and "sucked and sucked and sucked the more" (l. 134). Such vivid imageries evoke the sense of

'breastmilk' – Anna E. MacDonald observes. In fact, they are uniquely female expressions. The scene of Lizzie presenting her body for Laura to consume the 'juices' certainly brings in the idea of breastfeeding. Thus Lizzie takes on a maternal role in relation to the young character, Laura. There is, evidently, a direct link between verbal exchanges in the poem and the female 'body.' Even subtle allusions to oral intercourse cannot be avoided: "[S]he suck'd until her lips were sore" (Rossetti 2017, l. 136). After consuming the fruit, Laura's speech begins to resemble the diction of goblin men; she uses "Romantic poeticisms" like "pellucid", "odorous", "mead", and "velvet", recalling the diction of the male Petrarchan sonnet speaker" (Maxwell 1999, 82). By sucking on the goblin fruit juices, she may have "internalized this masculine liquid and linguistic expression at the cost of her own feminine expression" (MacDonald 2015, 4). For Victorian England, Laura and Jeanie's stories symbolise the baseness of female 'bodily fluids' as in the case of nineteenth-century prostitutes. Mary Werner says, "according to Duffy, Laura's condition resembles that of the habitual masturbator" (Duffy 1972, 290) and that "in the 19th century it was commonly believed that masturbation could result in dementia and even death" (Werner 1998, 19). But as readers today, we observe otherwise. The juice Lizzie brings back is bitter because it is the perfect 'antidote' to Laura's desperate craving. Lizzie herself is the antidote for Laura, as she brings proof of the fruit's bitterness and offers herself selflessly as a gift of love. Laura's voracious consumption of the fruit bears a striking resemblance to an exorcism ritual; her frenzied behaviour appears to be an embodiment of the very evil she has internalised. The more vital fire purges her of female love and solidarity. Rossetti reserves no scorn for Laura. Contrary to expectations, Laura is left with a pearl of enhanced wisdom instead of spiritual or physical collapse. In Rossetti's world, therefore, men have one purpose: impregnation. Male characters are either peripheral or absent, and women no longer exchange currencies. Resistance to male figures thus frees Rossetti's heroines from the social world that solely legitimises male eroticism. Rossetti, working within the boundaries of the religious and love lyrics, yet again redefines their limits.

"Goblin Market" is an amalgamation of its erotic imagery and its allegorical nature of providing a route to spiritual redemption. The erotic body is made into a tool for attaining salvation, thereby combining the physical and the spiritual. Rossetti paints a dramatic picture of the 'body' being surrendered as sacrifice first and, later, as food – portraying Lizzie as a Christ-like figure paying the price of atonement. Her body, like Christ's, is yielded to save someone. The image of fruit, too, resembles the sweetness of the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden. The scene of Laura feasting on Lizzie's body is overtly homoerotic. But it is also as if Laura achieves a cleansing

of her body through her 'love-feast' – a feast that brings her closer to God. Laura receives no punishment for her transgressive act fuelled by desire, even though she does bear the flames of regeneration spreading through her veins while she sucks the juices from Lizzie's body. Rossetti intended no moral. Through the two sisters' shared fall, the sisterhood is given a chance to take on the goblin men. Lizzie assumes agency when she fends off the goblin's violence and the threat of immodest behaviour. Rossetti brings us a picture of women redeeming women through her subtle depictions of passion and self-postponement, thus transcending gender roles indubitably.

Therefore, we must not fail to notice the apparent intermingling of gender roles – "Rossetti asserts that maternal love makes a woman not a giantess or a heroine but at once and full grown a hero and giant" (Casey 1991, 65). The female can be a redeemer or redeemed. She can also be nurtured or a nurturer. Through Lizzie's character, Rossetti might also be pointing at the fact that 'nurturing' itself can be heroic rather than a secondary function. According to Helene Cixous, the weaker sides of all binaries are assigned to females – so erotic love is thought of as belonging to Eve figures. In contrast, spiritual love is meant for divine Christ figures who are necessarily male. But in "Goblin Market", the goblin 'men' are associated with eroticism, and they are capable of physical molestation. Also, Rossetti continually stresses the equality of the sisters – "two pigeons in one nest" (Rossetti 2017, l. 185) – in the sense that no one is morally superior to the other. As Lizzie is forced to confront her fear of sensuality due to Laura's metaphorical fall, Lizzie, too, is redeemed in a way. Once too cautious and prudent, Lizzie also learns how physical love, combined with its spiritual dimensions, is integral to humankind. It is a full circle for both sisters, having realised the strength of both sides of love: erotic and emotional. Such a state of interdependence embodied by the sisters is also true of men and women. Even Laura and Lizzie's children are purposefully not defined by their sexes. Rossetti was forming a world where women, free of family ties, could explore themselves and each other. Such a view might be negated by "Goblin Market"'s domestic familial ending, but we may also say that domesticity in "Goblin Market" is far improved. It recognises the woman's nurturing role as dignified. As Janet Casey says, women are "unfairly relegated to the roles of Mary/Martha and Eve, when the role of Christ is within their grasp as well" (Casey 1991, 75).

In the innately human and ecclesiastical sense, temptation forms the poem's thematic premise, with Laura and Lizzie as respective symbols of profane and sacred love. Rossetti wrote, in *Letter and Spirit* (1883): "Nature worshipped under diverse aspects exacts under each aspect her victims; or rather, man's consciousness of guilt invests her with a punitive energy backed by a will to punish greater than he can bear" (Rossetti 1883, 74). So, with "Goblin Market"'s

happy ending, Rossetti could have been trying to say that neither the fruit nor the goblins – the prime agents of temptation – are harmful as such unless their overbearing Christian consciousness of guilt burdens humanity. Laura is destroyed by her personal ‘weakness’ of character, but Lizzie remains uncorrupt even when attacked. Lizzie veils her blushes, and covers her eyes while Laura looks, peeps, and listens. Laura aids her undoing. Retribution comes in the form of prolonged suffering and frustration for another taste of the fruit. The resulting expressive effect is equally vital – we can almost feel Laura’s bereavement, deprived of the one thing she desperately seeks. At this moment, Lizzie must remain pure, even with her knowledge of the forces of evil. She successfully seduces Laura’s seducers, and even as they lash out, she wears them down through unshakable resistance and returns triumphantly with the antidote.

Desire and love, in Rossetti’s work, have both destructive and regenerative powers and are reinforced cleverly through her fire symbolism. Like a leaping flame, Laura longs for love, and when denied – “She dwindled [...] To swift decay and burn” (Rossetti 2017, ll. 278-9). Meanwhile, Lizzie, during the attack, is “like a beacon left alone [...] sending up a golden fire” (Rossetti 2017, ll. 412-14). Rossetti makes Lizzie capable of self-governance, and rightfully so, in the face of visual temptation. The goblin’s marketplace conflates sexual and consumer temptation and exists outside of the enclosed economies created for women. Lizzie navigating through the threats of ‘viewing’ and ‘being viewed’ and successfully coming out of it unharmed proves a potential for feminine empowerment in the public sphere. During the times, women were supposed to be in control of their visual responses, while also keeping in mind that they were themselves objects of critical gaze. Women’s ‘internal weakness’ made them naturally fragile and more liable to influences and encounters outside the protected private space. Therefore, the ‘home’ intended to create a safe space to preserve female vision. However, urban markets targeted towards ladies and the resulting buyer-seller exchanges posed a risk of overstimulation of women. Laura and Lizzie, as customers, are exposed to several dangers of degeneration and are exceptionally vulnerable. However, the real risk lies not in the marketplace but in entering it with no moral lens. Looking through a lens of desire, Laura participates in the market’s manipulations. She leaves ‘appropriate public behaviour’ behind while allowing the goblins to penetrate her domestic world. So, the nineteenth century, as we see, not only gave way to gender roles but also gendered spaces and commodity culture. In such an era, a woman is doubly consumed – sexually and economically. She is either apprehensive of her sexual fall or unable to find her place in the male domain of social economy.

“Goblin Market” does not seek to send out the message of renunciation, for “it is one thing to renounce love voluntarily, but quite

another thing to be arbitrarily deprived of it" (Packer 1958, 384). Victorian ideals of good versus evil were characterised by moral concern. Such seeming goodness, mostly, was overshadowed by precepts of patriarchy. As Mill stated, the husband-wife relation, or, more accurately, a heterosexual union, can be perceived as a lingering form of slavery – a stand similar to what Rossetti was attempting to justify all the while. Mill identified the debilitation catalysed by inequality, extremities of domination, and dependence between the two sexes. His activist purpose in promoting female liberation from tyranny was simultaneously a battle for human emancipation. Slavery may have been a long-banished monstrosity, but cruelty towards women – including sexual exploitation, family violence and emotional abuse – continued. Mill did provide his audience with stomach-churning descriptions of brutal assaults inflicted on women in domestic spaces. Such criminal degradation brought about by patriarchs in a woman's life was the common thread linking Mill and Rossetti's ideologies. Rossetti's unyielding dedication to the 'fallen' is a tricky roadmap veiled under the charade of children's literature. Mill's avenue, too, has its fair share of sedate twists but much less in number. However, they both refute the command-obedience model and focus on alliances based on equal respect and affinity instead – as embodied by Rossetti's design of sisterhood. After all, as Iris Marion Young says, "Women in sexist society are physically handicapped" (Young 1980, 152).

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