

*Journal of Literature,
Theatre and Culture Studies*

Narrative for the Women, of the Women: A Multicontextual Interpretation of Sisterhood in Christina Rossetti's Poem "Goblin Market"

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Christina Rossetti's allegorical poem "Goblin Market" is rich in motifs, metaphors, symbols and themes which can be interpreted through multicontextual perspectives. Although much of the significance of the sisterhood presented in the poem hinges on reception theory, some parts of these nuanced interpretations are a result of Rossetti's deliberate criticism of Victorian social constructs that dictated the identity, position and mobility of women as passive participants in the activity of the phallogocentric society. Rossetti weaponises the poem to culminate the concepts of female solidarity, women's emancipation, and body autonomy by subverting gender roles and resisting against patriarchal norms of the nineteenth century. The unique representation of the sisterly bond and female friendship is both a reflection of Rossetti's subjective experiences and objective understanding of the sociology of her times. Therefore, the poem not only signifies the enduring legacy of Rossetti's literary contribution in promoting the arguments of radical feminism, but it also functions as a dialectic of the historical progression of gender politics. She has not only questioned the societal injustices done to women's economic freedom, but has also denounced the financial deprivation coerced upon them. Rossetti subtly criticises the underlying concepts of male chauvinism and gender inequality that the society presents through the institution of religion, so that these regulations cannot be easily disobeyed. Besides specifying these obvious flaws of religion and society, she also suggests the possible procedures for resolving these flaws by narrativising multiple counter-discourses in the poem. A postmodern reading of "Goblin Market" unfolds the fundamentals of queer theory present in the narrative, which become instrumental in portraying the liberation of the sisters. The portrayal of sickness, survival, and differently abled bodies in the poem can be commented upon from the perspective of disability studies. This paper aspires to articulate the magnanimous importance the poem harbours, especially in the literary spectrum of women's writing, as the poem functions not merely as a deviation from preexisting traditions but also as the establishment of traditions that were way ahead of its time.

Keywords: Christina Rossetti, Laura, Lizzie, women, Victorian

Journal of Literature, Theatre and Culture Studies

Kadınlar İçin, Kadınların Anlatısı: Christina Rossetti'nin "Goblin Market" Şiirinde Kız Kardeşliğin Çok Bağlamlı Bir Yorumu

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Christina Rossetti'nin alegorik şiiri "Goblin Market", çoklu bağlamsal perspektifler üzerinden yorumlanabilecek motifler, metaforlar, semboller ve temalar bakımından oldukça zengindir. Şiirde sunulan kız kardeşlik olgusunun anlamının büyük bir kısmı alımlama kuramına dayansa da, bu nüanslı yorumların bazı yönleri Rossetti'nin, kadınların kimliğini, toplumsal konumunu ve hareket alanını fallogosentrik bir toplumda pasif katılımcılar olarak belirleyen Viktorya dönemi toplumsal yapısına yönelttiği bilinçli eleştirinin bir sonucudur. Rossetti, şiiri bir araç hâline getirerek kadın dayanışması, kadınların özgürleşmesi ve bedensel özerklik kavramlarını öne çıkarır; toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini tersyüz ederek ve on dokuzuncu yüzyılın ataerkil normlarına karşı direnerek bu temaları doruk noktasına taşır. Kız kardeşlik bağı ve kadınlar arası dostluğun özgün temsili, hem Rossetti'nin öznel deneyimlerinin bir yansıması hem de yaşadığı dönemin sosyolojisine dair nesnel kavrayışının bir ürünüdür. Bu nedenle şiir, Rossetti'nin radikal feminizmin argümanlarını destekleyen edebi katkısının kalıcı mirasını simgelemekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda toplumsal cinsiyet politikalarının tarihsel ilerleyişine dair diyalektik bir işlev de görür. Rossetti yalnızca kadınların ekonomik özgürlüklerine yönelik toplumsal adaletsizlikleri sorgulamakla kalmaz, onlara dayatılan mali yoksunluğu da kınar. Şair, toplumun din kurumu aracılığıyla sunduğu ve bu nedenle kolayca ihlal edilemeyen erkek egemenliği ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliği kavramlarını inceliklerle eleştirir. Bu açık kusurları belirtmenin yanı sıra, şiirde birden fazla karşı söylemi anlatılaştırarak bu sorunların nasıl çözülebileceğine dair olası yollar da önerir. "Goblin Market" in postmodern bir okuması, anlatı içinde yer alan ve kız kardeşlerin özgürleşmesini betimlemede işlevsel hâle gelen queer kuramın temel unsurlarını açığa çıkarır. Şiirde hastalık, hayatta kalma ve farklı bedenlenmişliklerin temsili ise engellilik çalışmaları perspektifinden ele alınabilir. Bu makale, şiirin özellikle kadın yazını bağlamındaki büyük önemini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır; zira eser, yalnızca önceki edebi geleneklerden bir sapma olarak değil, aynı zamanda kendi zamanının çok ötesinde yeni gelenekler kuran bir metin olarak işlev görmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Christina Rossetti, Laura, Lizzie, kadınlar, Viktoryan

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The safe, hearty and warm bond of female friendship is perhaps the broadest connotation of sisterhood. Time and again, in history and in fiction, many have found a home in platonic feminine intimacy, while many have weaponised its strength for survival. Christina Rossetti's "*Goblin Market*", which is a complex poetic allegory celebrating the strength of sisterly bond, was much inspired by her personal struggles as a woman belonging to the public sphere of literature. Despite being an active and significant part of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, Rossetti struggled with her position as a female poet. The first reason was the gendered hegemony in the field of literature during the Victorian age. Her predecessor, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who enjoyed greater fame during her time, lost the position of Poet Laureate to Alfred Tennyson in the year 1850, and the loss had more to do with gender politics than with literary excellence. Much of the unnecessary criticism Rossetti received was from within her family. Letters and other accounts of her family members reveal that she was often seen as a problem child due to her fits of over-emotivity and non-conformity with ideal femininity. Her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who is the founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, critiques the unconventionally libertarian approach that Christina Rossetti's poetry offered. In a sketch titled *In A Rage*, he depicts her in a fit of comic rage, slightly critiquing her tendencies of resistance and obstinacy. The sisterhood presented in "*Goblin Market*" becomes Rossetti's weapon in freely and unflinchingly manifesting her progressive beliefs about women in an age that relegated women's position in society beyond measure. From 1859 to 1870, she volunteered at the St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate. The charitable community believed that prostitutes, otherwise known as fallen women, could be rehabilitated and should be reintroduced into society in an unsegregated manner. In the poem, the idea of a marketplace where appetite puts a woman at risk, but her salvation is not to be found in controlling the appetite but in turning to another woman's comfort, originates from the moral enlightenment Rossetti received from the experience at the penitentiary. The social conspiracy that commodifies women's bodies on multiple levels, while the blame of ethical contamination is also imposed upon the women, was exposed to her. Her ideas on feminism were free from complexity and theoretical ornamentation as they emerged from the first-hand experience of dealing with the plight of the social outcasts. In a letter to Gabriel Rossetti, she writes: "Women are not Men, and you must not expect me to possess a tithe of your capacities"(178) on being mockingly asked by him to write political pamphlets instead of children's rhymes. Therefore, "*Goblin Market*" is a documentation of women's lives, by a woman, for the women. It presents the Victorian woman question by establishing the unheard side of women's narratives.

The importance of the sisterhood presented in the poem can be interpreted as a didactic approach towards the subversion of patriarchal expectations. The actions of Laura and Lizzie reflect both defiance and conformity. They break away from societal norms while often internalising and accepting them. The exchange between opposite values ensures the dialectic progression of the poem, leading to a culminating conclusion where the utmost importance is placed upon the individual characters and not on situational

events. Hence, "*Goblin Market*" celebrates individuation of the self, but does not anticipate a utopian society. The narrative, no matter how revolting it appears to be, is much grounded in the reality of the Victorian age. The contextual irony of the poem contributes to articulating the frustration and susceptibility of Victorian women, including Rossetti. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes: "And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends...almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men...[women in fiction were] not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that." (65) Opposed to this, almost seventy years prior to Woolf's opinion, Rossetti creates an idyllic, feminine world devoid of patriarchal judgment, where women are not considered to be the weaker sex for behavioural inclination towards simple, domestic virtues. The sisters, Laura and Lizzie, engage in everyday chores, cooking, cleaning and shopping. Rossetti introduces an alternative household space that defies the pervasive Victorian ideologies known as the "cult of domesticity" and "true womanhood". These value systems promoted the belief that women must possess every domestic virtue, along with submissiveness, purity and piety to become better wives, and their existence should be restricted to the private sphere of the home. But Laura and Lizzie's everyday activity is not driven by any social expectation, nor is their movement to the outside restricted. However, each evening, the utopia is threatened by goblin men from "the glen" (Rossetti 15) who sell their mysterious hoard of fruits. It is important to note that the sex of the goblins has not been specified. But their behavioural pattern has been described in terms of a masculine code of conduct. Here, the problem regarding the question of identity arises, which many critics have pointed out. Analysing the poem by setting aside the issue of sex and prioritising the issue of gender as the means of identification creates an inconsistency between what is being critically extracted from the poem and the materiality of the poem itself. Hence, the postmodern reading of the poem often turns the interpretation anachronistic. In the nineteenth century, when sex education was a taboo subject for women, Rossetti made a clear distinction between sex that is assigned at birth and gender, which is a social construct of identification. But regardless of the inclusion of these radical expressions, two contradictory factors must be taken into account. Firstly, these binaries of gender and sex were only abstract ideas during Rossetti's time, and she herself includes these concepts in the poem according to her subjective understanding of the issues and not as scientifically rigid terminology. A similar attempt remains documented in her poem titled "Sappho", in which she identifies herself with the voice of the Greek feminist poet and articulates the suffocated existence of a woman trapped in her own body by the socially assigned norms. Secondly, even though the poet and the critics agree with the validity of gender as the means of identification and not sex, the subjugated condition of women in the nineteenth century was caused solely by the hierarchy of sex and not by the identification with any identity agenda. However, despite considering these dichotomies, the poem remains no less pivotal in conveying and shaping the social consciousness of the Victorian times. Her poetry attacks patriarchy, not men as individuals. The vocabulary the goblins use to describe their fruits is loaded with sexual innuendo that is very disturbing in nature. Based on the poem, the

controversial illustrations painted by Kinuko Craft depict how the fruits have been equated with objects of desire. Published intentionally in *Playboy* (1973), targeted towards the male audience, Craft's art is a burning proof of how sexualisation of women in a state of helplessness is all the more subject to carnal urges promoted by patriarchy. The inappropriate touch and goblin fruits shaped as male genitalia are aimed at exposing the dark, incongruous side of desire. But the goblins ultimately become catalysts in the sisters' transition from childhood into adulthood and assist them to realise their physical, emotional and sexual potential. Lizzie embodies the strict Victorian parenting traditions through her wise, experienced, protective approach. But the set of restrictions she utters is not socially internalised but out of reasonable fear of the goblins. She says: "Dear, you should not stay so late,/ Twilight is not good for maidens;/ Should not loiter in the glen/ In the haunts of goblin men." (Rossetti 17) She constantly cautions her sister Laura, whose carefree and daring behaviour embodies the new woman the eighteenth century witnessed. Laura's hyperfemininity, innocent mannerisms, and lovely appearance have made critics compare her with fourteenth-century poet Petrarch's muse, whose name was also Laura. Many have considered the name Laura to be a pun on the word "lure", as she falls victim to the allure of the goblin fruits. Whereas Lizzie, due to her resilience and bravery, has been compared to Queen Elizabeth I. This claim can be further supported by the genderless representation of the self, meticulously constructed by Elizabeth I herself. In order to establish her power over the phallogentric monarchy, she rejected her femininity in terms of conduct and cognition. She was popularly attributed as "King" Elizabeth or the Virgin Queen, who was an icon of sanctity and strength. Similarly, Lizzie's struggle with the Goblins has different characteristics from that of Laura. She is physically brutalised mercilessly, being treated by the goblins as their equal, but is not a victim of their seductive beckoning. Her resilience has been described through the metaphor of a horse, which was commonly used to describe masculine valour:

One may lead a horse to water,
 Twenty cannot make him drink.
 Though the goblins cuff'd and caught her,
 Coax'd and fought her,
 Bullied and besought her,
 Scratch'd her, pinch'd her black as ink,
 Kick'd and knock'd her,
 Maul'd and mock'd her,
 Lizzie utter'd not a word; (Rossetti 27)

There is a quality of chivalry in the way she emerges victoriously and saves Laura. In Laura's revival scenes, she has been placed in the submissive end of the heteronormative gender binary, whereas Lizzie works as the dominant agent in the poem. Lizzie's behavioural pattern throughout the poem replicates that

of the head of the family, who, in the Victorian age, quintessentially had to be a man. The end of the poem reveals that Laura is narrating the entire story to her children while Lizzie remains the valiant heroine, or rather, the hero of the tale. Whether Rossetti's intention behind portraying Lizzie through a gender influx was to criticise or to simply conform to the norm of her age is a debatable subject. But a postmodern reading of the poem exposes the multitude of hegemonic codes women were subjected to.

The economic oppression of women in the nineteenth century has been subtly presented in the poem as well. The title itself is indicative of the fact that the poem can be interpreted from economic perspectives. The opening lines of the poem: "Morning and evening/ Maids heard the goblins cry:/ Come buy our orchard fruits,/Come buy, come buy"(Rossetti 15) assert the possibility of "the cyclical rhythms of women in conflict with the linear pull of the market" (Campbell 199). The poem also deals with how consumer desire is exploited to propagate the capitalist economy. The goblins seem more interested in the sisters rather than their money. The way the rarity of their exotic fruits gives them the opportunity to determine the price and situate the consumers at the passive end of the bargain is very similar to how the mercantile economy was taking over England's code of consumerism. Besides, the Napoleonic code prevalent in the Victorian age restricted women from having financial possessions or doing monetary transactions without the permission of their male guardian—generally the father, brother, husband or son. Managing household necessities based on the earnings of the father of the family was the only financial role women were granted. Apart from that, the personal necessities of non-aristocratic women were rarely indulged in. Laura's desire to buy the forbidden fruit allegorically embodies how women's desire for personal entertainment was forbidden. Laura's hesitating speech about the possession of a coin clearly reveals the economic dependence of women:

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. (Rossetti 18)

The only socially accepted working roles for women were either being a governess or a prostitute. Both professions preyed on women's labour and bodies. Similarly, Laura too, commodifies her body as she substitutes her "precious golden lock"(Rossetti 18) for money. The extent of women's alienation from the sphere of economy has been conveyed by Laura's naïve comparison between gold and furze, a kind of golden flower. Laura's mistake is not a result of stupidity but sheer inexperience, which society is accountable for. She allows the goblins to determine the terms of the purchase and situate her within the patriarchal economy. She fails to assert her agency and thus is deceived, which mirrors the legalised system of unequal wages for women in the nineteenth century. After Laura is done eating the mysterious fruits, she brings home "one kernel stone"(Rossetti 19) to grow the delicious fruits by herself in the future.

However, she fails to reproduce the fruits that lured her into staking her life. This instance can be seen as a parallel to the termination of women's ownership of wages in Victorian times. Women who were already socially ostracised for entering the public sphere were exploited further for labour, while their wages were deceitfully rejected in the end. Laura pays the price for her desires with her life as her vitality slowly gets robbed from her body. Likewise, women had to pay higher interest rates for loans (as they were not legally allowed to borrow money), which often took them a lifetime of sacrifice to return. However, Lizzie asserts economic agency by demanding a fair exchange, proposing to buy fruits for a penny. The refusal of the goblins replicates the repressive political measures taken by the chauvinistic government against women's rights. The poem employs words like "loiter" and "linger" as part of a cautionary terminology, instructing the women to stay within a strictly drawn boundary of freedom. Yet Lizzie dares to alter the demography of patriarchal economy and inscribe her own understanding of bartering, by demanding: "If you will not sell me any/ Of your fruits though much and many,/ Give me back my silver penny/ I toss'd you for a fee." (Rossetti 26) Rossetti exposes how assault becomes the central expression of masculine control as the long description of abuse Lizzie endures symbolises the torment women went through for mere existential strife: "Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,/ Tore her gown and soild her stocking,/ Twitch'd her hair out by the roots,/ Stamp'd upon her tender feet" (Rossetti 27). "*Goblin Market*" was published in the year 1862, yet the way it paints the predicament of women's vulnerability almost predicts the rejection of the amendment to the Second Reform Bill presented by John Stuart Mill in 1867, which aimed to grant women's suffrage. However, Rossetti alters the palimpsest to be the dominant narrative as Lizzie stands her ground until she gets her penny back: "And heard her penny jingle/ Bouncing in her purse,—/ Its bounce was music to her ear." (Rossetti 28). She returns with both her penny and the cure for Laura's illness, as if avenging a generation of women's exploitation.

The feminist implications in "*Goblin Market*" result from Rossetti's subjective voice, plagued by multiple consequent events. In 1864, the Contagious Diseases Act was passed to enquire into the victims of venereal diseases. However, historians later documented that this process of rehabilitation only favoured male citizens, providing them with proper treatment while the women were confined in deplorable lock hospitals, which were remote and ill-maintained. The sole reason for this was a flawed view of prostitution that portrayed women as the carriers of venereal diseases, whereas the male consumerism of prostitution was absolutely invisibilised. Many women were deported to Australia along with national offenders, as carrying these diseases was considered a capital crime only for women. A popular discussion of the age was how and in what ways women were plagued by Hysteria. Derived from the Greek word 'hystera', meaning womb, Hysteria was considered to be a gender specific disease. Popular discourses, which were medically licensed and widely accepted, concluded that it was caused by what was known as the "wandering womb". The theory stated that the uterus of women who harboured more emotions than what is socially prescribed, dislodged from its rightful place and wandered throughout the body, hammering at the head and causing madness.

Laura too whimsically wanders to the prohibited regions and suffers from fits of distress as described in the lines :

And gnash'd her teeth for baulk'd desire, and wept
 As if her heart would break.
 Day after day, night after night,
 Laura kept watch in vain
 In sullen silence of exceeding pain. (Rossetti 24)

In another poem titled "The Daughter of Eve", Rossetti expresses similar agony upon making wrong decisions in life: "Stripp'd bare of hope and everything,/ No more to laugh, no more to sing,/ I sit alone with sorrow." (Rossetti 41) Although the poem itself is subjective, the subject matter of it is quintessentially womanly according to Victorian standards. The title also suggests that the poem captures the predicament of women who are bound to make the same mistakes as their predecessor Eve, who caused the loss of paradise. But an alternate reading of the poem reveals how the whole discourse of women's suffering, starting from Eve to Rossetti's own life, is a socially constructed scheme of gendered blame and marginalisation. Many of Rossetti's poems and letters deal with how women suffer the way society demands them to suffer, which geographically and historically varies. Similarly, Laura's illness is of a specific kind that is decided and inflicted by the goblin men. She manically craves for the goblin fruits, grows restless for the taste of them, and when she fails to reencounter the very feeling that drives her insane, she grows thin and pale, and her hair turns grey. Her innocent hunger causes her ruin. There is an irony in her suffering, which replicates the contradictory expectations society imposed upon women. The age witnessed the massive demand for conduct books written for young girls to instruct them about maintaining virginal purity and presentability in the marriage market. These books conventionally made examples of girls who dared to transgress the boundaries assigned by patriarchy. Similarly, "*Goblin Market*" also uses the example of a girl named Jenie who indulged in consuming the forbidden fruit and ended up losing her life. Lizzie cautions Laura on how even flowers do not bloom over her grave. To interpret it metaphorically, if women were found to have been defiled before legal marital union and hence, "deflowered", they were no longer accepted as brides and therefore, received no wedding bouquet. But most of these women were cheated by their partners, and that other side of the narrative has been silenced by history. In the nineteenth century, when guillotines were gradually being abolished as an inhuman means of execution, England discovered a new, invisible torture device as a morally ironic gift for women under the reign of the great Queen Victoria, namely, the woman question. Besides, the era was so obsessed with taxidermy that it trapped women in a life in death existence, stuffing their psychological innards with socially constructed ideologies of everything: talking and walking, eating and mimicking, and most importantly, being obedient and lovely wives for men. "*Goblin Market*" becomes Rossetti's literary revolt in breaking the notion of the "angel in the house". The value system required

women to become self-sacrificing, domesticated, angelic wives, as their virtue determined the respectability of their husbands. They must produce children, but must not have any personal sexual desire; otherwise, they shall be labelled as barbarous, licentious, repulsive. They must cook, but not be hungrier than the amount prescribed by society. They must ensure the well-being of their family, but must not demand rest. Suffering and staying still, existing in a twilight zone, was what ideal femininity was. The womanly qualities the sisterhood exudes completely debunks these expectations. Laura is not the damsel in distress but firm about her choices and projects her liberty in indulging in her biological desires. Her victimisation is a result of the deceptive goblin fruits. Her trust and curiosity are not her crime, but the goblins who corrupt and exploit her innocence are the actual criminals. Lizzie choosing to confront the goblins but refusing the fruits is proof that it is only through resistance and asserting choices, women will overcome the perils of the age. The victory of the sisterhood is an expression of Rossetti claiming her distinct position among the predominantly male Victorian authors. Her voice against the hypocritical phallocentrism stands the test of time. While in 1928, Virginia Woolf in *Orlando* opines, “As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking.” (65), Rossetti blatantly showcases the adverse effect of such thinking. Lizzie shudders at realising that “her sister heard that cry alone” (Rossetti 23), which conveys Rossetti’s message for women about distancing themselves from the deceptive promises of patriarchy. And indeed, the age witnessed the rise of unmarried women, including Rossetti herself, who earned for themselves and withstood all odds. What Rossetti achieves is more than just the identification with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, as she finds her unique place amongst the pioneering Victorian female poets, and so do many other women of the age in their different spectrums. Strength of sisterhood triumphs.

Apart from the feminist readings of the poem, it can be analysed from the perspective of queer theory as well. Whether it was Rossetti’s intention to normalise homoeroticism amongst women through the homosexual inferences in the relationship of the sisters is a subject of debate. Though most of her works deal with the spectrum of femininity, they do not feature queerness through its physical manifestation. In fact, it is only in the revival scene of Laura where these themes are found. But the fact that in the poem, Rossetti urges for freedom of expression and spontaneity of subjective behaviourism regardless of gender boundaries, is an unquestionable claim. From one perspective, the homoerotic approach works as a counter force to pacify the effects of the brutal objectification Laura is subjected to by the goblins. She has to be revived by being fed the same fruits that robbed her vitality. But Lizzie feeds her the remnants of the fruits, not in the standard way, but urges Laura to taste the fruits smeared on her skin :

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
 Squeez’d from goblin fruits for you,
 Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
 Eat me, drink me, love me;

The depiction is extremely obscure and disturbing, which highlights the height of the eeriness of the original seduction of the goblins. The seduction and the re-enactment are both depicted through similar behavioural patterns, but the intention has been altered. The goblin fruits are poisonous because they are infused, described and offered with their malicious intentions. But Lizzie transforms the poison into an elixir with her virtuous intent. This depiction is also similar to the Biblical ritual of consuming bread as the body of Jesus to reach redemption. It is not the goblin fruits but the bodily contact of Lizzie that redeems Laura. Her body radiates the warmth of protection and not the sickness of malevolent lust. The poem employs the contrasting images of light and darkness to articulate the effects of Laura's consumption of the fruits. After Laura eats the goblin fruits, the summer sky becomes dark as the sudden arrival of clouds "Put out the lights" (Rossetti 23) of the day, along with the hues of Laura's colourful life. Contrariwise, the effects of Laura's revival have been depicted beautifully in the lines: "Swift fire spread through her veins, knock'd at her heart,/ Met the fire smouldering there/ And overbore its lesser flame" (Rossetti 31). Rossetti hence weaponises homoeroticism to alter multiple facades of the dominant patriarchal code. One of the major reasons for female mortality in England was due to the neglect of gynaecological health. The subject was not medically studied properly, was considered a taboo, and the symptoms of women were not properly understood due to the absence of female practitioners in the field. If Laura's illness can be interpreted as a gynaecological or venereal illness, then the utmost patience and meticulous care Lizzie exhibits towards her emphasises the mandatory attention gynaecological health should be given, and how women's participation in the field is necessary. Lizzie understands Laura's plight so deeply because she shares the same physiological (gender) identity and experiences as her, and hence, her attempt at saving Laura is uninhibited, unbarred, purely instinctive to the point of exhibiting motherly concern. The lines "That night long Lizzie watch'd by her,/ Counted her pulse's flagging stir,/ Felt for her breath" (Rossetti 31) indicate the spontaneous motherly connection any female bonding has in common. The concept resonates with another poem of Rossetti titled "Crying, My Little One, Footsore and Weary" where the female speaker comforts the readers in a motherly tone: "You are my one, and I have not another;/ Sleep soft, my darling, my trouble and treasure;/ Sleep warm and soft in the arms of your mother,/ Dreaming of pretty things, dreaming of pleasure." (Rossetti 52) Rossetti counters the patriarchal concept that condemns women for falling victim to seduction but does not criminalise the seducer. She also breaks free from the political appropriation of female bodies, as the two sisters cannot be fitted into any neatly knit concept of gender that is determined by certain behavioural registers. According to the socially ascribed gender boundaries, a generalised reading of the poem may mislead the reader to view the sisters to be womanly in their behaviour, manly in their courage and transsexual in their survival. But that would contribute even more to the identity stereotypes that sustain the sex-gender hierarchy. When the protagonist sisters deviate from what is expected of females, they exhibit that being a woman is not linked to notions of sweetness, submission, and femininity, and this non-conformity does not make them evil or transsexual- just women who transgress what has been

imposed on them for centuries. The Victorian society normalised and even convinced women, to some extent, to identify with submission, harassment, lack of autonomy and rights over their own bodies. Rossetti is one of the first female writers to question this abnormal normalisation and normalise what actually should be normalised. She not only redefines and reappropriates the fundamentals of gender identity, but also anticipates the theories of materialist feminism that emerged almost a hundred years after the poem was written. By problematising gender boundaries, Rossetti emphasises the freedom of expression and spontaneous gender discourses that will aid the improvement of human progress. The similarity between the actions of the sisterhood and Biblical myth is remarkable. And Rossetti breaking the myth is more so. She alters the stereotypical masculine role of the knight in shining armour, the protector and provider, by presenting a woman as the Christ figure. Lizzie's capability of self-sacrifice and changing the universal fate of consuming the forbidden fruit makes her an almighty figure. By redeeming Laura and not letting her meet the same destiny as Jeanie, Lizzie's actions logically reflect more kindness than the Biblical God. She neither condemns or curses Laura to be a sinner as God did to Eve, subjecting her to the punishment of painful childbirth and domination by her husband in Genesis 3:16. Instead, she soothes, restores and erases any difference between the pious and sinner as even after consuming the goblin fruit, Laura and Lizzie merrily work together: "Fetch'd in honey, milk'd the cows,.../ Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat" (Rossetti 21). Through these alterations, Rossetti highlights the possibility of the revival of the fallen woman. In a society opposed to the progression of women, empowerment is all the more needed to break the barriers. The unbreakable sisterly bond defying the Biblical degradation of Eve with an alternative end is simply symbolic of Rossetti's faith in female solidarity. Both sisters go through a learning process, acting as redeemer and redeemed for each other. Lizzie learns the strength of emotional and physical love integral to human existence. Laura rediscovers the power of sisterhood and passes that message to her little ones. Even without the direct inclusion of men in the poem, the existence of the children confirms their passive presence. Yet the concluding focus of the poem is:

For there is no friend like a sister
 To cheer one on the tedious way,
 To fetch one if one goes astray,
 To lift one if one totters down,
 To strengthen whilst one stands. (Rossetti 31)

The system, code of conduct and social expectations persist. Only, the outcome is changed by the hands of the women. The message of empowerment is passed down, from mothers to daughters, from sisters to a universal sisterhood. "*Goblin Market*" can be experimentally read from the perspective of disability studies as well. Rossetti critiques and reconstructs physical differences that fall beyond the socially accepted

boundaries and debunks the unethical treatment of illness, psychological disorder, deviant or impaired bodies. The non-normative, incongruous, hybrid appearance of the goblins as depicted in the lines: “One had a cat’s face,/ One whisk’d a tail,/ One tramp’d at a rat’s pace,/ One crawl’d like a snail,” (Rossetti 16) is indicative of how physical deformity was a laughing stock in Victorian comic literature, lampoons and freak shows. The goblin fruit that causes the mental and physical disorientation of Laura can be considered a metaphor of contagion, which injects uncontrollable addiction and craving in her body, which manipulates her psyche to such an extent that makes her disregard the threats of bodily corruption. Even while slowly wasting away as her hair turns grey and colour fades from her skin, she thinks about the fruits. The symptoms of her fading youth are very similar to the effects of Syphilis and Tuberculosis, both of which heavily affected the Victorian population. She becomes the epitome of the physically and socially unfit outcast as her agility is robbed from her. It is Lizzie’s positive determination that reflects the central themes of disability studies in the narrative as she challenges the boundary of body autonomy by not giving up hope about the revival of Laura, who, according to social standards, is already a lost cause, much like Jenie. Disability studies critiques the flaws in the process of nursing that devalue the dignity of disabled individuals, as such value systems predetermine the scale of one’s abilities without practical proof of what they are actually capable of. But the cure narrative of the poem places Laura as the victor, as she has been given due credit for defeating destiny. Although she is required to be healed to again become an acceptable part of the normative society, her healing is born out of the finer sensitivities of love, protection, friendship and lastly, a sisterly bond, which are the psychological qualities often missing in the treatment of disabled lives. But Lizzie’s intervention introduces a radical reimagining of care narratives according to the standards of the nineteenth century, as she treats Laura as what we modernly know as a differently abled individual. Rossetti opposes the politics of psychology as she inscribes an alternate method of interdependent, communal, emotional healing. She herself experienced near-death conditions of dangerous and long periods of sickness. She was diagnosed with a rare condition of the malfunction of the thyroid gland known as Graves’ disease. From 1870 to the rest of her life, she was plagued by mood swings, fevers, headaches, exhaustion and loss of consciousness. Her body underwent severe swelling, hair loss, discolouration, and weight loss to the point that some accounts of 1872 state that her eyes seemed to protrude out of her face. Some of her letters and related correspondence of people who knew her reveal that her religious background often framed her illness as a trial for spiritual refinement, which caused her more harm than good. She was subjectively aware of the unreasonable isolation caused by society’s discomfort with non-normative corporeality, and hence, she vehemently critiques the moralization of medical narrative in the poem. Therefore, “*Goblin Market*” functions as a palimpsestic and humanitarian discourse over the inhuman medical ideology of the Victorians.

When Rossetti created the sisterhood of her dreams in the nineteenth century, she did so perhaps without realising that the yet-to-develop theories of feminism, queer theory, theology and consumerism would be applied to her work. Her frustrated reaction became solace for the women of her age and ages to

come. Her success in breaking the taboo remains as a burning proof that patriarchal subjugation couldn't muffle the justified protests of women, no matter how few and disempowered they were. What Rossetti fought for in 1865 is still being fought for by the women of the twenty-first century, and the echoes of her rebellion have reverberated down to the "me too" movement of contemporary times. The empathy the tale of the sisters evokes amongst the female readers creates a sense of unification of existential need, and Rossetti sews the thread of interdependence between a universal sisterhood. "*Goblin Market*" establishes the gender unified concept of sisterhood that the lofty agendas of liberty, equality and fraternity have excluded. Rossetti, Laura and Lizzie function as nineteenth-century fairy godmothers, imparting the priceless knowledge of kindness, courage and emancipation amongst a generation of female readers.

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