

Women's Hidden Freedom in "Goblin Market"

Despite nineteenth-century British literature's reflection of the cultural resurgence of traditional values, the Victorian period was the first to offer a variety of female-authored works to an increasingly literate public, providing women the opportunity to voice for themselves what it meant to be a woman instead of always having men decide the answer. Writing during this era, Italian-English poet Christina Rossetti appears to espouse Victorian values and ideas about domestic life and duty, yet her poem "Goblin Market" quietly rebels against ideas about women's supposed lack of power and pleasure. There, Rossetti describes two young sisters, Laura and Lizzie, who must daily resist the calls of goblins selling impossibly appetizing fruit. Faced with that temptation, Laura and Lizzie show two possible responses of young maidens to the manipulative and dangerous male goblins. While Laura demonstrates how curiosity can prove ruinous as she succumbs to their appeals, Lizzie maintains her virtuous behavior throughout the poem and eventually confronts the male world of the goblin market in order to save her sister. Exemplifying the ideal woman, Lizzie shows her sister that outside their set duties in external social interactions, women can create a rich internal life amongst themselves with the possibility to heal, save, and experience pleasure. Rossetti's "Goblin Market" portrays women as existing within fixed and limiting external realities yet possessing the freedom and potential for happiness in their internal, gender-segregated lives.

Rossetti portrays her female characters as existing in response to men, helpless to change the ways of their corrupt male counterparts yet still responsible for responding in the proper manner. Internalizing the impropriety of needless interactions with the goblins, Lizzie admonishes Laura several times for her curiosity towards the goblin market and adamantly refuses to follow in her friend's footsteps. Only when "Laura dwindling / Seemed knocking at

Death's door" does Lizzie "for the first time in her life / [begin] to listen and look" (Rossetti 320-21, 327-28). Taking the choice into heavy consideration, Lizzie engages with the goblins out of selflessness instead of indulgence, and this distinction helps her survive the goblins' violent assault. Describing the goblins' attempt to force Lizzie to consume their fruit, Rossetti employs starkly contrasting language to highlight Lizzie's virtue pitted against the goblins' immorality. Compared with the goblins' disgusting, crude ways, Lizzie embodies "White and golden" purity as she resists the goblins' advances, acting "Like a royal virgin town... Close beleaguered by a fleet / Mad to tug her standard down" (408, 418, 420-421). Likening the young woman's plight to a city under siege, Rossetti's imagery suggests an innocence and helplessness against the violent onslaught of the goblins.

Nonetheless, throughout the assault, Lizzie retains her honor. While the poem fails to put a moral imperative on the goblins to change their violent ways, Rossetti does commend Lizzie for her unyielding opposition to the goblins' advances. Once "the evil people / [become] Worn out by her resistance" and let her go, throwing her penny back at her, Lizzie runs home and takes a certain pleasure in the penny in her purse, "Its bounce... music to her ear" because of the virtuous behavior it represents (437-438, 454). Despite her powerlessness against the goblins, Lizzie prides herself on her resolve and her success in attaining the healing fruit juices for Laura. From this perspective, women's role is to respond to men's actions in the most upright, proper way possible.

Throughout the poem, Rossetti pushes for women to remain in appropriate spheres dictated by Victorian society, illuminating the dangers and consequences of not adhering to these social rules. Though Lizzie establishes early in the poem that the goblin market is a threat to maidens and sees firsthand the destruction their fruit inflicts on Laura, her subsequent traumatic

encounter with the goblin men acts as a harsh reality-check for women in this time, reinforcing the societal norms that separate women and men for their safety. Despite the originally friendly, enticing language of the goblins, once Lizzie refuses to feast with them, “Their tones wax[] loud, / Their looks [are] evil” (396-97). The goblins transform into animalistic monsters at the first hint of resistance, attempting to beat Lizzie into submission and force her to consume their fruit.

Rossetti’s language in this section is particularly vivid, comparing the assault on Lizzie to a pure, helpless object beset and overwhelmed by violent attack such as a “lily in a flood” or “a fruit-crowned orange tree / White with blossoms honey-sweet / Sore beset by wasp and bee” (409, 415-417). These images contrast Lizzie’s purity and helplessness with the unprovoked and extreme violence of the goblins and further reinforce the idea that certain spaces are inappropriate for women. The goblin’s sexual and economic territory, though aesthetically alluring, is established as off-limits to the women because of the real danger it poses.

Nevertheless, in contrast to these fixed external expectations, the women in “Goblin Market” have a remarkable amount of freedom and power in their personal lives, and the positive spaces they create are capable of saving and healing each other. Ultimately, against the sickness Laura experiences from the goblins, Lizzie’s sacrifice is the only way to save her. When Lizzie returns from her encounter with the goblins, Lizzie commands Laura to “make much of [her]” gifts because “for [her] sake [she has] braved the glen” and the goblin’s attacks (472, 473-74). After consuming the juices off of Lizzie’s face and being cared for throughout the night, Laura “[awakens] as from a dream, / Laugh[s] in the innocent old way” with new vitality (537-38). Rossetti’s language invokes imagery of rebirth, and interestingly, Laura seems to have regained her girlish innocence she had lost from eating the goblins’ fruit. On Lizzie’s side, despite the horrific trauma she has just experienced, she retains the same liveliness which she has always

possessed and which Laura has just recovered. Laura initially fears the worst for her sister, that she has been “Undone in [Laura’s] undoing / And ruined in [her] ruin” (482-83). However, while the goblins are forcing their fruit on her, Lizzie “laugh[s] in heart to feel the drip / Of juice that syruped all her face,” and she runs home afterward not “pricked by fear,” her “kind heart” and “inward laughter” sustaining her on the journey (433-34, 460, 461, 463). Throughout and after the assault, Lizzie only expresses joy that she has a chance to save Laura— as if in saving her sister, her pain goes away as well. The fruit juices are safe to be consumed between the two women, and in their protected and love-filled home, the women can save and heal each other.

This “sisterly” realm, safe and removed from the dangers of male tempters, offers the women in “Goblin Market” the additional freedom to experience new levels of pleasure and joy. Though the goblin’s sensual fruit is established as dangerous and forbidden in the context of the male-dominated market, those same juices have a positive connotation when Laura consumes them directly from Lizzie’s skin. Amidst erotic descriptions of Laura “[clinging] about her sister” and “[kissing] her with a hungry mouth,” she begins to cry, her tears “Refresh[ing] her shrunken eyes, / Dropping like rain / After long sultry drouth” (485, 492, 488-90). Their connection endows Laura with “Life out of death[,]” and unlike the fatal erotic appeal with which the goblins enticed her, the type of closeness she experiences with Lizzie is life-giving instead of life-taking (524). The type of intimacy Laura and Lizzie experience is pleasurable, safe, and healing. Pleasure here is not off-limits to women and is portrayed as positive—even praise-worthy— within their own female realm.

Through both gender-integrated and gender-segregated interactions in “Goblin Market,” Rossetti frames women’s primary role as sister; while they are required to behave in specific ways outwardly because of the dangers posed by men, they also have a duty and a capacity to

create a new, joyful life in the realm of women. Rossetti sums up the poem's position on women in the last stanza as, years later, Laura recounts to her children her story and the lesson she learned:

“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.” (Rossetti 562-67)

From Lizzie's example, Laura has learned how to embody the ideal woman— simply by being a sister. Rossetti's "Goblin Market" offers a freeing take on a stiflingly gendered Victorian society while still conforming to general social norms. Despite the limits placed on their lives by the realities of men, women have the ability to create lives full of joy and pleasure together and to save each other after traumatic events. In this manner, women do exist and act in response to men because they are required to act certain ways around them— but in response to men's static ways, women become flexible and innovative, creating a space of their own based on the close, supportive bond of sisterhood.

Works Cited

Rossetti, Christina. "Goblin Market." *Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 9th ed., Norton, 2013, pp. 2211-2223.