**Forbidden fruits – sex and religion in ‘Goblin Market’**

**Ray Cluley explains how Christina Rossetti’s narrative poem for children conceals a morality tale about female sexuality.**

Christina Rossetti was a religiously devout woman (she broke off two marriage engagements for religious reasons) so it is perhaps not surprising that her poetry reflects something of her beliefs. Yet it may be surprising to know that one of her most famous poems, ‘Goblin Market’, has been published both as children’s literature and in Playboy. How is it able to appeal to such diverse audiences? Only a year after its publication, Caroline Norton said it defied categorisation:

Is it a fable – or a mere fairy story – or an allegory against the pleasures of sinful love – or what is it?

**A poem about sex**

It’s clear from Norton’s comment that one possible reading of the poem is to see it as an exploration of sexuality. Having ‘heard the goblins cry’ Lizzie and Laura are enticed by the repeated imperative ‘come buy’, as if it were a siren call in reverse, men luring women. The fruit, with its colour, texture, smell and taste, combined with the delicious mouthfuls of sounds Rossetti uses in listing them, appeals to all the senses at once, whilst the single complex sentence uses rhyme and half rhyme, plosives, assonance and alliteration to present almost every possible fruit imaginable. Even before Lizzie tells us these are ‘evil gifts’ we recognise there is something unnatural about this abundance ‘all ripe together’ and as the poem develops this hurried ripening of fruits can be likened to a rush into sexual maturity. The cherries are ‘unpecked’ as a reference to virginal innocence, yet the observation of ‘summer weather’ presents a maturity that a spring setting would not. It’s an opposition embodied in the sisters themselves.
Introducing the sisters marks an abrupt scene change, and we are immediately directed to the contrast between them. Laura, ‘bowed her head to hear’, making an effort to listen to the goblin men, whereas Lizzie ‘veiled her blushes’, modestly hiding what was considered an erotic response in Victorian literature. Later, Lizzie will hide her eyes while curious Laura looks on. Yet despite these differences, the two are bound together by their relationship, as the closeness of their lines indicates.

**The goblin men**

The goblin men represent something very different. Referred to as ‘goblins’ as early as the second line, they are creatures outside of nature, like the fruit that ripens together. The following monstrous combination of bestial traits emphasises their otherness, a violation of beast and man:

One had a cat’s face
One whisked a tail
One tramped at a rat’s pace
One crawled like a snail.

The parrot-voiced one cries ‘‘Pretty Goblin’ still for ‘Pretty Polly’’. Their voices are also likened to the cooing of doves, an animal associated with Aphrodite, goddess of sexual love. Considering their animalistic natures and the allusion to classical mythology, it seems any sexual experience the goblin men offer should be considered primitive.

That the fruits they offer represent something sexual is made clear when Laura enters into trade with them. She expends herself with a wordy apology for her lack of money, building from copper to silver to gold to show that what she does have to give is more valuable, whereas the goblin men are far more economical in their reply: ‘You have much gold upon your head’. They tell her to ‘Buy from us with a golden curl,’ an order she obeys unquestioningly. It’s a sexual metaphor often utilised in literature, the woman giving of her body via a lock of hair, and Laura clearly understands the worth of what she has given for she drops a tear ‘more rare than pearl’ before enjoying their fruits.

A wealth of sexual imagery follows. ‘She sucked their fruit globes’ has obvious sexual connotations, and the addition of ‘fair or red’ implies a certain promiscuity, a promiscuity anticipated when she wondered ‘at each merchant man’ in turn. The fruits represent the ‘joys brides hope to have’, though this explicit admission does not appear until late in the poem, and there are references to ‘man-rejoicing wine’ and ‘juice’ the likes of which ‘she never tasted…before’. Her new insatiable hunger is represented by the syndetic repetitive:

she sucked and sucked and sucked the more
indeed, she:
sucked until her lips were sore

Food and sex combine to present an appetite as monstrous as the goblin men themselves. The trading and oral actions present Laura as a consumer but, ultimately, it is Laura herself who is consumed. When she can’t taste the fruit again, rhetorical questions mark her despair and she trudges home:

her pitcher dripping all the way

to symbolise her lack of containment and, more crudely, her sexual arousal. She is the rind they have thrown away.

**A cautionary tale**

The modal verb in Lizzie’s warning ‘we must not look at goblin men’ leaves little room for doubt and is repeated in ‘we must not buy their fruits’. The goblin men are not to be trusted, Rossetti writing ‘they sounded kind and full of loves’ rather than ‘they were kind’. Their ‘leering at each other’ and ‘signalling each other’ unifies the goblins in sinister secrecy and ‘brother with sly brother’ highlights a contrast between them and the sisters. Yet even the goblins offer a warning: ‘come buy’ admits there is a price to be paid.

Initially Lizzie’s warning seems to be against the threat of venereal disease, for ‘who knows upon what soil they fed their hungry thirsty roots?’ the phallic imagery depicting a voracious appetite with the modifiers ‘hungry’ and ‘thirsty’. Later we’re told ‘no grass will grow’ on Jeanie’s grave, continuing the idea of sterility and sexual disease. Yet even Lizzie is not immune to their offers; it may be that she ‘veils her blushes’ but there are blushes to veil. It highlights her strength in resisting the goblin men. ‘Their offers should not charm us’ she says, ‘should’ admitting appeal despite the certainty that ‘their evil gifts would harm us’. She offers more warning with the fate of Jeanie which creates tension, for we know by now it is too late for Laura. Jeanie ‘pined and pined away’ having lost her appeal to goblin men after she lost her innocence. She still hungers, for the fruits they offer are without sustenance, and she dies for her appetite. Society has no place for a fallen woman.

**A religious allegory?**

Very much a Victorian woman (much of Rossetti’s life spans most of Queen Victoria’s reign), it’s not surprising that the sexual content is veiled, but Rossetti also denied ‘Goblin Market’ was a religious allegory as many saw it. Yet comparisons to The Fall abound and the poem contains a wealth of biblical symbolism. Most obvious is the ‘fruit forbidden’, the list beginning significantly with an apple, and we are told directly that Jeanie ‘fell’. After Laura’s transgression, the sisters ‘fetched in honey, milked the cows’, foods reminiscent of the paradise of Exodus 3:8. Laura, though, is ‘longing for the night’. Her waiting for goblin men is literally fruitless, bringing to mind Revelations 18:14:

The fruit for which thy soul longed has gone from thee.

Indeed, other references such as Matthew 7:15-16:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves...you will know them by their fruits

indicate a deliberate intertextuality, for Rossetti would undoubtedly be aware of such passages.

Lizzie cannot stand to see her sister suffer the same fate as Jeanie. She offers herself to the goblins to save Laura, a sacrificial act with Christ-like symbolism. The goblins tempt her with their fruits (again, apples first), giving her commands like ‘pluck them and suck them’ when offering her the sexually explicit ‘plums on their twigs’. Lizzie, however, keeps her distance; she throws an impersonal payment of coin and holds out her apron for the goods. They become aggressive, ‘grunting and snarling’ their looks ‘evil’. They lash out, tread upon her, elbow and jostle her, claw her, tear her hair, stamp on her, the language violently rape-like when we’re told they:

tore her gown and soiled her stockings…held her hands and squeezed their fruits against her mouth.

Yet Lizzie remains strong.

Continuing the imagery of sexual attack, she’s compared to a ‘virgin town’ against a fleet ‘mad to tug her standard down’, the double meaning of ‘standard’ is very clear, and she is given a list of heroic similes in standing against them, a rock ‘lashed by tides’, a beacon ‘in a hoary roaring sea’, a tree ‘beset by wasp and bee’, each showing a strength in passivity. She is a re-gendered Christ figure in suffering for her sister, standing against the goblins kicking and mauling, refusing to ‘open lip from lip’, keeping her innocence intact. The goblins can only cover her with juices as they are ‘worn out by her resistance’.
The cautionary aspect of the poem is reiterated with Laura’s concerns for her sister’s ‘ruin’ when she returns for her but Lizzie remains pure, bidding:

hug me, kiss me, suck my juices,

lines more loving in this sisterly context, and ‘eat me, drink me, love me’ in an allusion to the Holy Communion. The juice is ‘wormwood’ to Laura’s tongue, a metaphor drawing on Revelations 8:11-12, yet she is reborn for it, ‘Life out of death’ offering the Christian paradox that saves her. Thus, regardless of Rossetti’s own view of the poem, from a reader’s perspective the religious meaning is clear: Rossetti has used ‘Goblin Market’ to retell the story of the Fall, depicting Laura as a redeemable Eve whilst goblin men embody the serpent. The temptation offered remains knowledge, in this case of a carnal sort and it’s up to Lizzie as redeemer to save her sister.

**A feminist text?**

Critic Jan Marsh recognises an ‘ambivalence’ towards the position of women in Rossetti’s work and notes that, whilst Rossetti was opposed to the sexual exploitation of girls, she was also against women’s suffrage. Her work is at once elaborately erotic and yet seemingly a renunciation of such pleasure. The poem ends with both sisters married, safely domestic and separate from the world of commerce and men, passing the cautionary tale on to their own children.

There are no details regarding their husbands. Indeed, the goblin men are the only men in the poem and as such it’s tempting to see them as all men, but Rossetti does differentiate; ‘Such fruits as these no man can carry’, she says, and ‘men sell not such in any town’, excusing men somewhat from any part in the downfall of the sisters, the line repeated for emphasis and bracketed both times as an apologetic aside. No, the focus in ‘Goblin Market’ is on the women and their behaviour. Lines like ‘the moon bends her arc’ and ‘each glow-worm winks her spark’ present the natural world as feminine and a feminist reading all the more tempting, especially when ‘sisters’ is read metaphorically.

‘Goblin Market’ may be a warning against sex before marriage but Rossetti’s lasting message seems to be an appeal to support women who have succumbed to such desires. At the end of her poem she tells us ‘there is no friend like a sister’ and it is her duty ‘to lift one if one totters down’, which is to say fallen, be it from grace or in the eyes of a judgemental society. Rossetti herself volunteered at Highgate Penitentiary for Fallen Women for several years. In Lizzie’s rescue of her sister, ‘Goblin Market’ shows a certain feminine strength, and yet at the same time it illustrates that a woman seeking to establish a sexual identity before marriage is doomed. The sisters are:

like two wands of ivory tipped with gold for awful kings

showing that, although men may be absent from the poem, the patriarchal system to which the women belong is not.

Of course, a feminist reading is not the only possible reading, nor is the poem only a religious allegory; a psychoanalytical reading has Lizzie and Laura as personifying aspects of a divided self, or a ‘queer’ reading is possible, as is one of economics, highlighting the evils of trade via the ‘customary cry’ of the goblins with its ‘iterated jingle’ that suggests coins. Perhaps this poem illustrates that women should not become involved with commerce? Whatever message you decide is strongest, it’s clear that ‘Goblin Market’ is a poem that offers many fruits for further study.

**Ray Cluley**

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