

# Victorian Womanhood: Economic and Moral Value in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'

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As a woman writer in the Victorian era, Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was intimately familiar with the economic market as a male-led industry. Women were expected to exist mainly in the domestic sphere, at home and with the children. Men were allowed in the public sphere of business, commerce, and politics. Capitalism was set up to coexist with the social etiquette of the times which dictated not only how the economic market operated but how working relationships between men, women, buyers and sellers functioned. Interpersonal relationships were established to follow the same rules of social acceptability. For women writers like Rossetti, engaging with the market as an author meant stepping into a traditionally masculine zone and trying to play by their rules. Rossetti used the success of *Grimms' Fairytales* (1812) and the new wave of English fairy tales it inspired to write 'Goblin Market' (1862) as an exploration and critique of the literary marketplace that she and other Victorian women were trying to enter.<sup>1</sup> Throughout, 'Goblin Market', value is first economic in the sense of what items have value and to whom, as well as who sets the value. This value is based on power and accepted social structures. The consumer also has their own form of power which the characters in the poem are seen to exercise or fail to do so. The value is also moralistic, however, and engages with the morality of women entering a masculine space and how they interact within it. This value is harder to define the boundaries of, however, due to its nature being based more on unspoken social etiquette and expectations. The female body is commodified, robbing the female subject of their moral value. This commodification ultimately acts as a sin against their moral value for which the cost is death. However, the religious imagery in 'Goblin Market' suggests that moral value can be restored through Christian behaviours such as sacrifice and sisterhood. In this paper, I will explore these different forms of value and the consequences of them through a close reading of 'Goblin Market'. I will offer perspectives from previous critics' readings of the poem and expand on how that potentially affects the work's portrayal of value.

The economic basis of the goblins' market is apparent from the very start of the piece:

Morning and evening  
Maids heard the goblins cry:  
'Come buy our orchard fruits,

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<sup>1</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'Goblin Market', *Poetry Foundation* (2021) <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44996/goblin-market>> Accessed 13.05.2021. All further references are to this edition.

Come buy, come buy'.  
(ll. 1-4)

This sets up the premise of the market for the entire poem - the goblins are constantly offering goods to young women for a cost as yet undisclosed. A capitalist market requires consumer figures, and in this instance, the 'maids' are targeted as such. The appeal of the market to the young women is in part the mysticism of a space that they are not familiar with, and which is almost unseemly for them to be involved. This mysticism is expressed by the unnatural growth of the fruits:

crab-apples, dewberries,  
Pine-apples, blackberries,  
Apricots, strawberries;-  
All ripe together  
In summer weather.  
(ll. 12-16)

All of the fruit is perfectly ripe at the same time and never goes out of season. This timelessness goes against nature and feeds into the mysticism that ultimately attracts young women. This echoes the capitalist market of the real world that female writers like Rossetti often struggled to enter as a result of cultural patriarchy. Elizabeth Campbell's comment that 'the values and hidden assumptions of capitalism, at least in Victorian England, include manifest beliefs about the role of women' supports this.<sup>2</sup> These manifest beliefs are that of the domestic sphere in which women were expected to remain, resulting in their marginalisation with regard to capital markets and economies. The market was a place of socially accepted male-dominance and just as the maids in Rossetti's 'Market' are lured in by their curiosity, so were women writers intent on discovering their place in the Victorian market.

It is the calling of the goblin men which awakens curiosity in Laura, one of the two sisters that are centered throughout the poem. It is not the goblins themselves that catch her attention but what they are offering both through their shouting and from her glimpses of them:

One hauls a basket  
One bears a plate  
One lugs a golden dish  
Of many pounds weight  
How fair the vines must grow  
Whose grapes are so luscious.  
(ll. 56-61)

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Campbell, "Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Studies*, 33, (1990), pp. 393-410, (p. 394).

The fruits have value to Laura because they markedly differ from those that exist outside of the market that Laura is more familiar with and are thus exoticised. The Victorian market is in part interesting to Rossetti as a female writer because of - not despite - the patriarchal nature of it. However, only the goblins have access to these rare and ever-ripe fruits and if Laura wants to partake of them, she must go there and buy them. This is analogous to Victorian female writers such as Rossetti having to venture into the masculine sphere of publishing in order to partake of the fruits of its industry.

Campbell points out that 'only the women, the "maids", are endowed with humanity' and that the male figures are more bestial merchants.<sup>3</sup> The nature of the mercantile goblins are at odds with the humanity of the women, and this sets up a dangerous situation for the women. Lizzie, Laura's sister and the other main protagonist, warns that the goblins' offers can cause harm to the women when she tells Laura 'you should not peep at goblin men' (l. 49). Lizzie and Laura both know that interacting with the goblin merchants should be avoided. However, Campbell argues that 'at this point in the poem...temptation is everything, and the goblin fruits represent something that the women want, even if they know it is something they cannot have: a place where the fruits are produced, a place in, and a piece of, the economic action'.<sup>4</sup> The market and its masculine-presenting creatures may be enticing to the maids but the true cost of the fruits are not advertised by the beguiling calls. In the same way, the Victorian market may entice women writers, but just as the fruits have an unseen cost, so does the entrance into the public and mercantile sphere for the women who step into it.

When Laura acquiesces to her curiosity and goes to the goblin market, she tells the goblin men that she has no money with which to buy their wares. The goblin men, however, tell her 'You have much gold upon your head' (l. 123) leading Laura to pay with a lock of her hair as well as a teardrop. This instance shifts the reader's perception of what the goblins see as having value. The original assumption is that coin is the accepted payment for the wares but, when Laura says she does not have any, rather than send her away without the fruit the creatures in power at the market tell her that she still has something of worth to them. Laura's body and its reproductive value become the payment. While she gives hair and tears as payment, there is an echo of earlier fairy tales that involve Rumpelstiltskin or a witch demanding a woman's first-born child as payment. Economic value is being placed on Laura's femininity and her ability to reproduce.

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell. p. 399.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

This is especially visible in the sterilisation Laura experiences after eating the fruit and which Lizzie explains happened to a woman they knew, called Jeanie. Jeanie 'pined and pined away' (l. 154) and eventually died without the chance to be a bride and, therefore, a mother. By leaving the maidens pining and ultimately dying a premature death, the fruits of the market have stolen their ability to grow older, marry, and give birth; they are figuratively sterilised by partaking in the market's traditionally male-led commerce. As men were traditionally in charge of the public spheres, the value of different items and experiences were determined by them. Campbell explains that 'because the Victorians perceived the marketplace as directing the course of history, the middle-class man's role in production gave shape to the social configuration of the era'.<sup>5</sup> Just as the middle-class men Campbell speaks of directed the Victorian market, so the goblin men shape their market by setting the value of the fruit and what it would cost for Laura to participate in their marketplace trades.

The value set in the goblin market is not only economic, but moralistic. As the market is dominated by goblin men and public industry was considered the domain of men, there is moral concern for women who step outside of the private sphere and into the public ones. The concept of sterilisation through the consumption of the fruits suggests that to be in the masculine market is to lose one's womanly values. 'In other words' notes Elizabeth Campbell, 'the poem suggests that women's involvement with the market denies them their right to motherhood, reproductivity, and nature's cyclicity'.<sup>6</sup> She also argues that this is down to the fruit growing all at once in the goblin's market as opposed to following natural seasons of growing. By partaking of the unnatural fruit, Laura takes on some of that unnatural quality. By giving into the temptation to leave the woman's domain, Laura is put in a position where to participate in the economy she must choose to forfeit her hair – a cultural sign of her femininity.

On the other hand, it is Lizzie who attempts to keep close to the socially-accepted female domain and keep her moralistic value. Lizzie knows she must interact with the market to save her sister but takes a coin to pay 'And for the first time in her life / Began to listen and look' (ll. 327-328). Unlike Laura, who lets her curiosity led her to the goblins, Lizzie is the maid who is appropriately obedient to the rules of both the private feminine sphere and how she is to interact with the public sphere. Although she risks the market to save Laura, she refuses to negotiate with the goblins and therefore keeps her feminine value. She offers the goblin men her penny, but they refuse to accept it as payment, instead wanting her to eat their fruit like Laura. Campbell observes that this is because 'In the world of the poem, as in the capitalist Victorian world outside it, the merchants have the power to make the rules and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell. p. 406.

exact the price'.<sup>7</sup> The value of the penny and the fruit is dependent on the ones in power; in Rossetti's market the goblins have power and in the real-world Victorian market men are in power. Lizzie also sets herself apart from her sister by retaining the only power she has as a female buyer at the market: the power to refuse to buy. Lizzie has set the coin as the limit of what she is willing to pay in return for the fruit and when they demand a higher price she does not budge or adjust her limit. Thus, it gives her consumer agency. However, the goblins are enraged that she will not accept the price they have set and, just as Victorian society tended to belittle women who stepped into the male-dominated public spheres, the maidens who go into the goblin market are also subject to punishment.

The punishment for the maids depends on their perceived crime. Laura traded her feminine value for the privilege of experiencing the masculine market and has lost her right to reproduce for partaking of male fruits. Jill Rappoport explains the mistake Laura made by saying that 'penniless Laura buys fruit with a lock of her hair, representing the perils of female consumerism by becoming the very object consumed'.<sup>8</sup> Laura's humanity and femininity became the price she pays. Lizzie, because she refuses to pay the price they want, is punished verbally and physically by the goblin men. They insult her by calling her 'cross-grain'd, uncivil' and 'their looks were evil' (ll. 395,397). They also physically 'bullied and besought her, / Scratch'd her, pinch'd her black as ink' (ll. 426-427). A woman's moral value is in her body; Laura gives her moral value by offering her hair and thus her femininity as payment, while Lizzie's body is abused because she does not offer it. Despite the bruises Lizzie is left with, her moral value is still intact because she does not offer it as payment. Lizzie is also given back her penny because they refuse it. An agreement of exchange cannot be met because Lizzie does not become the goblin's payment or product.

It is in Lizzie's visit to the market to save Laura that the idea of redemption of moral value begins to unfold. Lizzie's silver penny is the first key idea of religious redemption. Victor Roman Mendoza suggests that it can be linked to Jesus Christ's parable of a lost coin that is found and which could mean that 'what Lizzie arms herself with, then, may in fact be the knowledge of and, more importantly, the faith in the redemption that the parable exemplifies and therefore supplies'.<sup>9</sup> However, Mendoza goes on to say that it could also represent money given to the poor on Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter and that 'if read as Maundy money, then, Lizzie's penny offers her a form of resistance based not so much upon faith in the promise of redemption...but rather upon faith in a more secular

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 405.

<sup>8</sup> Jill Rappoport. "The Price of Redemption in 'Goblin Market'", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 50. (2010), pp. 853-875, (p. 853).

<sup>9</sup> Victor Roman Mendoza, "'Come Buy': The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", *ELH*, 73, (2006), pp. 913-947, (p. 929).

symbolic authority'.<sup>10</sup> Both of Mendoza's arguments trace back to religious origins although the end result in the latter is a secular faith. Similarly, Rappoport argues that the importance of the silver penny can be located in the history of moneyed and penniless sisters within Anglican sisterhoods.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, she notes: 'it is important that Lizzie has this penny. Laura's pennilessness meant powerlessness. Lizzie's coin insures her against market forces...allowing her to take on the role of rescuer rather than victim'.<sup>12</sup> The money of the middle- and upper-class women in Anglican sisterhoods allowed them the power to stand as a non-profit charity against the more predatory male-dominated market and Lizzie's money provides her with the opportunity to save her sister from the mercantile goblins.

Religious imagery is further generated as Lizzie's willingness to withstand the goblin men's abuse of her in the market is analogous to the more severe abuse Christ was subjected to when crucified. The beastly goblins appear almost demonic as they are shown as:

Lashing their tails  
They trod and hustled her,  
Elbow'd and jostled her,  
Claw'd with their nails,  
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,  
Tore her gown and soil'd her stocking,  
Twitch'd her hair out by the roots,  
Stamp'd upon her tender feet,  
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits  
Against her mouth to make her eat.  
(II. 398-407)

Lizzie is attacked by the goblin men for standing against their demands that she bend to their economic process. She refuses to 'open lip from lip' so that she will not eat the fruit (I. 431). Where Laura is reminiscent of Eve from the Bible who eats the forbidden fruit, Lizzie remains steadfast to save her sister. Indeed, her refusal to partake of their sterilising objectification provides her with the means to save her sister:

juice that syrapp'd all her face,  
And lodg'd in dimples of her chin,  
And streaked her neck which quaked like curd  
(II. 434-436)

When Lizzie returns to Laura, she is able to act as a Christ figure because of the fruit that is crushed on her and tells Laura to 'eat me, drink me, love me' (I. 471). This is an echo of the Christian communion, wherein believers drink wine and eat bread - symbolising Jesus' blood

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 930.

<sup>11</sup> Rappoport, p. 860.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 861.

and body. As Christians believe they are saved by accepting Jesus' sacrifice and partake in communion, so Laura is saved by accepting what Lizzie has done for her and eats the fruit juice and pulp that the goblins smear on her. For Laura, the cost of losing her moral value is to pine and die, but Lizzie's act of selflessness and the fruit she brings to Laura redeem her. This redemption of her moral and feminine value allows Laura to return to the private sphere of womanhood as years later both Lizzie and Laura are 'wives / With children of their own' (ll. 544-545). Rappoport notes that this religious aspect of the poem also relates to nineteenth-century sisterhood as 'both Christina Rossetti and the sister to whom she dedicated the manuscript of 'Goblin Market' were active in the communal lives and social services of Anglican sisterhoods' and that her sister Maria 'joined the Sisterhood of All Saints at Margaret Street'.<sup>13</sup> The nature of the economic and religious organisation is for the 'sisters' to act in morally upright manners while serving their communities.

Lizzie enters the goblin's market without taking part in their business and is therefore able to retreat out of it in order to redeem her sister. Albert D. Pionke asserts that 'Lizzie's active resistance to the goblins during her own second encounter with them has altered the meaning of Laura's second fall by radically shifting the terms of exchange - she has effectively reimagined the market, not as an abstracted cash nexus, nor as a system of barter, but as a gifteconomy'.<sup>14</sup> This alteration to the market from a seller/buyer trade exchange into what Pionke calls a 'gifteconomy' is key to how Lizzie is able to save Laura. It is the redeeming fruit pulp and juices gotten through physical assault and shared freely between the sisters that allows Laura's second taste to revitalise her rather than further destroy her. The 'active resistance' Pionke says Lizzie uses is her resistance to the temptation of the fruit. As relevant as Pionke's religious reading of the text is, what he does not do is consider what this means for the economical market that Rossetti was experiencing at the time of her writing 'Goblin Market'. Women writers, like Rossetti, who choose to enter the Victorian market risk losing their moral value by stepping into the public spheres as men set the value of the 'fruit' of the industry. Trying to act as the men running the economy puts them at risk of losing their feminine value and becoming considered unmarriageable which can be said to lead to sterility through spinsterhood. Just as the Bible states that 'the wages of sin is death', so death is the cost of losing feminine moral value to the goblin market.<sup>15</sup> This is clear in Laura's decline and near death when:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 855.

<sup>14</sup> Albert D. Pionke, "The Spiritual Economy of 'Goblin Market'" *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 52, (2012), pp. 897-915, (p. 903).

<sup>15</sup> "Romans 6:23 (King James Version)" in *Bible Gateway* [online version], (2021), <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%206:23&version=KJV>> Accessed 21.05.21.

Her hair grew thin and grey;  
She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn  
To swift decay and burn  
Her fire away.  
(ll. 277-280)

However, through religious sisterhood and acts of selfless sacrifice, it is possible to keep and even regain moral value by returning to a woman's domain, the private sphere, or to interact in ways that do not offer the female body as payment for goods and services such as the goblin's fruit in the poem. Lizzie keeps her bodily value by following Christ's example and maintaining her moral and feminine behaviour. This allows Lizzie to return her sister's moral value through the offering of her sacrifice and her sister's acceptance of it just as those who would be redeemed by Christ must accept His sacrifice for them.

Overall, value in Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' is a complicated system because value in the poem functions on different, but interconnected, levels. It is economic in the way that value is set by the goblins and the representation of a masculine domain that women must 'buy into' if they wish to be included. This market system is problematic as it falsely invites women but also sets prices that can strip women of their feminine value. Lizzie was able to retain her value by taking a coin with her for payment and refusing to renegotiate the price of the fruit beyond her budget. The coin shielded her from Laura's fate by offering consumer agency, as the refusal to buy is one power of the consumer that the merchant cannot force. However, it is also moralistic because women like Laura are seen to lose their moral value by leaving a woman's place which was thought to be at home. Laura sold her hair and tears, offering her body to enter a masculine domain and losing her ability to reproduce as her hair represented her fertility. This idea of moralistic value is shown as redeemable through religious adherence. Through Lizzie's Christ-like behaviour of restraint and sacrifice, Laura was able to regain her value through the acceptance of forgiveness. That it was sacrifice and 'eating' of her sister that redeemed her value, is an expression of religious imagery that links the ideas of male economy and female morality. Sisterhood brought Laura back into the fold of moral value and returned her feminine fertility as a sign of life returned from the wages of sin. Rossetti uses the template of a fairy tale and the surging Victorian popularity of the form to provide a critique of the capitalist market and the perceived place of women in public and private domains. Laura and Lizzie represent the different ways of interacting with a male-dominated market and how economic and moral value functioned in the Victorian period.



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