

Lesbianism in “Goblin Market”

By
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Although considered to be a poem for children, Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* contains erotic undertones and disturbing references to the darker animalistic recesses of human - and inhuman - emotion and behavior (Morrill iv). A story of two sisters who fall into the hands of dangerous merchant goblin men, *Goblin Market* is a cautionary tale that reiterates the idea that female companionship is the remedy to threatening male sexuality. Therefore, an extended interpretation of the poem may provide that “sisterly love” or by extent - lesbianism, may be the key to avoid and/or undo the ominous sexual overtures from salacious men.

Morning and evening

Maids heard the goblins cry:

"Come buy our orchard fruits,

Come buy, come buy."

(ll. 1-4)

The first set of lines from the poem illustrate the enticing call from the goblin men as they shuffle along their usual rounds. Maidens, or naïve virginal girls, are the principal audience to these words, and urged by these goblin men to buy their goods - which are “fruits.” The term “fruit” signifies fertility; ergo by metaphoric bridging, this seduction of the two girls to accept fruits from the male body are equated with sexual advances, especially with the continued usage and suggestive context of fruit imagery within the rest of the poem. Furthermore, the significance of the day cycle - and its symbolism - is not to be overlooked; mornings and evenings are the times associated with intimacy, beds and lying abed: mornings convey lightness, freshness, cleanliness, beginnings, birth, newness, and purity; while the evening is associated with sexual yearnings, wedding nights, dreams, fantasies, privacy, darkness and a susceptibility to persuasion.

*"Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye,
Come buy, come buy."*

(ll. 28-31)

Again echoing the appeal, the goblins are insistent that the two sisters Lizzie and Laura buy, and more importantly consume their products. The blatant predation and persistence parallel a scene of lustful men attempting to woo innocent women into their world. These creatures possess a voluptuous pleasure in potentially corrupting and tricking these young girls whilst reaping the benefits of the barter made. Fruits are, again, repeatedly mentioned and are in abundance enough to fill young girls' mouths as per verbatim from the poem's lines; therefore this may be a euphemism for oral sex. Considering the ample number of goblin men, all together they certainly have enough "fruit" to fill the mouths of girls, and as they so sweetly cooed, their "fruit" is sweet to taste and beautiful to see. Again, the phrase "come buy," serves both as an economic plea as well as a literal call of temptation. The mention of figs also is suggestive: in art and biblical lore, the leaves of figs are used to conceal the human genitalia of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21). Heeding this connotation, the actual figs that the goblin men advertise may in fact be construed as actual male genitalia - that would, in fact, "fill the mouths of girls," should they so desire.

*With clasping arms and cautioning lips,
With tingling cheeks and finger tips.
"Lie close," Laura said,
Pricking up her golden head:
"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. 38-45)

Laura and Lizzie clasp arms and speak with dainty, demure mouths and are obviously tempted by the goblins in a way: an inference from their “tingling cheeks and finger tips.” Their blood circulation is increased, possibly due to sexual arousal, and in an attempt to squash this strange sensation, they cling to each other and use ‘sisterly love’ as protection or substitution for resisting the wiles of goblin men. Their love is *safe*. There is no pregnancy - a visible result of heterosexual sex, there is no societal scorn or loss of reputation, and there is no fallenness - a loss of virginity and reputation. Their last option is to “lie close” and not to allow the merchants’ [bodily] fruits to touch their persons [sexually]. They do not know where the men’s “roots” have been: perhaps with other virginal girls they seduced in the past. They might be tainted by the others’ blood or venereal diseases. The men’s “roots” may have been in soil that was also unclean, or in other words, engaged in coitus with prostitutes. Since female reproductive organs and genital areas have been literarily referred to as a ‘garden,’ i.e. *soil*, prostitutes’ gardens have malnourishing soil because they have already been ruined and because of the risk of disease. “Venereal disease was sufficiently widespread in the army that, starting in 1864, Parliament passed a series of Contagious Diseases Acts, which provided for the examination of prostitutes in military towns, and if they proved to be infected, their detention for a cure” (Pool 189). Virgins, on the other hand, are ‘untouched and pure,’ and their garden contains ‘nourishing soil.’ They are the bridal and maternal ideal. Laura also has golden hair, an example of metaphorical economic sufficiency. This may signify that she is an innocent virgin maiden with a dowry. She is ripe for plucking and taking advantage of; her dowry is her hair, a substance later used for barter and the subsequent salvation for Laura, the fallen woman.

*"No," said Lizzie, "No, no, no;
Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us."
She thrust a dimpled finger
In each ear, shut eyes and ran:
Curious Laura chose to linger*

Wondering at each merchant man.

(ll. 64-70)

Women of purity, according to Victorian values, must not be interested in sexual matters and especially not sexual “offers.” “Chastity, or, more generally, strict notions of sexual behavior, could, and notoriously did, turn into prudery” (Altick 176). Such topics and advances should not charm good girls. “Premarital sex would have been with servants and prostitutes since, of course, “nice girls” didn’t engage in sex before marriage” (Pool 189). Lizzie denounces the goblin fruits as “evil gifts,” but her word choice of “gifts” may denote a positive meaning, which may indicate a subconscious female desire for their sexual knowledge. The girls are strangely drawn to them - especially Laura, but both know that these goblin men would harm them. Victorian society was notoriously sexually repressed, and the acceptable theory was essentially that sexual intercourse was evil or devilish, *especially* outside of marriage. Lizzie hears, sees, and touches no evil as she runs away, so her actions label her as a wholesome young woman who is able to resist temptation. Laura, however, remains where she is, curious of the darker side - which is a trait not suitable for young Victorian women. “It was only marriage that licensed proper women to inquire into “improper” subjects at all” (Pool 187). As sexual curiosity may lead down an unclean path to prostitution and female fallenness, Laura looks and listens to the goblins’ “cooing” and is mesmerized; she begins to wonder and fantasize about each merchant man.

They stood stock still upon the moss,

Leering at each other,

Brother with queer brother;

Signalling each other,

Brother with sly brother.

(ll. 92-96)

When they see they have Laura’s attention, the goblin men all soundlessly communicate with each other, signifying that they all have the same ideas in mind. Their indirect relationship is

evident from the collective term “brothers,” and suggests that they are of the same matter and of the same queer thoughts, perhaps even of the same bad blood. They signal each other slyly, a manifestation that mischief is on their minds regarding Laura. It is almost as if they have been reduced further to a pack of animals readying itself and planning to take down a prey or a gang planning to violate her - which is what they essentially do, although the act is consistently shrouded in metaphor.

Laura stretch'd 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)

Once she succumbs to the wishes of the goblin men, Laura is determined and beautiful, like an animal in heat: the term “rush-imbedded” possibly meaning a rush of hormones or adrenaline from the excitement and thrill of a forbidden sex act. She is also described as a lily which, as a flower, is a common metaphor for female genitalia: “the traditions linking female sexuality and flowers are many, from Linnaean botanical classification to biomedical analogies explaining human in terms of plant reproduction” (Matus 76). She is a bud that has flowered, and now is ready to be deflowered. Her neck is called a “moonlit poplar branch,” which may be interpreted as a phallic symbol; and a vessel, a word whose main reference is the womb which receives, carries and creates “fruit.” “The analogy of human and vegetable reproduction supports the claim that foetal life commences before the ovum has entered the uterus; menstruation is described as ‘flowers’ because...’menstruation indicates in a woman the capability of being fecundated” (Matus 30). Her “last restraint is gone” once she hears the goblin men’s sweet words, which is the pinnacle of their seductive success.

*The whisk-tail'd merchant bade her taste
In tones as smooth as honey,
The cat-faced purr'd,
The rat-faced 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.107-114)

This time, the various characters of each goblin may be inferred closely through description at this point. Regarding the first merchant in this section, the word whisk is used to describe him. A whisk implies a flicking, throwing, or batting away of pests, yet he uses tones “as smooth as honey” to lure prey close to him. The cat-faced one purrs - a comforting sound from what one would think to be a domesticated house pet, but this particular creature most assuredly is not. The rat-like one welcomes, which is perhaps a contradiction in itself: rats symbolize untrustworthiness, hence Laura’s welcome will not be what she thinks. The parrot-like one is bolder; he outwardly flirts with Laura, calling her a “Pretty Goblin” in lieu of the phrase “Pretty Polly,” in an attempt to bring her down to their level, perhaps as a suitable mate for the goblin men if she is thusly dubbed a she-goblin. The bird whistle can safely be interpreted as another exclamation of verbal appreciation.

*She clipp'd a precious golden lock,
She dropp'd a tear more rare than pearl,
Then suck'd their fruit globes fair or red: (lines 126-128)
She never tasted such before,
How should it cloy with length of use?
She suck'd and suck'd and suck'd the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;*

She suck'd until her lips were sore.

(ll.132-136)

Laura has no actual money with which to pay them for their fruits, no actual dowry to repay them with, so they suggest that she offer them bits of her body to compensate. They want locks of her hair, a request akin to the common behavior between a human male and his betrothed, as well as her tears. They are precious things to the goblins, especially since they are rarer than pearls - indicating that they are not easily shed and/or are more beautiful. But to make her cry, they would have to make her suffer. Finally, Laura has been tainted: she has eaten the fruits of the goblin men, and has metaphorically ruined herself, although she and the reader do not know it yet. She has never tasted such delights before [possibly sexual delights: if so, then their plotting was not meant for rape, but simply seduction for consensual intercourse even if the result is female ruination] and once she has paid, she “sucked their fruit globes fair or red,” the multicolored description being an allusion to oral sex with multiracial men, all would be part of the merchant lower class. They fooled her into giving up her only attributes in order to ultimately please them. “She sucked until her lips were sore.”

Golden head by golden head,

Like two pigeons in one nest

Folded in each other's wings,

They lay down in their curtain'd bed:

Like two blossoms on one stem,

Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow,

Like two wands of ivory

Tipp'd with gold for awful kings.

(ll.184-191)

Cheek to cheek and breast to breast

Lock'd together in one nest.

(ll.197-198)

Lizzie and Laura sleep together after their talk of the goblin men and the unfortunate Jeanie who also fell victim to their charms, ate their fruits and pined away into dust, to a point where nothing living would grow on her grave. To translate as per Victorianism: Jeanie had become barren and old, tainted by indecent male company. She would have never been a nurturing bride or mother because she succumbed to temptation; her reproductive organs and her character withered, and so she died. Laura and Lizzie take comfort in one another as a substitute for the goblin men, and they are so alike and pure at this point that their love is just as beautiful. They are white, like snowflakes and precious ivory; they are fresh and fragrant like two blossoms, and they are soft and downy like the wings of pigeons. Their description is filled with sensual but virtuous imagery. The only thing that ruins the moment is the fact that they are targets for the goblin men. They are the prey; the objects and “wands of ivory tipped with gold” for “awful kings.” They sleep together, cheeks and breasts together - a suggestive pose of both platonic and sexual lesbian love. The fact that they are called “sisters” may also apply to lesbianism, just as the goblin men were communally termed “brothers,” but did not seem to actually possess familial relations.

Chattering like magpies,

Fluttering like pigeons,

Gliding like fishes,--

Hugg'd her and kiss'd her:

Squeez'd and caress'd her:

Stretch'd up their dishes,

Panniers, and plates:

(ll. 345-351)

Plums on their twigs;

Pluck them and suck them,

Pomegranates, figs.

(ll. 360-362)

When Lizzie seeks out the merchant-men to try to find a cure for Laura's wasting sickness from giving into temptation and partaking of the fruits, the goblins taunt her by laughing and caressing her. They "stretch'd up their dishes" to present to her, then they list their fruits to tempt her with, including the phallic "plums on their twigs" and an encouragement for her to "pluck and suck them," with another reference to figs. Compiled together, these lines lead to yet another disguised suggestion for *her* to give them oral sex. It is Lizzie's turn this time.

Their looks were evil.

Lashing their tails

They trod and hustled her,

Elbow'd and jostled her,

Claw'd with their nails,

Barking, mewling, 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 squeez'd their fruits

Against her mouth to make her eat.

(ll. 397-407)

Since Lizzie does not want to eat with them, does not wish to partake in sexual conduct with them, but instead only wants what she needs to help her sister, the goblin men are egregiously insulted, and become violent. They demonstrate their evil side and all try to force her to do what they want; they kick her, elbow her, destroy and rip her clothes, pull her hair, and "squeezed their fruits against her mouth to make her eat," ergo, another analogy for a forced oral sex act.

She cried, "Laura," up the garden,

"Did you miss me?"

*Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
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;
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men.*
(ll. 464-474)

When Lizzie survives the allegorical gang rape, she returns to the desperate, ailing Laura, completely covered in fruit juices which she had rightfully paid for, but did not consume, like a 'good maiden.' Since she is still untainted, the juices accompanying her body are also pure and subsequently the cure for Laura's wasting away. Lizzie urges her sister to kiss and "suck her juices" despite the pain it causes to her aching body, which might hint towards her tendency for sexual masochism. It is a testament to how much Lizzie is willing to do for her love of Laura. "Eat me, drink me, love me" is a plea similar to those made by the goblin men, but unlike their orders, Lizzie's intention - her true wish - is to heal Laura, not hinder or harm her in any way - that is the difference and therefore the solution.

*"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.562-567)*

These last lines summarize and conclude that when all goes astray, especially in regard to being tempted and taken advantage of by evil, sexually aggressive men; “sisterly love,” or even a deeper lesbian love is an option in order to “cheer one” and “lift one” and “strengthen” one, no matter the circumstance. It is always a choice available to comfort and especially to heal 'fallen women.' Whether platonic or sensual, the love between sisters or fellow women is a balm to ease the pain inflicted by men.

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