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# Nature's Perilous Variety in Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

SEAN C. GRASS

**T**HE critical interpretations of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" that have been advanced during the last two decades are nearly as multifarious as the goblin fruits so lavishly depicted in her verse. A cursory glance at the introduction to virtually any critical essay on "Goblin Market" provides a healthy catalog of the disparate readings of the poem: as commentary on the capitalist marketplace; as tale of sexual, sometimes homoerotic yearning; as feminist glorification of sisterhood; and perhaps most often as Christian allegory of temptation and redemption, "inescapably a Genesis story."<sup>1</sup> Many early criticisms of Rossetti's poetry focus on the location of biographical events that correspond to the situations described in her verse, apparently in an attempt to show Rossetti's poetry as grappling with the symbolic mean-

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<sup>1</sup> June Sturrock, "Protective Pastoral: Innocence and Female Experience in William Blake's *Songs* and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*," *Colby Quarterly*, 30 (1994), 99. See also Terrence Holt, "Men sell not such in any town': Exchange in *Goblin Market*," *Victorian Poetry*, 28 (1990), 51–67. In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the poem as a story of sexual temptation and renunciation (see pp. 564–75). Two examples of articles that treat "Goblin Market" as a glorification of sisterhood are Dorothy Mermin, "Heroic Sisterhood in *Goblin Market*," *Victorian Poetry*, 21 (1983), 107–18; and Miriam Sagan, "Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' and Feminist Literary Criticism," *Pre-Raphaelite Review*, 3, no. 2 (1980), 66–76.

ings in events of her quiet, retiring life.<sup>2</sup> But this body of criticism as a whole tends to be too narrowly focused on Rossetti's poetry as a product of a singular aspect of her life—either her ill-fated love affairs, her association with Tractarianism and the Oxford Movement, or her affiliation with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. However, seeing her poetry as influenced by only one or another of these forces provides an inadequate and myopic view of her verse as a whole and of "Goblin Market" in particular. Instead, we should at least attempt to account for the commingling of these influences as they manifest themselves in her verse if we are to arrive at any comprehensive understanding of the several layers of meaning in "Goblin Market"—the poem that continues to be the enigmatic core of Rossetti's work—and if we are to defy the inquiry of any narrowly ideological approach.

In attempting to arrive at such an understanding we necessarily must let the poem itself determine the avenues of inquiry that are most fruitful, and in "Goblin Market" Rossetti's use of lists may provide an interpretive key. Nearly fifteen years have passed since Miriam Sagan observed that "the major trope of the poem is the *list*" (p. 71), but little has been done to explore the ramifications of this accurate assessment. More often than not the goblin fruits and goblin characteristics have been relegated to strictly symbolic or allegorical significance by critics, or they have been vaguely referred to only insofar as they overwhelm the senses or render the goblins and their fruits in ambiguous terms.<sup>3</sup> Katherine Mayberry has by and large discarded the possibility of any literal significance in the lists, attributing "the proliferation of words, rhythms, metaphors, and similes" to "the poet's breathless inebriation with the process of writing"

<sup>2</sup> In her biography *Christina Rossetti* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1963) Lona Mosk Packer attempts to portray the poem as a description of Rossetti's sexual yearnings for William Bell Scott (see p. 120).

<sup>3</sup> In *Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989) Katherine J. Mayberry writes that the fruits "by [their] sheer variety and number" "threaten to overpower Lizzie completely," and she goes on to claim that "the multiple implications of the goblin experience" are reflected by the multiplicity of the fruits (p. 98). Sagan claims only that the multiple fruits seem to intensify the images and overwhelm the senses (p. 71).

(p. 90). To assume that these meticulously structured lists are strictly symbolic or that they are only illustrative of Rossetti's poetic self-indulgence, however, is to underrate the breadth and clarity of her poetic vision.

The lists in "Goblin Market" construct a vision of a bounteous and abundant nature that is seductive in its infinite variety—not a surprising vision considering Rossetti's love of the natural world around her. In fact, the use of lists in "Goblin Market" in such diverse ways—in cataloging the goblin fruits, in describing the physiognomies and behaviors of the goblins themselves, and in developing the imagery associated with Laura and Lizzie—suggests that variety and multiplicity in the natural world, especially when juxtaposed against the harmony and unity of the sisters, are more central to Rossetti's themes of temptation and moral discernment than has previously been thought. Such variety is threatening for Rossetti, for not only does it have the potential to lead one to dissatisfaction with a simple and retiring life, but it can also cause a spiritual crisis as the desire to celebrate the variety of nature clashes with the necessity of viewing nature morally.

That Christina Rossetti loved the natural world—especially all sorts of animals—has been thoroughly documented by her biographers and by literary critics. She and her siblings were frequent visitors to the Regent's Park Zoological Gardens throughout her adolescence and early womanhood, and one such trip is recounted by her in a letter to her brother William dated 18 August 1858, only one year before "Goblin Market" was written. "We have revisited the Z. Gardens," she writes; "Lizards are in strong force, tortoises active, alligators looking up. The weasel-headed armadillo as usual evaded us. . . . The blind wombat and neighbouring porcupine broke forth into short-lived hostilities, but apparently without permanent results."<sup>4</sup> In this passage we see not only the interest (and good humor) with which she surveyed the animals during her visits, but also, in the "weasel-headed armadillo," we glimpse perhaps

<sup>4</sup> *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Brown, Langham, and Co., 1908), pp. 25–26.

the beginnings of her goblin men with their humanoid forms and animal components. William also indicates that "she knew . . . Ratel at the Zoological Gardens," and that "it was C[hristina] and I who jointly discovered the Wombat in the Zoological Gardens."<sup>5</sup> Packer in her biography has discussed Christina's experiences of 1854 when, in a time of depression, "she walked in the Botanical Gardens of Regent's Park" to relieve her melancholy (p. 98).<sup>6</sup> This interest in and love of nature in its infinite varieties is reflected in many of Rossetti's poems, including works like "From House to Home," "Another Spring," and "A Birthday."

The artistic sensibilities of Dante Gabriel and of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood surely served to nurture and perhaps even to heighten the love of nature Christina already felt. The painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had "the overt aim of . . . a 'return to nature,'" much as the Romantics before them, although in a very stylized way.<sup>7</sup> Such a return meant precision and saturation of detail in depicting nature to produce an aesthetically pleasing effect. Pre-Raphaelite poetry tended to exhibit many of these same characteristics, with meticulous attention being paid to minute natural phenomena, and with poets attempting to use meter and melody playfully to delight the senses.<sup>8</sup> "Goblin Market," with its lavish attention to the cataloging of natural phenomena and with its highly irregular but melodic rhythms, would seem to be an archetypical example of both of these characteristics. And, if anything, the Pre-Raphaelite influences shaping Christina's verse would certainly

<sup>5</sup> Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study*, 4th ed. (1898; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> Making use of such visits to the Zoological Gardens was not an uncommon practice in attempting to relieve particularly emotional or psychological ailments in Rossetti's time. In Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), "one of the most eminent doctors in London" suggests that such walks are medicinal when he says, "I have found the Zoological Gardens of service to many of my patients" (pp. 379-80).

<sup>7</sup> John Heath-Stubbs, "Pre-Raphaelitism and the Aesthetic Withdrawal," in *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James Sambrook (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> See Lionel Stevenson, *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1972), p. 6.

have heightened her desire to represent faithfully and at length the variety she found and so doted upon in the natural world, both as she observed it at the Zoological Gardens and as she experienced it as a girl during her visits to the English countryside.<sup>9</sup> Thus Christina's own predisposition to celebrate nature received certain encouragement from at least one of the forces helping to shape her poetic sensibility.

Christina's desire to revel in and glorify the splendor of the natural world in her verse was mitigated, however, by her religious apprehension that nature must be scrutinized for its moral and sacred meanings—a belief characteristic of the writings of Tractarians John Keble and John Newman. Christina, along with her mother and sister Maria, probably came under the influence of the Oxford Movement as early as 1840, and in fact both sisters cultivated long-standing relationships with the Anglican Sisterhood of All Saints.<sup>10</sup> As the Oxford Movement influenced Christina's spirituality, so Tractarianism and the writings of Keble and Newman informed her sense of symbolism and interpretation with regard to the natural world.<sup>11</sup> Tractarian thought included a central tenet of intense sacramentalism in which things visible in the natural world were thought to symbolize things invisible and divine, and Tractarians saw in nature

<sup>9</sup> Biographers have noted several vacations in which Christina would have had opportunity to explore the English countryside, such as at Holmer Green (Packer, p. 144) and at Frome Selwood, where she lived with her parents for an eleven-month stint (see Bell, p. 24).

<sup>10</sup> See Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life* (London: Constable, 1981), p. 154. Christina was an Associate of this same Order and worked at its House of Charity from 1860 to 1870 (Battiscombe, p. 94), which explains her support of Maria's decision to become a nun with the Anglican Sisterhood of All Saints in 1873 (p. 154). In fact, D.M.R. Bentley explores, intriguingly though not wholly convincingly, the hypothesis that "Goblin Market" was in fact written to be read aloud to the fallen women of Highgate Hill, with whom Christina was associated through her involvement with the Anglican Sisterhood (see "The Meretricious and the Meritorious in *Goblin Market*: A Conjecture and an Analysis," in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David A. Kent [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987], p. 58).

<sup>11</sup> See Mary Arseneau, "Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement, and *Goblin Market*," *Victorian Poetry*, 31 (1993), 80. Rossetti in fact "took the trouble to illustrate her own copy of [Keble's] *The Christian Year* with naive little marginal drawings" despite her lack of true affinity for Keble's verse (Battiscombe, p. 180).

"the signs of the Creator."<sup>12</sup> Since the incarnation of Christ, the beauty of the physical world was shaped by his continuing presence here on earth. The job of the Christian was to look for the signs of Christ on earth and to understand the natural world in terms of his continuing presence and incarnation in order to achieve ultimate Christian salvation.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the very composition of poetry was based, according to Newman, "on correct moral perception . . . where there is no sound principle in exercise there will be no poetry."<sup>14</sup> In order for Christina to produce excellent poetry, she therefore needed to attempt to resolve the underlying tension between her desire to celebrate the sheer variety of nature and the spiritual and moral need to make sense of that variety. The collision between her own affinity for nature and her religiously imposed moral doctrine produced Rossetti the poet: a poet who worried that reveling in nature could confuse moral judgment, thereby imperiling salvation. Understanding Rossetti in these various contexts shows us that she was deeply concerned with her own love of nature's variety and its depiction in her Pre-Raphaelite verse.

This concern takes center stage in Rossetti's poetic world, from the very outset of "Goblin Market," in the form of lists. The first fourteen lines of the poem list for us no fewer than sixteen types of goblin fruit:

Morning and evening  
 Maids heard the goblins cry:  
 "Come buy our orchard fruits,  
 Come buy, come buy:  
 Apples and quinces,  
 Lemons and oranges,  
 Plump unpecked cherries,  
 Melons and raspberries,  
 Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,

<sup>12</sup> G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), p. 21. Tennyson presents perhaps the most thorough treatment of the influences of Tractarianism upon Victorian poetry and includes a discussion of Rossetti's work (and Hopkins's) in his "Postscript: Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins" (pp. 197–211).

<sup>13</sup> See Arseneau, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Tennyson, p. 39.

Swart-headed mulberries,  
 Wild free-born cranberries,  
 Crab-apples, dewberries,  
 Pine-apples, blackberries,  
 Apricots, strawberries;—<sup>15</sup>

Then, after a five-line respite, Rossetti goes on to catalog another thirteen of the goblin fruits for us. The effect upon the senses is overwhelming, as many critics have pointed out, but such an observation is only particularly relevant within the context of Rossetti's Tractarianism. While the common view has been to see these fruits as together symbolic of the "fruit forbidden" (l. 479) of Eve's fall in Eden, thus rendering the poem wholly allegorical, the case is not quite so simple. In other poems Rossetti utilized individual types of fruit as symbolic of sin and temptation (such as in "An Apple Gathering"), but here the forbidden fruit is not of any single type. The Edenic fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, unique as it is, serves as the means of Eve's fall from innocence and grace, and Rossetti could certainly have made use of the single tempting fruit here had the poem been intended as simple Genesis allegory. Instead, Rossetti makes use of twenty-nine different fruits, all meticulously listed, some with accompanying details. This vision of the multifarious goblin fruits does overwhelm, but more important, this overwhelming of the senses can confuse moral discernment, the spiritual problem Rossetti battled herself.

The way to combat this sensory overload, in Laura and Lizzie's initial view, is twofold: the sisters must remain united, and they also must close their senses entirely to the avalanche of sensory input the situation attempts to force upon them:

Crouching close together  
 In the cooling weather,  
 With clasping arms and cautioning lips,  
 With tingling cheeks and finger tips.

(ll. 36–39)

<sup>15</sup> "Goblin Market," in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Crump, 3 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979–1995), I, 11, ll. 1–14. Further references to "Goblin Market" are from this edition and are cited parenthetically by line number in the text.



As they crouch, Laura iterates what must be their credo for action if they are to resist the jumbling of their moral judgment:

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

(ll. 42–45)

The maintenance of unity of both mind and purpose is a means of coping with the multiplicity and abundance of the scene. Unfortunately for Laura and Lizzie both, however, Laura is breaking their unity even as she acknowledges its necessity, for she is "pricking up her golden head" (l. 41) to look. Very early in the poem, then, the variety of nature with its potential to overwhelm and mislead is pitted against the unity and resolve of the sisters.

Just as the multiplicity of the forbidden fruit in Rossetti's poetic world is at odds with the uniqueness of the Edenic fruit, the variety of the tempters in the forms of the goblin men provide us with no unique Satan. The goblin men not only look very different in their animal aspects:

One had a cat's face,  
One whisked a tail,  
One tramped at a rat's pace,  
One crawled like a snail,  
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,  
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry,

(ll. 71–76; see fig. 1)

but they also are engaged in differentiated activities:

One hauls a basket,  
One bears a plate,  
One lugs a golden dish  
Of many pounds weight.

(ll. 56–59)

The repetition of the word "one" reinforces that for Laura no two of the goblin men look alike. The particular wonder of each is unique, and we are told that although Lizzie "thrust a



FIG. 1.

dimpled finger / In each ear, shut eyes and ran" (ll. 67–68), Laura chooses to remain, "wondering at *each* merchant man [emphasis added]" (l. 70). Once again the variety and multiplicity of the experience are what confuse Laura's intellectual and moral instincts, causing her to react improperly. The result is a complete fragmentation of the harmony of the sisters, for now they are separated—a situation that we feel inevitably leads to Laura's fall.

The goblin men, strictly speaking, are more manifestations of the supernatural than of the natural world, and their origins in the books of Rossetti's childhood have been convincingly

traced.<sup>16</sup> But the goblins are no more entirely supernatural than they are entirely humanoid, like the traditional goblins of mythology. Rossetti has provided us with a rather curious admixture of mythology and her own experiences at the Zoological Gardens, as we can see from her references to animals like the wombat and the ratel. The goblins' supernatural aura, though, is not what draws Laura to them; rather, the focus of the poem is on the aspects of the goblins that are most closely connected with the natural world—namely, their fruits and their animal characteristics. Moreover, these animal characteristics are precisely what differentiate the goblins from one another. Despite their partially supernatural origins, the goblins are unmistakably part of Rossetti's concern with the variety of nature as she depicts it in this poem; and insofar as they are, they interfere with Laura's moral judgment almost immediately. Even though Laura has taken time to examine each particular goblin man and found each unique, to her ear they sound entirely harmonious:

She heard a voice like voice of doves  
Cooing all together:  
They sounded kind and full of loves  
In the pleasant weather.

(ll. 77–80)

Later in the poem Laura's perception of the goblins' apparent harmony will be contrasted sharply with Lizzie's own uncorrupted and morally discerning recognition of their discordant voices. Also, as Mary Arseneau has perceptively pointed out (p. 86), Laura's comparison of the goblin voices with the cooing of doves is a clear indicator that Laura's discernment has been muddled, for the dove is the traditional Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit, while the goblins themselves are dangerous and perhaps even evil.

<sup>16</sup> B. Ifor Evans traces the origins of the goblins back to such sources as Thomas Keightley's *The Fairy Mythology* (1828), and he makes convincing arguments for the sources of many other aspects of the poem, including the merchant cries, the lavish scenery, and the animal features of the goblin men (see "The Sources of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" *Modern Language Review*, 28 [1933], 156–65).

Laura's inability to locate any moral meaning in all of this natural variety results in the complete loss of her ability to make morally proper decisions, as we learn from yet another list that Rossetti has assembled for us:

Laura stretched her gleaming neck  
Like a rush-imbedded swan,  
Like a lily from the beck,  
Like a moonlit poplar branch,  
Like a vessel at the launch  
When its last restraint is gone.

(ll. 81–86)

In this list of images Laura is compared with and thereby closely associated with both the animal and vegetable natural worlds; she is finally a vessel, then, something associated with humanity, but only insofar as she has lost all restraint. She has been entirely assimilated into a nature that is devoid of moral meaning and that exists outside the possibility of exercising judgment and restraint to mitigate the desire for self-indulgence. The first three images, picturesque and attractive though they are, provide an interpretation of Laura that, for Rossetti, would have been terrifying.

Later in the poem, when we come upon a similar list of images associated with Lizzie's stand against the goblins, we are first reminded of Laura's fall. In fact, the first simile used to describe Lizzie is "like a lily in a flood" (l. 409), intentionally bringing to mind the lily with which Laura was compared during her encounter with the goblins. The imagery used for Lizzie is subtly, but decidedly, of a different sort. The narrative voice says:

White and golden Lizzie stood,  
Like a lily in a flood,—  
Like a rock of blue-veined stone  
Lashed by tides obstreperously,—  
Like a beacon left alone  
In a hoary roaring sea,  
Sending up a golden fire,—  
Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree  
White with blossoms honey-sweet  
Sore beset by wasp and bee,—

Like a royal virgin town  
 Topped with gilded dome and spire  
 Close beleaguered by a fleet  
 Mad to tug her standard down.

(ll. 408–21)

Unlike Laura, Lizzie is part of both the beauty and variety of the natural world—as reflected by her comparison to a lily and a blossom-laden orange tree—and the world of human, Christian understanding. The color blue and her comparison to a virgin certainly indicate a reference to the Virgin Mary, and, despite the beauty of the natural world, Lizzie realizes her precarious position “sore beset by wasp and bee” and under assault by “a hoary roaring sea.” Indeed, her depiction as a beacon “sending up a golden fire” is accurate, for she is a moral example, shedding a Christian light through the chaos of nature so that others—especially Laura—may find the moral grounding and direction they require.

Without Lizzie to guide her, however, Laura during her encounter with the goblins remains morally ungrounded, cast adrift without a guiding principle for conduct. Laura is oblivious to the threat the goblins pose, even though the narrative voice depicts them in steadily more ominous terms, “leering at” (l. 93) and “signalling” (l. 95) each other. As if they are acting on cue, the various activities of the goblins begin afresh, and they all speak to Laura to encourage her to eat:

The whisk-tailed merchant bade her taste  
 In tones as smooth as honey,  
 The cat-faced purr'd,  
 The rat-paced spoke a word  
 Of welcome, and the snail-paced even was heard;  
 One parrot-voiced and jolly  
 Cried “Pretty Goblin” still for “Pretty Polly;”—  
 One whistled like a bird.

(ll. 107–14)

The goblins no longer sound like cooing doves, but Laura is too far adrift at this point to realize her danger and speaks “in haste” (l. 115) to seal her moral collapse by purchasing the goblin fruits with “a precious golden lock” (l. 126; see fig. 2).



FIG. 2.

The result of Laura's self-immersion in the bounteous variety offered by the goblin men is her engagement in a frenzied, gluttonous feast during which she is unable even to differentiate which fruits she is eating. Perhaps more important is the fact that Laura does not *care* to distinguish between the different fruits, indicating her complete abandonment of even the pretense of moral awareness. Not until she returns home and is subjected to Lizzie's "wise upbraidings" (l. 142) does Laura try to reconstruct exactly what her experience with the goblins has consisted of. Laura's description of her adventure, as she tells us of it in her own voice, sounds frighteningly like the opening speech of the goblins themselves:

"I'll bring you plums tomorrow  
 Fresh on their mother twigs,  
 Cherries worth getting;  
 You cannot think what figs  
 My teeth have met in,  
 What melons icy-cold  
 Piled on a dish of gold  
 Too huge for me to hold,  
 What peaches with a velvet nap,  
 Pellucid grapes without one seed."

(ll. 170–79)

Like the goblins, Laura is intoxicated by the sheer excess of her indulgence in the variety of the fruits. No single kind of fruit appealed to her more than any other, and she has no particular fruit in mind for her return visit—she desires them all again. Even free from direct contact with the goblins, Laura is consumed by the remembrance of her experience in all its forms.

The experience of eating the goblin fruit and the results of that experience mark the poem's most significant departure from the Genesis story, for Laura does not immediately suffer any consequences for her transgression. Unlike Adam and Eve, Laura is not overburdened with either a feeling of guilt, a fear of "the potentially mortal consequences of disobedience," or a knowledge that she has done evil (Sturrock, p. 99).<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, she is in a state of exhilaration when she reaches home, and even that night in bed the sisters present what D.M.R. Bentley calls "a stability that opposes itself to the anarchic . . . nature of the goblins" (p. 71). At least for this one night the sisters regain and retain the harmony that could have shielded Laura had they maintained it at the start of the poem. According to the narrative voice:

<sup>17</sup> Sturrock argues that "Goblin Market" is "inescapably a Genesis story: it involves arbitrary taboo, forbidden fruit, and the potentially mortal consequences of disobedience," but in her argument she does not explicitly connect Laura's suffering to her disobedience, *per se*. It seems to me that Laura's suffering is more accurately a result of her desire to repeat her experience than of her original transgression. The goblin fruit is not intrinsically harmful, nor is an omnipotent arbiter of the "taboo" involved in meting out punishment, as in the Genesis story. Sturrock's description of the poem as "inescapably a Genesis story," then, remains unconvincing.

Golden head by golden head,  
 Like two pigeons in one nest  
 Folded in each other's wings,  
 They lay down in their curtained bed:  
 Like two blossoms on one stem,  
 Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow,  
 Like two wands of ivory  
 Tipped with gold for awful ki' gs.

. . . . .  
 Cheek to cheek and breast to breast  
 Locked together in one nest.

(ll. 184–91, 197–98)

This picture of serenity differs from the lists describing the goblins and from the lists of images describing the sisters individually, for here neither solitariness nor true variety exists. While snowflakes and blossoms are not identical natural phenomena, their freshness and purity suggest that these sisters remain even now unmarred by ugliness or defect. The absence of variety, at least as it is presented here, is the happiest and least threatening of all possible states and exists even after Laura's physical consumption of the goblin fruit.

If Laura's subsequent decline is not linked to the actual eating of the fruit, as in the Genesis story, to what can we attribute it? It is not surprising that the key providing an answer for this question lies in another of Rossetti's lists. Although Laura and Lizzie pass a peaceful and harmonious night, the following day brings the advent of another loss of harmony between the sisters.

Laura rose with Lizzie:  
 Fetched in honey, milked the cows,  
 Aired and set to rights 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:  
 Lizzie with an open heart,  
 Laura in an absent dream,  
 One content, one sick in part.

(ll. 202–12)



The list here, unlike the lists of goblin fruits, suggests a tedium of routine inherent in domestic pastoral life—a life, incidentally, that seems to have been satisfying enough for Laura before but now is a wearisome burden for her. The dizzying effect of her self-indulgence in the variety of nature has been so pleasurable that Laura now finds a return to her previous routines impossibly constraining.

Such a dilemma is particularly interesting in light of what we know of Rossetti's own life. Her various biographers have indicated that Rossetti led a quiet, retiring life, devoting much of her time as a young woman to caring for her invalid father and later working closely with the nuns at Highgate Hall. According to Lionel Stevenson, "by the time [Rossetti] was eighteen she had given up going to the theater, in spite of her love of drama and music, because she believed that actors and other stage folk were prone to too much self-indulgence" (p. 80). And according to Katherine Mayberry, "from 1854 until 1866 [the period during which "Goblin Market" was written], Christina Rossetti led a comparatively quiet life, dividing her time between her three central interests: her art, her religion, and her family" (p. 8). The theme of distaste for a life of excitement and society runs through much of her poetry, most noticeably in "Repining," in which she depicts a girl who "begs to return to her quiet isolation" (Stevenson, p. 84). We should not be surprised, then, to see Rossetti struggling with the same sort of conflict—between a life of self-indulgent excitement and one of ascetic simplicity—within the verse of "Goblin Market." From what we know of Rossetti's love of nature, perhaps her greatest temptation to leave her quiet life was the wonder of the natural world around her. We see this same inner tension in Laura, after her experience with the goblins.

The mounting tension in Laura and her increasing spiritual desolation as she pines away are reflected by a corresponding change in her appearance. Her hair, which was golden less than one hundred lines before, "when the noon waxed bright / . . . grew thin and gray" (ll. 276–77). Her behavior changes also, for she is no longer able to keep herself in bed with Lizzie during the night. The peaceful and harmonious scene of the two of them asleep side by side is interrupted, for after Lizzie falls asleep Laura rises and spends the night "in a passionate yearn-

ing" (l. 266), weeping and gnashing her teeth "for baulked desire" (l. 267) of a repeat of her previous exhilarating experience. Finally, we are told that Laura does not even attempt to participate any longer in the simple chores of her domestic country life.

In order to redeem her rapidly failing sister, Lizzie must find a way to reestablish that harmony and unity so splintered by Laura's goblin experience:

Tender Lizzie could not bear  
To watch her sister's cankerous care  
Yet not to share.

(ll. 299–301)

The only course of action that Lizzie can conceive of taking that will provide both her and her sister with a commonality of experience is to encounter the fruit-merchant men herself, and to do so she must overcome her own fears "and for the first time in her life / Beg[i]n to listen and look" (ll. 327–28). But Lizzie's visit to the haunted glen is fundamentally different from her sister's because of their different motivations in dealing with the goblins. Whereas Laura's determination to experience the goblin fruits was based first on her fascination with their infinite variety and second on her own inability to refrain from self-indulgence, Lizzie's visit to the goblins is driven by Christian values. First, and most important, Lizzie is moved to take this course of action by a pure, unconditional love for her degenerating sister. Moreover, Lizzie's aim is not simply to experience nature but to meet it and wrest from it the secret of her sister's salvation—and, by association, her own. Thus Laura's failure in Tractarian terms to scrutinize nature for signs of a greater purpose than mere self-indulgence is redeemed by Lizzie's fundamentally Tractarian approach to the problem of redemption and salvation. In approaching the overwhelming natural world that seduced her sister, Lizzie begins on much firmer moral ground.

The difference between Lizzie's experience and Laura's becomes apparent as the scene of Lizzie's encounter unfolds. For thirty-four lines (ll. 329–62) the bewildering description of

the goblins goes on—the longest and most dizzying such catalog in the poem. Everything about them is described in rapid succession and with meticulous differentiation: means of locomotion, demeanors, features, sounds, activities, and finally their fruits. The cumulative images overwhelm the imaginative eye as the poetic language of the catalog rises to a cacophonous crescendo. Yet in spite of this most furious of the poem's assaults upon the senses, Lizzie remains morally upright and physically composed, never indicating that she is for a moment tempted to experience nature for a reason other than her professed purpose. When Lizzie speaks of her desire to buy goblin fruits she does not do so hastily, as Laura has done; rather, Lizzie is "mindful of Jeanie" (l. 364) in her reserved approach to the array of fruits.

Further, the goblins seem much more threatening to Lizzie's perceptions than they seemed to Laura's. None of the goblins speak in honey-sweet tones or purr as they approach; instead, they make harsher, less melodic sounds as they come,

Puffing and blowing,  
Chuckling, clapping, crowing,  
Clucking and gobbling.

(ll. 333–35)

Rossetti's use of harsher sounds in this passage, compared with those describing the goblins' seduction of Laura, emphasizes the goblins' more grating approach to Lizzie. The goblins have become representative of the uglier, less seductive side of the natural world, though they are still the same goblins that accosted Laura. But because of her morally discerning eyes and ears, Lizzie interprets the goblins not as benevolently cooing like doves but as "chattering like magpies" (l. 345)—birds with decidedly less attractive reputations and lacking Christian resonance.

As Lizzie's resistance to the temptations of the goblins mounts, their frenzied and disharmonious activities intensify. The variety of the goblins and their actions has become, at this point of the poem, a threatening and dangerous repulsion rather than an exciting attraction. The lists in these lines detail a multitude of malevolent and violent activities rendering this

portion of the poem, at least superficially, as a symbolic, if not a literal, rape of Lizzie at the goblins' hands. Despite the violence and struggle of the scene, though, the rape is a failed one. Lizzie has encountered the ambiguous variety of the goblins and their fruits, but through her moral stability she has come to a realization that Laura failed to reach. Lizzie has discovered that the seductive beauty of nature's variety is neither good nor evil in itself but instead has the ability to produce either good or evil results, depending upon the viewer's response. The goblin experience and her initial taste of the fruits produced for Laura an evil result, primarily because her approach to that experience was self-indulgent and, if not immoral, at least amoral. But when the same experience is encountered with a discerning moral eye and a pure heart, as Lizzie has approached it, the result can be spiritual rejuvenation and moral salvation.

Many critics have pointed to Lizzie's return to Laura as a barely veiled moment of sexuality and homoeroticism, primarily because of Lizzie's words to Laura:

“Did you miss me?  
Come and kiss me.  
Never mind my bruises,  
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
Eat me, drink me, love me;  
Laura, make much of me.”

(ll. 465-72)

While the language of this passage is both erotic and suggestive, Rossetti's intense sacramentalism and devout Christianity render rather hollow any strictly sexual or homoerotic interpretation. As we have seen, much of the poem is concerned with the temptation offered by the variety of the natural world, a temptation to which Laura succumbed earlier. The more likely interpretation of this scene is a Christian one in which Lizzie becomes a representative of Christ, offering communion and Christian salvation. This salvation also renders “Goblin Market” as an unlikely (although much improved from a Christian perspective) variation of the Genesis story, for only in the New Testament do we finally reach the possibility of Christian salva-

tion. Lizzie has finally and ultimately turned the variety of the goblin fruits into a physical mode of salvation for her ailing sister, for Lizzie is morally astute enough to understand what can be taken away from nature to provide meaning for her sister's experiences.

After tasting the juices of the goblin fruits again, in the form of communion from her sister, Laura undergoes a spiritual transformation that is described in imagery highly suggestive of a rending of the soul, followed by a resurrection from a state indistinguishable from death. Once again, as occurred with her decline into spiritual desolation, Laura's recovery is dramatized by a corresponding change in physical appearance and behavior. After she regains consciousness, we are told:

Laura awoke as from a dream,  
 Laughed in the innocent old way,  
 Hugged Lizzie but not twice or thrice;  
 Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of grey,  
 Her breath was sweet as May  
 And light danced in her eyes.

(ll. 537-42)

For Rossetti a return to spiritual wholeness and a state of Christian grace seems necessarily to require a harmony and unity among the sisters. Throughout "Goblin Market," in fact, such a state of harmony and unity has always provided the surest means of happiness and the starkest contrast to the ambiguity and variety of the mysterious goblin men who threaten to upset both domestic tranquility and the moral judgment that provides for Christian salvation.

In this context the concluding lines of Rossetti's poem seem to offer a more than satisfactory resolution to the experiences of Laura and Lizzie:

"For there is no friend like a sister  
 In calm or stormy weather;  
 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."

(ll. 562-67)

By arriving at this conclusion herself in her own storytelling, Laura makes clear that she has learned the lesson exemplified by Lizzie. But more significant, the message contained in Laura's final speech is not merely an affirmation of biological sisterhood; rather, having a sister can be the means of achieving a human harmony that allows one to stand, fortified rather than forlorn, upright amid the bewildering array of human experience from which one may be unable, alone, to make moral sense. In "Goblin Market" the bewilderment comes specifically from nature, and it is in unearthing the secrets of Christian salvation in nature that a sister can light the way as a spiritual beacon.<sup>18</sup> Understanding this crucial conflict that lies at the center of "Goblin Market" requires a reconsideration of Rossetti's use of the list to present in quite real and literal terms the fear she felt of the seductive and multifarious natural world.

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<sup>18</sup> Bentley, too, argues that the culmination of the poem lies in the "right-thinking Laura who draws upon her own past experiences, as well as Lizzie's, to emphasize the importance of community and mutuality" (p. 79).