The Possibilities of Interpretation in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”

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W.H. Auden once said, “there are no good books which are only for children” (Kooistra 181). Poets and authors have produced numerous works that seem meant for children to read. For instance, with a surface reading of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books, it might seem as though they are nothing more than fantastical accounts of the events of a little girl’s life, but different forms of criticism have allowed us to investigate the possibilities of what Carroll's books might actually suggest, which are much more complex adult themes. Similarly, “Goblin Market,” a poem by the 19th century English poet Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), was written, according to the author, for children. “Goblin Market,” which was first published in 1862, is a poem about two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, and the events that ensue after Laura is unable to resist the temptations of “goblin men” and their calls to “come buy” the luscious fruit that they nightly sell. Assuming that Rossetti meant for the poem to be interpreted as a cautionary tale for children, the possibility of “Goblin Market” as a children’s fairy tale would be completely plausible. The end result of the poem is a very contrived redemptive ending that explicates a moral that somehow fits into the context of Rossetti’s work, but seems detached from the rest of the poem upon a deeper reading. Some critics in the 20th century began to read “Goblin Market” with a religious approach, noting the undertones of Christianity and a very obvious Christ figure: Lizzie, the sister of Laura and her “savior,” in a way. Lizzie manages by the poem’s end to revive her ailing sister and save her from certain death that would have resulted from her inability to resist the goblin men’s tempting fruit. Other critics have thought the poem contains feminist undertones, or even that it hints at a dislike or a distrust of men. There is also a possibility that the poem is a kind of depiction of the devastating effects of addiction, due to the fact that Laura goes into complete withdrawal and becomes violently ill after she is unable to attain a second taste of the goblin men’s fruit. Rossetti experienced firsthand the consequences of addiction, for both her brother and his wife developed fatal drug dependencies. Despite a great deal of debate over whether “Goblin Market” is a Christian allegory, a feminist poem, a manifesto on addiction, or a children’s fairy tale as Rossetti herself said it was, “Goblin Market” seems to encompass elements of multiple literary themes, and due to that fact, it is open to many different readings. Victor Roman Mendoza, in his article entitled “‘Come Buy’: The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market,’” quotes Caroline Norton’s article that she wrote for *Macmillan’s Magazine* (1862) about “the
The Possibilities of Interpretation in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” newly printed ‘Goblin Market’”:

Is it a fable—or a mere fairy story—or an allegory against the pleasures of sinful love—or what is it? Let us not too rigorously inquire, but accept in all its quaint and pleasant mystery, and quick and musical rhythm—a ballad which children will con with delight. And which riper minds may ponder over, as we do with poems written in a foreign language which we only half understand (915).

Norton’s statement about the ambiguity of “Goblin Market” seems to be the general sentiment of most critics of the time period towards the poem, for with the façade of a children’s fairy tale, no one seemed to know quite what to make of it. With the possibility of multiple readings, as well as Rossetti’s perhaps evasive assertion that the poem was intended for children, we can say that “Goblin Market” lends itself irresistibly to an allegorical reading. The elements of the supernatural contained within “Goblin Market” seem to make it a children’s tale, but the other possibilities are too apparent for adults to overlook. Rossetti’s writing is intriguing on many levels and raises numerous questions.

Critics have again and again looked into the allegorical nature of “Goblin Market,” but they have also examined the life of Christina Rossetti herself, who was one of the forerunners in the Pre-Raphaelite movement not only because she was a poet of the time period, but also because she was a woman and a successful, published poet of the time period- and also due to the fact that she knew the principal people involved with the Pre-Raphaelites. Rossetti was placed among her male contemporaries as a capable equal, and has always been included in the Pre-Raphaelite anthologies along with them. Her work was well received when it was published, though her poetry was generally more acclaimed than her prose works, and “Goblin Market” has received more criticism than her other poetry due to its inexplicability. Generally, it seems that “Goblin Market” was not explored heavily with regard to its allegorical nature until the 20th century; however, the critical response to “Goblin Market” was positive. Her work tended to garner more criticism during her life than did she as a person, but after her death, critics began to examine her life in order to unravel some of the intricacies of her work, and while many of those who wrote about her seemed to find her to be a simple, godly woman, others saw quirky events in her life as indicative of the fact that Rossetti herself was worth being admired and studied just as much as her work.

One of Rossetti’s admirers was Virginia Woolf, who composed an essay about her around the time of Rossetti’s upcoming 100th birthday in 1930. The essay, entitled “I am Christina Rossetti,” is a creatively-written biography at the start, with Woolf adding flourishes to Rossetti’s younger years with com-
ments regarding how she was “whimsical and freakish, and liked making fun of people who took themselves with egotistic solemnity” (Woolf). Woolf also talks about how Rossetti’s childhood was peppered with visits from Italian exiles and artists, who were, like her parents, of a creative and liberal mind during a time in England’s history when being as conservative and reserved as possible was en vogue. The Rossettis, however, could not be bothered by the pretense of British society, and their daughter Christina was “a quiet and observant child, with her own way of life already fixed in her head” (Woolf).

Christina Rossetti’s ties with her family directly and profoundly influenced the formation of her identity as a child, and had a great effect on her adult life and her career, as well. The youngest child after her siblings Maria Francesca (1827), Gabriel Charles Dante (1828), and William Michael (1829), Christina Georgina Rossetti was born on December 5, 1830. Rossetti’s mother, Frances Mary Lavinia Polidori Rossetti, was the sister of the famous Dr. Polidori, the drug-dispensing physician whom we most closely associate with Lord Byron and Percy and Mary Shelley. Rossetti’s preoccupation with motherhood, something that she herself never experienced, most likely developed as a result of her strong love of her own mother, the person to whom “all of [her] books, except two” were dedicated (Bell 6). Her father, Gabriele Rossetti, was “eminent in more than one respect,” for he had won “repute as a poet, and as a student of Dante, [and] he was [known as] an ardent reformer” (Bell 5). Rossetti’s reverence for the institution of sisterhood, I believe, derived from her love for her own sister, Maria. From a young age, Maria exhibited a severe reverence for religion, and Christina “thought that her sister’s conduct [was] worthy of the highest respect” (Woolf). Woolf even mentions how Maria would not go into the Mummy Room at the British Museum because, “she said, the Day of Resurrection might suddenly dawn and it would be very unseemly if the corpses had to put on immortality under the gaze of mere sight-seers” (Woolf). Though, as Woolf says, we might “enjoy a hearty laugh” at the antics of young Maria for we are not “inside the tank and exposed to all its heats and currents,” Christina, probably from seeing her sister’s serious attitude about religion, had developed “something dark and hard, like a kernel” inside her heart and her mind with regards to her own view of religion- something that would grow over the course of her life and that would eventually shape her adulthood and her writing (Woolf). A great deal of Rossetti’s writing, however, sprang directly from her childhood, for she conveyed for the youngest of her readers many of her experiences as a young girl into language they could readily understand: nursery rhymes.

In Rossetti’s body of work, there is a large section that she devoted to children, the majority of which is contained in her book Sing Song, a collection of nursery rhymes. Much like her separate work “Goblin Market,” Sing Song is
professed to be for children, yet there are numerous poems contained within 
it that hint at larger, more complicated themes than a child would not have 
the mental acuity to notice. Familial roles, the symbolism of colors and flow-
ers, and frequent allusions to infantile or premature death are all themes that 
occur frequently throughout Sing Song, making it similar in nature to “Goblin 
Market,” for we are able to speculate as to the real meanings of what is written, 
and in this case, it is through poems that are clearly for children, for they are 
contained within a book of nursery rhymes. “Goblin Market” was included in 
Rossetti’s Goblin Market and Other Poems (1862) with other poems that were 
written for an adult audience. All the nursery rhymes in Sing Song are untitled 
and are fairly short in nature, and all of them differ greatly from “Goblin Market” 
in their lack of complexity and consistently simple verse form, even though a 
few of them do hint at larger themes. Here again we are able to recognize that 
Rossetti’s literature for children is allegorical, or has deeper underlying mean-
ings than a surface reading would suggest. Some of the suggestive elements 
of the text, however, are quite easy to distinguish.

The most noticeable aspect of “Goblin Market” that seems immediately 
to distinguish it from other works of the time period is its verbal opulence and 
sensuous imagery used in the description of the fruit for sale by the goblin 
men, which seems to further illustrate its significance:

…Plump unpecked cherries,  
Melons and raspberries, 
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches, 
Swart-headed mulberries, 
Wild freeborn cranberries, 
Crab-apples, dewberries, 
Apricots, strawberries; — 
All ripe together 
In summer weather, — 
Morns that pass by, 
Fair eves that fly; 
Come buy, come buy: 
Our grapes fresh from the vine, 
Pomegranates full and fine, 
Dates and sharp bullaces, 
Rare pears and greengages, 
Damsons and bilberries, 
Taste them and try… (l. 7-25)\textsuperscript{1}

The emphasis, then, is on the fruit and its importance, and also on the goblin 
men, which seems further to stress the danger of temptation, and also refer-
ences the Biblical fall from grace due to an inability to resist the fruit. Critics
such as Anthony H. Harrison have made references to the fruit in “Goblin Market” being linked to sex. Harrison notes the lines in the poem that have to do with the two sisters’ friend Jeanie, who, sadly, was like Laura and unable to resist the temptation of the goblin men’s fruit. Unlike Laura, however, she does not survive her bout with the venomous fruit:

She thought of Jeanie in her grave,
Who should have been a bride;
But who for joys brides hope to have
Fell sick and died
In her gay prime (l. 312-316)

Harrison sees a link to the fruit as a sex symbol because the “joys brides hope to have” “are implicitly identified with Laura’s powerfully sensual experience with the goblin fruit, defining her temptation by the goblin men as a sexual one” (Harrison 416). Furthermore, Harrison states that, “the premature and illicit experience of such ‘joys’ causes Jeanie to become a ‘fallen’ woman (recall that she ‘fell sick’) (416). The descriptions and subsequent implications of the fruit perhaps run counter to the expectations of Rossetti’s staunchly conservative Victorian society, and coming from a very religious Victorian woman, it seems unlikely that the poem would contain so many dramatic descriptions. I believe that this could be an example of the repressed feelings that so many members of Rossetti’s society probably felt, and Harrison seems to agree, for he says that, “in cultural context, this poem can be read as a monitory exemplum and thus an extreme instance of Victorian sexual repression” (416). He goes a step further by saying that “it reflects a profound fear of female sexuality and its potential consequences” (416). Harrison asserts that Rossetti’s “unrelenting attacks upon the indulgence of sexual desire, often troped as an illness or represented as an addiction that produces malaise, disease, or death for narrators and characters in her poetry,” was absolutely intentional, and this makes sense when we consider how religious Rossetti was (416).

Familial ties are certainly present in “Goblin Market,” for the relationship between the two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, carries major importance throughout the poem. Rossetti’s relationships with her own family seem to have played a vital role in the formation of her body of work, and I believe that the relationship she had with her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his wife Elizabeth Siddal contributed directly to the outcome of “Goblin Market”. A prolific artist, Dante produced illustrations for the poem, and he also painted his sister Christina on several occasions to represent the Virgin Mary, as well as some portraits of her as herself. Dante became addicted to chloral hydrate, the first clinically-developed sleep aid, after his wife Elizabeth Siddal overdosed on laudanum. It is thought that her depression after giving birth to a stillborn child, combined with a preexisting addiction to laudanum, an extremely habit-forming opiate
that was given by physicians to patients in severe pain, may have caused her to overdose intentionally. Dante died from his addiction, and Elizabeth Siddal's addiction to laudanum plays a large role in "Goblin Market," I would assert, because Lizzie is forced to rehabilitate her sister Laura, and the sisters' relationship is strained as a result of this. While there is no evidence that Rossetti herself tried to rehabilitate Siddal, we can sense her almost certain sadness at the prospect of the wife of her dear brother being an addict, and perhaps Rossetti's cry for rehabilitation is in direct association with her brother's grief over her sister-in-law's addiction, for Elizabeth Siddal, or "Lizzie" as Dante called her, passed away around the same time "Goblin Market" was written. The prospect of addiction being a major factor in Rossetti's formation of "Goblin Market" is probable, for even the manner in which Lizzie goes about saving or "rehabbing" her sister is similar to the way that addicts today are weaned off of an addictive substance through the administering of increasingly smaller quantities of the drug to which they are addicted.

Addicts are usually thought of as incapable of resisting the drug that they crave, and from the beginning of "Goblin Market" Rossetti seems intentionally to characterize Laura as exhibiting traits of an addict. Laura first chides the goblin men in the same manner as her sister, saying:

"We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?" (l. 42-45)

This apparent disapproval of the goblin men by Laura, when viewed in the context of the poem, comes across with an almost robotic sense of insincerity, for she seems to be talking mostly to herself; Rossetti does not insert a response from Lizzie. A few lines down, however, there is a warning from her sister Lizzie that is directly spoken to Laura. Laura, exhibiting both a childlike sense of curiosity and the lack of self-control that an adult addict might possess, quickly takes an interest in the luscious wares of the goblin men, and later that night goes to buy their fruit. After returning home to her sister Lizzie and being swiftly reprimanded for loitering in the glen late in the evening, she quiets the scolding of her sister and begins describing the amazing fruit she ate. She also tells her sister that she craves more of the fruit already:

"Nay, hush," said Laura:
"Nay, hush, my sister:
I ate and ate my fill,
Yet my mouth waters still;
Tomorrow night I will
Buy more:" and kissed her: (l. 163-168)
Laura seems entranced or even high from her consumption of the fruit. Also, her enjoyment of the fruit has already been experienced, and the possibility of Laura experiencing the same euphoria is automatically diminished because of the fact that she has given in to her want to consume the fruit. This notion is similar to John Keats’ “Ode on Melancholy,” which is a poem about experience and the sadness of the ephemeral happiness that is experienced with the consumption of something that is strongly desired. Her speech and lengthy descriptions of each further serve to illustrate the ecstasy that each one provided for her. Of course, as a result of Laura eating the fruit Laura becomes addicted in a way and Lizzie rehabilitates her sister. Simon Humphries in his article entitled “The Uncertainty of ‘Goblin Market’” succinctly describes the way in which Laura is saved by her sister. He says that “Laura’s sister Lizzie goes to get more of [the fruit] for her, but the goblin men want Lizzie to eat the fruit too and they try to force it into her mouth. Lizzie resists and runs home dripping with juice and pulp; then Laura kisses her, and in kissing her tastes the juices once more” (392). We observe that “the fruits which had once poisoned Laura now cure her” (392). Some may find it odd that the same fruit that harmed and nearly killed Laura also had a restorative power; however, addicts are often rehabilitated and weaned off of the substances to which they are addicted in the same way. The “poison that cures,” as Humphries calls it, works its magic, and Laura is amazingly renewed to her old self.

Here, we must begin to examine the goblin men themselves, for they are the agents of the action of the poem. In terms of “Goblin Market” being written with undertones of addiction, the goblin men could be said to be the drug pushers or even dealers, for they hint at “one taste” of the fruit being so miraculous and amazing- it then almost seems too good to be true, as addictive substances often are. One thinks of Tennyson’s “Lotos-Eaters,” for the goblin men seem quite similar to the Lotos-eaters in his poem who give the lotos-flower plants to Odysseus’ men to eat on the way home from Troy. The lotos-flowers cause the men to fall into a languid state that is similar to what alcohol or another depressant drug would induce. This is different from the ecstasy and brief energy that the goblin fruit provides for Laura, but the qualities of the fruit are similar to the lotos-flower plants, for they are described as being quite lush and luxurious- capable of causing a person to want to eat them for their aesthetic beauty, just like the fruit. Both the goblin fruit and the lotos-flower plants have the power to take one away from having a purpose and a drive in life. Tennyson was always in danger of becoming isolated, and Rossetti was fearful of the perils of the world, so both writers faced a constant fear of life in different ways. The goblin men almost seem to take on some of the qualities of vampires, for in giving the fruit to Laura, they deliberately take away her life force, like someone who has been drained of her blood. Rossetti was probably familiar with the work of her uncle, Dr. John Polidori, who wrote a book entitled The Vampyre (1819) that
was about a very unlikely monster: an English nobleman who was actually a vampire. According to Donna Heiland in her book *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction*, “upper-class vampires did not make their appearance until John Polidori published *The Vampyre* in 1819,” therefore making it possible for “scary” creatures in stories to take on a countenance of semi-normalcy (106). Though the goblin men are not entirely normal-looking, they are not overtly frightening, since they look, essentially, like animals. Perhaps, then, Rossetti’s idea for an antagonistic figure that would not frighten even her youngest reader is derived from her uncle’s story. Polidori wrote *The Vampyre* after agreeing to a writing contest with his friends Lord Byron, Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley, the last of whom wrote the horror story *Frankenstein* as a result of the same contest. Shelley’s novel about the frightening implications of male power run amuck rings throughout “Goblin Market,” for the goblin men exhibit a degree of control over Laura via the fruit, and their hypnotic calls to “come buy” have an instant influence over her. Both “Goblin Market” and *Frankenstein* exhibit the general 19th century fascination with the Gothic. Rossetti’s direct connection with Dr. Polidori makes it even more plausible that she could have been familiar with his work, and could have chosen to form the goblin men out of the notion of supernatural beings or monsters who were capable of taking the life force out of someone and thus incapacitating them. Furthermore, the goblin men could be likened to the physicians of the 19th century who carelessly doled out palliative medication for people who were far from cured by it. The patients, in turn, would suffer from the doctors’ carelessness, for they would often develop addictions to the medications they prescribed, since many of them contained opium and other habit-forming ingredients. Perhaps it is Rossetti’s anger at the prospect of another human being causing so much pain and suffering to her brother and his wife that motivated her to write “Goblin Market” in the first place.

We can speculate as to whether Rossetti was passionate about the reformation or rehabilitation of addicts and the perils of drugs and addictive substances, but there is one aspect of her life that we are absolutely sure of, and that is that she was a devout Christian. Religion played a major role in the formation of Rossetti as an individual, and it is oftentimes reflected in her poetry. I would venture to say that religion is a very strongly felt presence in “Goblin Market,” which some critics believe is a Christian allegory. When given a reading that focuses on the religious possibilities of “Goblin Market,” we can relate it to Rossetti’s life in the same way that we can relate it to her life experiences with addiction in her family: as something that she experienced firsthand. However, we are able to go further and take direct examples from Rossetti’s life as a Christian.

The major religious current that runs throughout the poem is the possibil-
ity of Lizzie as a Christ figure, which I think is one of the most probable and apparent possibilities in the work’s entirety. Lizzie, from the start of the poem, proves wiser than her sister, for she cautions her sister about the dangers of the goblin men and the fruit they nightly peddle:

“Oh,” cried Lizzie, “Laura, Laura, You should not peep at goblin men.” (l. 48-49)

Lizzie’s urgent cautions are unheed by her sister, whose “golden head” is instantly drawn to the calls of the goblin men (l. 41). Laura is thusly characterized as the more human or naturally flawed of the two sisters, since Lizzie is able to have the strength to resist the temptation of the fruit of the goblin men. This wise sensibility that supersedes her sister’s is an indicator to us that Lizzie might have to intercede later on in order to protect her sister, and her calm sensibility almost creates a sense of foreshadowing that may later lead to the occurrence of a miraculous event. The main reason why Lizzie is thought to be a Christ figure is the fact that she makes a huge sacrifice for her sister in order to save her life, for she goes to see the goblin men one night in an attempt to buy some of their fruit to give to her sister. When Lizzie realizes that her sister needs some more of the fruit, she risks her safety to go get some for her. Laura literally eats and drinks of Lizzie’s body, which hints at the Eucharist when Christ said to eat and drink of his body. Simon Humphries notes this in his article entitled “The Uncertainty of ‘Goblin Market,’” when he quotes the “Prayer of Consecration in the Common liturgy,” in which Christ says, “Take, eat, this my Body is given for you…Drink ye al of this; for this is my blood of the new Testament, which is shed for you” (Humphries 394). Marylu Hill’s critique of “Goblin Market” finds that the major action of the poem rests upon Laura’s salvation via the consumption of her sister’s body, which has been smeared with the goblin men’s fruits. Obviously suggestive of Holy Communion, Hill asserts that “Eucharist as sacrifice and saving meal is clearly at the heart of ‘Goblin Market’” (455).

Another theme lurking in “Goblin Market” is that of motherhood and familial roles, the first of which is mentioned at the end when Lizzie and Laura are both happy and healthy once again and have become mothers. The familial role of the sisters is carried out through the projected relationships of Lizzie and Laura, and the role of the ministering mother is depicted through Laura and Lizzie at the end of “Goblin Market”. Their husbands are never mentioned, even though the end of the poem describes how Lizzie and Laura both have children of their own and are now warning them about the dangers of the goblin men and their tempting fruit. The theme of familial roles is dealt with heavily throughout Sing Song, as well, in poems such as this one:

“What does the bee do?
Bring home honey.
And what does Father do?
Bring home money.
And what does Mother do?
Lay out the money.
And what does baby do?
Eat up the honey.” (Rossetti 36)

Rossetti’s preoccupation with family and the jobs of the specific family members echoes throughout her writing in *Sing Song* and in “Goblin Market,” for the “job” of a sister is explicated through the task that Lizzie performs in order to save her dying sister. Motherhood is usually more heavily emphasized in *Sing Song* in an indirect way, for Rossetti frequently writes about babies in her nursery rhymes and compares them to lambs, which shows her apparent longing for a child. One possibility for this is the fact that, due to her extremely devout religious nature, she never married or even became engaged, despite the fact that she had several proposals. Rossetti’s religion became the central focus of her life, and she chose not to take the “heteronormative course of marriage and childbearing” (Mendoza 914). Religion was, for Rossetti, her entire life’s devotion, aside from her writing, which she charged with religious undertones. “Goblin Market” is believed by some to be one of her most religiously charged works, and there are real differences between it and her other works, namely her book of nursery rhymes.

When we look at *Sing Song*, we are able to see the real difference between the nursery rhymes contained within the book’s text and the fact that “Goblin Market,” while it was also a suggested reading for a child, dealt with more overtly adult themes in an explicit way. One of the major themes of “Goblin Market” is religion, and many critics over the years have read the poem as a Christian allegory. Some critics have even compared it to Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” first published in 1798 in *Lyrical Ballads*, due to its epic themes and the obvious moral being conveyed. The idea of the pervasive sinfulness of life itself resonates in different ways throughout both works. However, Rossetti’s poem differs from “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in that Rossetti’s suggests original sin, while Coleridge’s contains a specific sinful act. Both of them, however, reflect the fundamental story of the Christian idea of fall and redemption within the overall plan of life, and in the many sins along the way. If we read “Goblin Market” as a religious allegory, we can assert that the goblin men have the traits of demons or anti-Christ figures. Rossetti ascribes to them the inhuman quality of having animal-like faces and temperaments:

One had a cat’s face,
One a whisked 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. (l. 71-76)

The goblin men seem to use their fruit to possess Lizzie in the way that demons inhabit a human and “possess” her body. Laura, enthralled by the fruit and its powers, describes the fruit in great detail:

“Have done with sorrow;
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:
Odorous indeed must be the mead
Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink
With lilies at the brink,
And sugar-sweet their sap” (l.169-183)

Rossetti paints a gluttonous image of Laura consuming the goblin men’s fruit. Lizzie, the poem’s Christ figure, must then go to great lengths to combat the goblin men and Laura is given a careful exorcism by her sister and miraculously returns to good health by the next morning. Even the way that Laura is described as acting while she is “possessed” by the power of the goblin men’s fruit seems similar to the way one who is possessed by a demon would act, for she is depicted as convulsing and being tormented:

So crept to bed, and lay
Silent ‘til Lizzie slept;
Then sat up in a passionate yearning,
And gnashed her teeth for
Balked desire, and wept
As if her heart would break. (l. 264-268)

One aspect of “Goblin Market” that is worth examining is the ending. Consisting of a single, rather disjointed stanza that conveys a moral message to the reader, it comes just after the quick restoration of Laura’s health and the stanzas that precede it:

“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.” (l. 562-567)

This stanza seems merely to serve to tie up any loose ends having to do with the moral purpose of the poem; however, it is notably disjointed from the rest of the poem in style. The ending is undoubtedly the poem’s most child-friendly element, and it helps add fuel to Rossetti’s assertion that “Goblin Market” was, in fact, a simple children’s poem with a very available moral lesson, which would go back to Rossetti’s religious beliefs.

Rossetti’s devoutness when it came to religion resonated throughout all aspects of her life to the fullest extent. Even her love life was clouded by her severe Christian beliefs, for she received two marriage proposals from two different men and chose to marry neither of them because of the fact that her suitors’ religious beliefs were not completely compatible with her own. The first who proposed to her was a young man by the name of James Collinson, and Rossetti refused him because he was a Roman Catholic. In an effort to win her back, he became a member of the Church of England like she was, but he soon drifted back to Roman Catholicism, and though it “broke her heart and for ever shadowed her life,” Rossetti promptly ended their relationship (Woolf). The second of Rossetti’s love interests was Charles Cayley, and he proposed to her several years after her relationship with Collinson had ended. However, Cayley was a free thinker and was not in any way devoted to Christianity like Rossetti was, and Rossetti, not wanting to be “the wife of a sceptic,” ended their relationship as well, even though, as she said, “no woman ever loved a man more deeply” (Woolf). In a poem entitled “No, Thank You, John” (1862), she seems to write directly and bitterly to one of her suitors, speaking in a frank manner about how she never actually promised to marry him, and about how she never even said she loved him in the first place:

I never said I loved you, John:
    Why will you teaze me day by day,
    And wax a weariness to think upon
    With always “do” and “pray”?

You know I never loved you, John;
    No fault of mine made me your toast:
    Why will you haunt me with a face as wan
    As shows as hour-old ghost? (l. 1-9)

Although Rossetti seems to be rather uncaring for this particular man, she did seem to want to be married and placed in the role of wife and mother, some-
thing which she seems to valorize at the end of “Goblin Market” and frequently throughout her nursery rhyme book, *Sing Song*. Although there is a good chance that this poem was probably written due to Rossetti’s devout piety and religious nature, it seems to suggest something else about her: a sense of self and strength of mind as a woman. To reject a marriage proposal seemed counter to the Victorian mentality, and for Rossetti to assert herself in such a way as she does in this poem adds to her character a sense of strength and profound assertiveness which Virginia Woolf touches upon in her essay about Rossetti. Woolf says that once at a tea party, Rossetti overheard someone say something negative about poetry in a “casual, frivolous, tea-party way” (Woolf). Rossetti promptly stood up from her seat at the table, marched directly to the center of the room and declared fervently, “I am Christina Rossetti!” (Woolf). This is a move that, though somewhat ambiguous to us today, I take as being symbolic of her strong sensibilities about life. In “No, Thank You, John,” Rossetti seems to repeat what she said that day at the tea party. She goes on in the poem to encourage the rejected suitor to pursue other women, saying:

I dare say Meg or Moll would take
Pity upon you, if you’d ask:
And pray don’t remain single for my sake
Who can’t perform that task. (l. 11-14)

Rossetti effortlessly and sharply convinces her audience that she is a woman whom the conventions of society could not shake in any area; that she had her own agenda in life.

In terms of identifying a resonance of Rossetti’s strong sense of self in “Goblin Market,” we must give to the poem a feminist reading, for we can almost say that a kind of proto-feminist is exactly what Rossetti was. Feminism and children’s literature, according to Beverley Lyon Clark, have the ability to go hand in hand, for “children’s literature has addressed some women’s concerns,” and so even if “Goblin Market” really was intended to be a children’s poem, it still could be feminist, since it does address some concerns of its female characters, Lizzie and Laura (171). To assert, then, that “Goblin Market” is perhaps a feminist work seems completely appropriate, especially when we are able to examine other poetic works composed by Rossetti, such as “No, Thank You, John”. The possibility of “Goblin Market” as a feminist poem was not brought to light until the mid 1900s, when feminism began to infiltrate literary criticism and theory, especially among young, educated women who were able to take notice first of “Goblin Market” and then of Rossetti herself, and we can speculate that Rossetti felt as though her relationships with other women were a very important aspect of her life judging by her own relationships with her mother and her own sister, and also by looking at her work in the Women’s Penitentiary Movement. Some “more recent critics have specu-
lated as to whether or not the poem had an actual didactic, moralizing function for the ‘sisters’ at the Highgate-based penitentiary for ‘fallen women,’ St. Mary Magdalene Home, where Rossetti was working as early as 1859, the year of the poem’s composition” (Mendoza 915). This adds to the already broad functionality of the poem with regard to relevance to Rossetti’s personal life. We can assume that if “Goblin Market” is to be interpreted as a feminist poem, that between the two female characters, one of whom is obviously in need of assistance from the other, that the sister who steps in and saves her troubled sister is the poem’s heroine. Therefore, Lizzie can be considered to be a heroine, given the fact that she risks her own life to save Laura from the goblin men’s perilous fruit and its devastating effects. This is truly a major, groundbreaking occurrence in literature, for women had, until this point and even after it, struggled to establish and maintain their place in literature both as writers and as heroic characters integrated into the poems, stories and novels written. Rossetti simultaneously creates a female Christ figure through Lizzie, and also creates herself as a palpable literary force. The idea of a woman as representative of Christ or having Christ-like redemptive qualities in a work of literature is groundbreaking and, if it was her intention to make Lizzie the poem’s heroine or the savior of her sister, she shows that she has tremendous belief in equality of the sexes and of the power of women in general, which is why “Goblin Market” has been interpreted as a work containing feminist undertones.

With Lizzie as our heroine, we can then ask the question of whether or not the poem is calling for the elimination of men from the lives of women, or is Rossetti asserting that men – goblin men in this case—have the potential to disrupt or ruin an otherwise stable relationship between two women? Rossetti’s poems “Noble Sisters” and “Sister Maude” both hint at men causing a rift in the relationships of women. In an article entitled “Re-Reading Sisterhood in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Noble Sisters’ and ‘Sister Maude,’” Scott Rogers examines Rossetti’s views on women and their relationships, whether they are biological sisters or friends.

Rossetti’s “Noble Sisters” shows the reader two possible ways that women’s relationships can be brought to ruin or “destabilized” (Rogers 870). The first way is by one of the sisters having a relationship with a man and wanting to be exclusively with him, presumably away from the home where the two sisters reside. The second way is by the “protector sister,” as Rogers refers to her, intercepting the communication between her sister, the “protected sister,” and her lover, making it seem as though the protected sister is no longer interested in her lover and ruining the relationship between the two of them:

“I met a nameless man, sister,
Who loitered round our door:
I said: Her husband loves her much,  
And yet she loves him more.” – (l. 45-49)¹

The sister who was obviously waiting for her love interest to pursue her feels betrayed by her sister’s behavior, as it was an obvious attempt to keep her from entering into a relationship with the man in question:

“Fie, sister, fie, a wicked lie,  
A lie, a wicked lie,  
I have none other love but him,  
Nor will have till I die.  
And you have turned him from our door,  
And stabbed him with a lie:  
I will go seek him thro’ the world  
In sorrow till I die.” – (l. 45-56)¹

Similar to Rossetti’s poem “Sister Maude,” the conflict may have arisen out of jealousy, but is initiated by the extrasororal relationship between the protected sister and her lover. This is the primary source of conflict. “Sister Maude,” composed in 1860, exemplifies a relationship where “the home is... the site of sororal conflict” (Rogers 870). Maude, the sister of the narrator, has “uncovered a relationship between the speaker and a lover, and has revealed the relationship to the sisters’ parents” (Rogers 870):

Who told my mother of my shame,  
Who told my father of my dear?  
Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude,  
Who lurked to spy and peer. (l. 1-4)¹

Jealously seems to be the driving force in the dispute, for the speaker says explicitly to Maude that her lover would never have any attraction towards her:

You might have spared his soul, sister,  
Have spared my soul, your own soul too:  
Though I had not been born at all,  
He’d never have looked at you. (l. 9-12)¹

Rossetti structured the poem so that each reference to the speaker’s lover is followed by a relation of a family member, whether it is her mother, father, or Maude. By writing “Sister Maude,” Rossetti wanted to show how the “inequalities of possession” can bring about dissonance in a sister relationship, specifically by the possession of a man. The existence of the man in the poem has caused both a disruption in the “sororal bond [and] also the family unit,” for the poem’s conclusion involves the speaker describing how Maude will surely be separated from the rest of the family in the afterlife for her cruel actions. Men, it seemed to Rossetti, harbored a great deal of potential for destructiveness in
the relationships between women, which would further lead us to believe that Rossetti was an early advocate of feminism. Her ideas about men in “Goblin Market” are conveyed through the goblin men, who, in a feminist reading of the poem, can be said to represent men in general, for it seems that Rossetti specifically called them “goblin men” and not just “goblins” for a reason. Furthermore, the goblin men could be representative of the male Victorian establishment, which tended to cut off or try to put a stop to women who wanted to pursue art. This calls to mind Virginia Woolf’s “A Room on One’s Own,” a long essay about the importance of women having both a sense of self and a purpose, as well as a place to which they could retreat to pursue their art. Rossetti seemed to be very concerned overall about the relationships between women and the effect of men on their relationships. She was also interested in the functionality within groups of women.

The dynamics of a community of women began to play an even larger part in Rossetti’s life when she started her work at Highgate Women’s Penitentiary in 1859. Highgate was a place where “fallen women” such as prostitutes could be “rehabilitated” and placed back into society as good citizens, even though it was, essentially, a women’s prison. Rossetti seemed to disagree with the harshness of the institution and may have wished it to be more unrestricted with regard to the women living there, but she continued her volunteer work there nonetheless, perhaps wanting to have as much of an effect on the lives of the women there as possible. Rogers notes that always within a community comprised exclusively of women, there is a “hidden patriarchy” that influences the women to “define themselves and their relationships to one another in terms of a male presence” being involved (Rogers 869). At Highgate, the male presence was the warden, also a clergyman, who was the only man involved with the penitentiary. However, his existence was always palpable and sometimes had a negative effect upon the establishment as a whole, as it was run, maintained and inhabited by women. Rossetti was most sensitive of a male being causing disharmony. Her poetry is consistently reflective of the patriarchy that can be ruinous to a sister relationship, and “Goblin Market” is no exception, for its sole focus is upon the way that the relationship between Lizzie and Laura is threatened by the presence of the goblin men.

Aside from the several established notions that “Goblin Market” presents us with regards to its possibilities of interpretation, there are numerous other ways that the poem can be read. Looking back on Rossetti’s life and medical history, we see that she was affected by numerous physical ailments, as well as one emotional and mental illness: depression. This, I believe, deserves some ground when considering other ways in which “Goblin Market” could be read and interpreted, for mental disorders have influenced the works of numerous other female writers. For proof of this, we should consider how Virginia
Woolf suffered from bipolar disorder but continued to write despite her illness, although committing suicide later, and how women like Sylvia Plath wrote poetry during difficult times with their own depression. Charlotte Perkins Gilman also chose writing to give her own mental illness a voice. Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” came as a direct result of her depression, but even during her lifetime, which was later than Rossetti’s, it was unthinkable to label a woman as “depressed” because society was not ready to handle the thought of a woman having deeper concerns than those of the household. Rossetti probably also felt the pressure to suppress her feelings and be as normal as possible, and her frustration could have led her to write “Goblin Market” as an exposition on the effects of mental illness on an individual and how her ability to cope can be strengthened through the support of family. The mental health of countless women for years was overlooked and considered quite taboo. To say that “Goblin Market” arose as a result of Rossetti’s frustration over her depression makes a considerable amount of sense, especially when we examine some of the character traits of our two protagonists, Laura and Lizzie.

While Lizzie would represent normalcy and sanity in this particular reading of “Goblin Market,” Laura represents chaos and disorder- some of the feelings associated with a mental illness such as depression or schizophrenia, and based on the behavior exhibited by Laura throughout the poem, the possibility of her as a schizophrenic is completely conceivable. From the beginning, when Laura utters her first words of the poem, saying that “we must not look at goblin men,” (l. 42)) it is noticeable that she seems to be making an attempt at keeping herself in line- or at least at keeping her mind and her thought process in check with reality. Laura sees something that may or may not be there: a tromping gang of goblin men, who are essentially small men with the faces of animals. Schizophrenics are classically known to hallucinate- to visualize and hear things that are not actually present or perceptible. They are also known to be incredibly paranoid, which Laura was, for with the same statement of “we must not look at goblin men” she seems wary of them and the possibility of their evil, whether or not they truly existed. Looking at “Goblin Market” as Rossetti’s way of exposing the life that she herself may have experienced in terms of emotional frustration, the possibility of Laura as representative of Rossetti, and the goblin men as representative of her depression, is completely viable. Lizzie, besides representing normalcy, could be said to be a Christ figure once again, for Rossetti undoubtedly found solace in her religion during her severe bouts with depression. There is also the possibility of Lizzie being representative of writing, for Rossetti most likely would have found it therapeutic to write when she felt ill or sad. Some of the intrigue of “Goblin Market” is that in reading it, we, the beholders, find its beauty in our own ways, for each interpretation has some grounds for validation, and each person who reads it may feel
free to interpret it how he or she sees fit.

I speculate that Rossetti claimed the poem to be for children to avoid the flood of questions and attention she would have had to endure had she suggested that it actually contained more adult themes than ones that were suitable for children. Also, there is the possibility that she did not know what it could have meant, either, and that she did not care to speculate. Although we are allowed to hypothesize as to what exactly is meant by “Goblin Market,” we can never come up with a factual conclusion about where it fits in terms of genre and subject matter, for the possibilities exist with different readings from different people. With a look at her life and her persona, we can conclude that, perhaps, Rossetti would have been happy that people find such substance in her work, for all the themes we are able to notice- those of religion, addiction and family, feminism, and even mental instability or depression- were all applicable to her life in some degree. The meaning of “Goblin Market,” then, is entirely subjective and open to interpretation by its readers, and that, I believe, is how Christina Rossetti would have intended for it to be.

Works Cited
Rossetti, Christina. Sing Song. Edinburgh: R&R Clark, 1892.


**Notes**