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The Rossettian Formula: No Love Without Suffering

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Abstract

This article will align Christina Rossetti's poetics with Susan Sontag's work on suffering to argue that in Rossetti's poetic universe that suffering is a necessary precursor to a realisation of love. Turning to Mikhail Bakhtin's theorising of the carnivalesque, the article describes the landscape of *Goblin Market* as one in which established social convention is overturned and suggests that it is against this landscape of perversity that suffering is reimagined as a precursor to love.

Furthermore, to demonstrate how this cult of suffering becomes established at the heart of Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, I turn to both Karl Marx and Jacques Lacan to investigate how a desirable quota of suffering is achieved through both Lizzie and Laura's interactions with a burgeoning commodity capitalism.

Keywords: Christina Rossetti, Mikhail Bakhtin, Susan Sontag, carnivalesque, *Goblin Market* the body, Karl Marx, commodity fetishism

Can there be anything new written about Christina Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market*? For perhaps more than any other poet of the nineteenth century, the author industry, and the output that it has spawned, has witnessed Rossetti elevated from a position within collected volumes of nineteenth-century poetry to a literary superstar.

Biographical studies, the celebration of Rossetti by a first wave of literary feminist theory, and the critical turn in Literary Studies in the past decade to a new New Historicism have coincided with a vast array of monographs, articles, conferences, and collected essays, all dedicated to the famously sheltered and reclusive figure of

Christina Rossetti. With the weight and activity of Rossetti studies as it is, this article will turn away from biography and a sort of cultural historical methodology that has sought to gauge how her arcane poetry was received by high-brow and low-brow critics and readers alike; it will, instead, offer a reading of the poem with which she has become synonymous, *Goblin Market*, in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque and Susan Sontag's notion of the artist as exemplary sufferer. I want to interrogate Rossetti's configuration of love in terms of an economy of suffering in order to put forward the following formula: that within the poetic parameters of 'Goblin Market', there can be no love without suffering. This is what I will refer to throughout as the Rossettian formula. There is within the confines of her poem, I will argue, a perverse logic which sets out this Rossettian formulation of suffering as a prerequisite to the development of love between poetic subjects. When confronted with 'Goblin Market', the reader has entered into a paradoxical and deconstructive world where, as in 'Convent Threshold', sin can be experienced as sweet; where incestuous Sapphic desire is coded in terms of the crucifixion of Christ; and where double meaning appears at every turn. As the narrator remarks in 'Convent Threshold', another poem about liminal spaces, '[y]ou sinned me with a pleasant sin'. ('Convent' l. 51) There is a strange logic embedded within her poetic utterance that demonstrates the conflict between religious devotion and sexual yearning and illuminates how this paradoxical conflict manifests itself in suffering. Against the popular portrait of the pious young Rossetti, this sense of a 'pleasant sin' hints towards a complex sexuality that derives a pleasure from the illicit, the religious forbidden, and reimagines the subject as tormented by bodily sensation that is checked by the super-ego structures of religious orthodoxy. This article is, therefore,

not an attempt to impose a theoretical fixity upon her poem but a reading that opens the poem to new theoretical possibilities.

Recent scholarship has set out to debunk the enduring popular image of the reclusive and pious Christina Rossetti surrounded by a community of women.¹ Nevertheless, the young Rossetti selflessly dedicated herself in the 1860s to helping the desperate in the claustrophobic milieu of the St Mary Magdalene Home for Fallen Woman at Highgate Hill, and this is carried into the poem in the form of a pervasive claustrophobia, both in terms of textual geography but also in the inter-familial, sisterly sexual desire. The close confines of her textual world create the impression of the narrative unfolding within a poetic grotto of sorts.

An etymological history of the term “grotesque” reveals how it has its semantic origins in the Italian word *grotto/grotta*: a cavernous space. And it is within this self-enclosed world, this poetic cavern – the narrative never ventures beyond the geographical parameters of the marketplace or the domestic – that Rossetti’s grotesque vision of suffering and its relation to love plays out. Rossetti’s invocation of the grotesque is perhaps most recognisable in the strange hybrid bodies of the goblins who are constructed in terms of a monstrous bestiality:

One had a cat’s face,
One whisked a tail,
One tramped at a rat’s pace,
Once crawled like a snail,
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry. (*Goblin* ll. 71-76)

The grotesque is heightened here by the following lines, in which the contrast between the sight of the revolting goblins and the sweet sound that they produce, as experienced by Laura, is so discrepant that it becomes obscene:

She heard a voice like voice of doves

Cooing all together:

They sounded kind and full of loves

In the pleasant weather. (ll. 77-80)

Rossetti's hybrid goblin figures serve the dual function of being both comedic and disturbing. The goblins are goblins but they are also delineated as merchant *men*, and it is through Rossetti's hybrid construction that they accrue an uncanny quality, an affect that has become a hallmark of the grotesque.

Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* (1965) examines the fantastical power of the carnival in the medieval period and demonstrates how the comedic, specifically laughter, played a disruptive role in medieval society. For Bakhtin, quotidian life in the medieval age for the common people – the sisters qualify under this classification with Rossetti depicting Lizzie in simple domestic service – was short and brutal, but during the carnival life was radically transformed into the fantastical. It was a time when the logic of everyday life was suspended and subverted: misery became laughter, hunger was satiated by feast, and the beggar became the king. Carnival mimicked everyday rites and rituals, right down to the performance of Carnival Kings and Queens, in a process that turned the serious into a form of comic spectacle:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.

While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival

time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom.

It has universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (Bahktin 20)

Carnival provided transgressive opportunities to experience an alternative reality beyond official life with all of its petty rules, and, for the duration it lasted, the carnival offered a world of anarchic possibility.

Rossetti's poem adheres to the Bakhtinian convention of the carnivalesque with the poem bookended by the prosaic – it begins with shopping at a market and ends with marriage – thus creating a sense that her poetic narrative will play out in a world of suspended temporality and social convention. While the goblins' language is reflective of a burgeoning commodity capitalism, in Bakhtinian terms their sloganeering represents the language of the marketplace which is a hallmark of the carnivalesque and stands in stark contrast to the sober rhetoric of church and state. For Bakhtin, the marketplace is a grotesque *tableaux vivant* whose sounds, sites, and smells offer a form of cathartic release from the stuffy injunctions of officialdom. In offering relief from the psychic pressures of diurnal life, therefore, 'Goblin Market' can be read as a covert critique of a burgeoning mercantile capitalism (albeit rendered in Rossetti's fantastical style) that is propelled by the logic of a nascent free market economics.

The injunction to '[c]ome buy, come buy' accrues a hypnotic quality with every poetic repetition. As this mesmeric command to '[c]ome buy, come buy' is repeated, it begins to function as a sort of musical refrain that implants itself within the unconscious of both the sisters and the reader. Rossetti refuses to fully explicate why it is that Laura appears so entranced by the goblins and their fruit but alludes to the origins of this desire as being grounded in the discourse of free market economics:

‘Laura stared but did not stir, / Longed but had no money’ (ll. 105-6). Rossetti, here, anticipates the evolutionary development of mercantile capitalism in the mid-nineteenth-century moment to a more advanced, twentieth-century mutation, that of commodity capitalism, a variant that demands and encourages this perverse longing for goods for which we do not have the money to pay. Laura, here, is presented as the perfect agent for consumer capitalism through the libidinal investment that she makes in the goblin wares. She longs for that for which she has no means to pay. Rossetti introduces this notion of fetishistic longing for commodities from the very beginning of the poem, when describing the goblin’s market as some sort of 24-hour supermarket trading all day, every day – ‘Morning and evening / Maids heard the goblins cry’ – before the poem quickly begins to list all the things that the goblins have to sell and Rossetti first introduces the hypnotic refrain ‘[c]ome buy, come buy’:

Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-checked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries
Apricots, strawberries. (ll. 1-14)

The goblins deploy the sloganeering language of advertising in order to entice prospective consumers to ‘[c]ome buy, come buy’. At a textual level, Rossetti’s poetics yield an affect of pleasure through the very act of reading that mirrors the

pleasure that Laura experiences listening to this goblin language. Rossetti reveals how part of the pleasure of the goblin market is the actual experience of listening to the goblins' sales pitch:

Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries. (ll. 20-4)

The succulence of the fruit not only exposes the libidinal dimension of consumer capitalism but simultaneously imbues the narrative with an eroticism that both signals and anticipates the poem's numerous sexual encounters. Laura's cathecting – the psychic investment of desire into the fruit – of desire transforms the Rossettian marketplace into a site where sexuality can be expressed through commodity exchange. This aligning of commodity capitalism with sexual desire is delineated in the poem by way of Rossetti's double-speak. In other words, if this is a portrait of repressed libidinal desire, then it plays out on the level of the barely repressed.

Rossetti continues to out the goblins as canny mercantile capitalists through the logic that governs the lines: 'Taste them and try: Currants and gooseberries. / Bright-fire-like barberries, / Figs to fill your mouth, / Citrons from the South, / Sweet to tongue and sound to eye: / Come buy, come buy' (ll. 25-31). This is unmistakably the poetry of the market place, of commerce and sales-pitches, and despite its recondite story and arcane setting Rossetti, throughout the poem, draws attention to the second word of its two-word title. Rossetti's casting of the goblins as merchant men reveal *Goblin Market* to be a poem that is primarily concerned with providing a phenomenological account of the market and market forces. To think of *Goblin*

Market as belonging to a later tradition of Pre-Raphaelitism that moved away from Millaisian realism towards the mythic and fantastical is not to elide the fact that this is a poem that deals with the psychic pressures that the market exerts upon subjects in daily life.

The goblins effectively transform their wares from a type of sustenance – the fruit has a very obvious use value – into objects that entice and which exert an irresistible pull over the highly suggestive Laura. In doing so, the inanimate (the fruit) attains vitality which contrasts to the loss of autonomy that Laura undergoes while under the sway of this heady mix of sexual longing and market exchange. In this Rossettian formula, the loss of vitality that Laura experiences is proportional to the vitality of the fruit, with the result being that both object and subject are reimagined in terms of the undead. Her desire for the goblin fruit results in a loss of animation. In the opening section of the poetic narrative, the fruit is depicted as possessing more vitality than the captivated Laura, who is shown standing and ‘[w]ondering at each merchant man’ (l. 70). Laura’s libidinal investment in commodities removes her from the realm of the living to the ranks of the undead and she is unable to resist both the goblins linguistic dexterity and the logic of commodity capitalism that underpins it: ‘Laura stared but did not stir, / Longed but had no money’ (l. 106).

Transfixed by the hypnotic refrain of ‘[c]ome buy, come buy’, the goblins demonstrate how capitalism transforms the objects of the everyday, the necessary, the banal, into that which is experienced by individuals living under its economic logic as the essential. In classical Marxist terms, the fruit appears to have a surplus value that exceeds its use value. This phenomenon is what Marx calls commodity fetishism when he writes in *Capital* of the moment when an object is transformed into a commodity. A commodity’s use value and exchange value are not always directly

related. Therefore, commodities attain a mystical quality in the eyes of consumer, as Marx writes:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labour. It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent.

(Marx 138-9)

For Marx the minute a table is positioned alongside other tables that have, perhaps, been made by a famous carpenter or built using a rare type of wood, and which result in one table costing more than another, the table becomes an object of commodity fetishism. The table is transformed into something mystical, spiritual even, and becomes a magical dancing table in the eyes of the consumer. Commodities possess a spectrality as experienced by the consumer; when staring at an advert for an object that is endorsed by a well-known celebrity, I am permitted to vicariously imagine the sort of life that I too could have: a ghostly other life of riches, popularity, love, excitement, and so forth. This is the spectral dimension that is built into commodity capitalism and which governs the market place: the value that society collectively

invests in the commodity. For Marx, there is something mystical, ‘transcendent’ he observes, at the heart of capitalism, in that commodities attain a spiritual quality in the eyes of the consumer that elevate them from banal to the magisterial in a process whereby signifier and signified become indivisible. Marx describes the table as possessing an animistic vigour that brings it to life in front of the covetous consumer:

It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (Marx 163–4)

Just as Rossetti constructs Laura as an undead consumer yearning for commodities that possess an uncanny animated quality, Marx conceives of the commodity as an object that is brought to life through a process of collective libidinal investment. This is what, for Jacques Derrida, qualifies the commodity as a spectre that is ‘neither dead nor alive, it is dead and alive at the same time’. (Derrida 192)

Rossetti’s recondite fable of goblins signals the way that commodity fetishism compels individuals to invest more than they can afford in order to momentarily gratify the insatiable desires that capitalism itself creates. The poem has often been read as a fable warning against narcotic intoxication; however, if this is a poem about drugs, then it bears figurative similarities to Derrida’s understanding of the *pharmakon*, with commodity capitalism being offered in terms of a Derridean pharmakonomics as being both the poison and the cure.²

Rossetti evidences this dual logic through the textual mirroring of Laura and Lizzie’s interaction with the goblins. Laura informs the goblins that:

I have no coin;

To take were to purloin:

I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather. (ll. 116-122)

She follows the traditional processes and procedures that governed a previous iteration of a more feudalistic model of capitalism, one that has not transformed objects by way of commodity fetishism: ‘you have product, I have money, I exchange my money for your product, etc’. Rossetti’s poem, however, with its demonstration of commodity fetishism, reveals how an object’s use value bears little relation to its exchange value and, in the process, begins to lay bare the mystical logic of consumer capitalism. The desired fruit is presented as possessing a value that surpasses copper, gold, and, later we learn, silver, too, with the goblins demanding a form of payment which reveals the relationship in the poem between the body and money. The goblins themselves seem to acknowledge the discrepancy between use value and exchange value when they offer this rejoinder to Lizzie towards the close of the poem:

Such fruits as these
No man can carry;
Half their bloom would fly,
Half their dew would dry,
Half their flavour would pass by.
Sit down and feast with us,
Be welcome guest with us,
Cheer you and the rest with us. (ll. 375-382)

The fruit may appear irresistible in the intoxicating setting of the marketplace scored by the jingle-jangle sound of money changing hands, yet it decomposes when removed from the scene of exchange. In the language of commerce, the fruit instantly depreciates in value the minute it is exported from the marketplace.

Lizzie attempts to pay for the fruit with money, but this financial transaction is deemed insufficient by the merchant men who desire an absolute form of remuneration. Having '[t]ossed them her penny' (ll. 367), Lizzie's refusal to consume the fruit in front of the goblins prompts her to say:

'Thank you [...] but one waits

At home alone for me:

So without further parleying,

If you will not sell me any

Of your fruits though much and many,

Give me back my silver penny

I tossed you for a fee.' (ll. 383-9)

Here Rossetti exposes the grotesque logic that underpins commodity capitalism – the goblins demand a payment that exceeds simple financial exchange – while the vulnerability of Lizzie is exacerbated by the grotesque setting of the market place that having initially captivated the subject with its sounds and sights, is transformed into a space of intimidation. Furthermore, Rossetti's use of the grotesque goes beyond its etymological roots in Italian to incorporate a more familiar religious meaning. Here the spatiality of the market place bedecked with items for sale experienced as possessing transcendental possibilities, recalls a definition of the grotto as an ancient and numinous space that operates as a spatial lacuna from the logic of quotidian life. This sense of the word uncannily recalls the biography of

Christina Rossetti who lived a rather isolated life of immense religiosity surrounded by the paraphernalia of religious devotion. Mary Wilson Carpenter highlights how the poem's charged eroticism contrasts Rossetti's devout Anglo-Catholic beliefs:

The extraordinary homoerotic energies of *Goblin Market* seem particularly unaccountable in relation to the familiar assessment of Christina Rossetti as a devout Anglo-Catholic spinster who lived out her entire life with her mother, sister, and elderly aunts. Her brother William Rossetti described her as a 'devotee' citing her 'perpetual church-going and communions, her prayers and fasts, her submission to clerical direction, her oblations, her practice of confession. (Carpenter 417-8)

Surrounded by this religious community of women, Rossetti dedicated herself to working among the poor and most notably among the sepulchral ghettos of prostitutes in London's red-light district. We know that Christina, her mother, her sister, and her aunts were part of a religious campaign to alleviate the suffering of women plying their sexual trade not far from the family home, and all seem to have been caught up in the new fervour of women's work that encouraged young Christian women to go out and interact with the tribes of fallen men and women near the family home. What emerges from her biography is a portrait of the young Christina Rossetti that adheres to the popular image that her brother William was so keen to stress, one which stresses her piety and her investment in the community of religious women that she belonged to. In 1854, she volunteered for service in the Crimean War with that patron saint of nineteenth-century selflessness, Florence Nightingale, but was rejected on account of being too young.

It is crucial to keep Rossetti's religious life in mind when approaching this poem. Not only did her religious belief provide her with this all-female system of

support that seemed to have been so important to her – her sister Maria eventually joined an Anglo-Catholic sisterhood – but Christianity also places an intense emphasis on the body, suffering, and sexuality. As Susan Sontag writes in her essay ‘The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer’ (1962):

Christianity is, from its inception (Paul), the romantic religion. The cult of love in the West is an aspect of the cult of suffering – suffering as the supreme token of seriousness (the paradigm of the Cross) [...]

The modern contribution to this Christian sensibility has been to discover the making of works of art and the venture of sexual love as the two most exquisite sources of suffering. It is this that we look for in a writer’s diary [...]. (Sontag 417-8)

We can, therefore, use Sontag’s reading of suffering as the source of love to understand Rossetti’s troika of the body, suffering, and sexual love. For Sontag ‘making works of art’ and ‘sexual love’ are the ‘two most exquisite sources of suffering’, and this is what we ‘look for in a writer’s diary’. Writing as imagined by Sontag is not only a means by which to express repressed libidinal desires, but a site that articulates the plight of the artist. Is it possible to read the artistic output of the meek, devout, isolated figure of Rossetti as some form of diary of sexual longing and suffering? As Sontag reminds us, Christianity is the most romantic religion because it makes the most of this cult of suffering. Suffering may be the supreme token of seriousness, yet it is also the supreme token of love. More than that, it is through suffering that love is expressed.³

This conceptual formulation of love through suffering is brought into focus via the mechanism of looking. Rossetti’s original title for the poem was *A Peep at the Goblins*; *Goblin Market* was Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s suggestion, with her working

title making explicit one of the latent concerns of the poem: that of looking. Laura declares, 'We must not look at goblin men' (l. 42), all the while looking. Lizzie intuitively understands the latent dangers of encouraging temptation by gazing, when crying, 'Laura, Laura, / You should not peep at goblin men', before covering her eyes 'lest they should look' (ll. 48-51). For Rossetti, the act of looking is bound up with temptation. To gaze is to want or to have, and this, as we are made aware through the temptation of Laura at the hands of the goblin merchant men, can have devastating consequences. The gaze is also equated with suffering throughout the poem and recalls the torture of the Miltonic Satan, who while stalking the earth spies on the glorious Eve from his lowly position. In this way, the poem displays a complex understanding of the voyeur as an agent of suffering; that looking, but never possessing, eating, experiencing, and so on, represents a tantalising form of suffering. Or, in Lacanian terms, the act of looking is associated with the Imaginary Order, where fantasy can only remain fantasy as long as the love-object is never experienced in the realm of the Symbolic. Following this proto-Lacanian formula, Rossetti exposes how whenever an individual is brought into direct contact with the desired object, it is not a moment yielding exciting affective possibilities but becomes a nightmare wherein fantasy gives way to reality. Looking may equate to suffering; however, this is also a position of love that remains entirely in the Imaginary and, therefore, protects the desiring subject from the trauma of reality. The act of looking is one that, for Rossetti and Milton, yields an affective quota of *jouissance*, a term that explicitly reveals Lacan's coding of pleasure as suffering. Rossetti, once again, complicates her schematic vision and proto-psychoanalytic philosophy of looking by delineating Laura's gazing longingly at the forbidden object as an allegorical fall that

conjuges up symbolic associations with the temptation of Eve and her eating from the tree of knowledge.⁴

However, the fall, like Alain Badiou's conception of the event, represents a moment of radical potentiality where the logic of the established social order is abolished and, therefore, the Bakhtinian idea of the carnival is once again discernible. Again, we can discern the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in Eve's conversation with Satan and, more specifically, in Book X; after Adam decides to fall with Eve and they are subsequently consumed with an insatiable libidinal passion that, once again, demonstrates how a position of love as suffering is preferable. Having eaten from the forbidden tree of knowledge, they are both consumed (consuming as consummation) with sexual desire in a way that was lacking or absent in their pre-lapsarian world. It is only after the fall that sex transforms the Imaginary world of fantasy into the Symbolic Order of rules and regulations. Rossetti curiously reimagines the biblical couple in terms of an incestuous and Sapphic formulation of desire. In her poem, Rossetti signals the yearning with which Laura is now inflamed by describing her dashing home in order to embrace her sister in a scene that culminates with the two sisters lying in bed together:

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.

Moon and stars gaz'd in at them,
Wind sang to them lullaby,
Lumbering owls forbore to fly,
Not a bat flapp'd to and fro
Round their rest:
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Lock'd together in one nest. (ll. 184-98)

Throughout the poem it is incredibly difficult to differentiate between the two sisters. Even at a phonetic level, Laura and Lizzie have a very similar semantic arrangement – both begin with an L and end with a vowel sound – and Rossetti compounds their similitude in this vignette. Not only do they serve as uncanny doubles for one another and the poem, full of uncanny mirroring – first Laura's interaction with the goblins followed by Lizzie's – but here they also seem to enter into some form of physical and spiritual union. They become entirely indecipherable from one another: 'Like two blossoms on one stem / Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow / Like two wands of ivory' (ll. 188-90). Similarity shifts to unity in this scene; simile (like, like, like) gives way to metaphor (Lock'd together in one nest) (l. 198).

In morphing together – 'Like two blossoms on one stem' (l. 188) – the sisters' bodies acquire a grotesque quality in the Bakhtinian sense:

[The grotesque] is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines. Special attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside. (Bakhtin 317)

The grotesque, for Bakhtin, is not the obscene, revolting, or filthy, but the overly fertile and organic. When read against this passage where singularity is elided and is

delineated in the symbolic language of the organic, the bodies of Laura and Lizzie attain a grotesque quality – shoots and branches – whereby the two bodies are conjoined. In the carnivalesque space of Rossetti's poem, bodies can lose physicality and form; nothing is definitive, nothing definite, and everything exists under the governance of Morpheus. Rossetti's poem throws into sharp relief Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque as that which is too fertile. Just as the Pre-Raphaelites consciously sought to move away from a stilted mannerism and depict bodies in all of their imperfections, the grotesque body draws attention to its functions – shit, pus, insemination, and so forth – in an act of celebration of these bodily processes. It carries the intoxicating promise of regrowth.

Here the Rossettian formula is made explicit: there can be no love without suffering. To return to Sontag's schematic vision, Christianity is the religion of love because it is the religion that places a cult of suffering at the very centre of it; with the value that Christianity places on identifying compassionately with those who suffer being reworked into a form of a sexual love that elides difference in the fabrication of a single unified body. It is this move towards unity that allows Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) to read Rossetti's poem as an important moment in the formation literary feminism:

Obviously the conscious or semi-conscious allegorical intention of this narrative poem is sexual/religious [...] Beyond such didacticism, however, 'Goblin Market' seems to have a tantalizing number of other levels of meaning – meanings about and for women in particular – so that it has recently begun to be something of a textual crux for feminist critics. (Gilbert and Gubar 566)

Rossetti's twinning of the sexual and the religious through suffering is most evident in the scene where Laura's redemption is achieved through the body of Lizzie. After her ritualistic torture at the hands of the grotesque goblins who in the act of abusing her have splattered her with fruit, Lizzie returns home and offers her body up as a regenerative cure:

Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed 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 the goblin merchant men.(ll. 467-74)

The fruit which had once poisoned Laura now becomes regenerative in its ability to cure her not because the fruit is different – it is still goblin fruit – but because it is consumed differently. Again, is there not something carnivalesque or grotesque about this logic? It transpires that this is a poem that is interested in consuming and how we consume. Rossetti never explains why the fruit is so destructive to Laura or why the goblins should desire to inflict this form of suffering upon her – it remains unspoken, unknowable. In her book *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry talks about the limitations of identifying with another's suffering and how suffering destroys language:

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it,
bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to
the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.

(Scarry 4)

Throughout her ordeal, Lizzie remains silent in her suffering: 'Lizzie utter'd not a word; / Would not open lip from lip' (ll. 430-1). Furthermore, it is never fully explained (it remains textually silenced) why it is that the goblins insist upon the sisters consuming the fruit while sitting beside them. Lizzie, who had previously been described as 'white and golden' (l. 488), is allegorically recast as a Christ-like figure who, by undergoing the torture, the beating, the humiliation at the hands of the goblins is elevated, through her suffering and her pain, to the position of Laura's saviour.⁵ The stoic 'white and golden' Lizzie's refusal to submit to the sloganeering and then the violence of the goblins recalls the manner in which Christ defied Satan's temptation in the desert. This Christ-like association is further emphasised when Lizzie entreats her sister to 'Never mind my bruises' (l. 467), a command that at once effaces her pain but in doing so draws attention to her body as a site of silent suffering, and it is Lizzie's suffering, ultimately, that allows for Laura's redemption. At the end of the poem Lizzie's suffering body is offered as a site of sexual pleasure and thus stays true to the Rossettian formula that there can be no love without suffering.

This is most pronounced in the invocation to the passion of Jesus that Rossetti makes when depicting Lizzie as a Christ-like figure, who pays for the sins of the other through her own body; here, Rossetti makes clear that in order for Lizzie's actions to have a curative effect then her sacrifice must surpass the sins of her fallen sister in order to be redemptive. Simply put, Lizzie's suffering must outstrip Laura's in order for her to be redeemed through love, and, as such, Rossetti's formulation of suffering as the ultimate expression of love remains faithful to a Christian tradition.

The Catholic component of Rossetti's Anglo-Catholicism is made manifest in the Eucharistic associations that symbolically bind the suffering of Christ with

Lizzie's. The 'poison in the blood' that once polluted the bodies of those who consumed the Goblin fruit is radically transformed through this Rossettian formula of love as suffering – Lizzie 'her sister / stood in deadly peril to do her good' – to become 'the fiery antidote' (ll. 555,557-9). When consumed via Lizzie's suffering body, which is also the loving body in pain, the goblin fruit now carries the possibility to both redeem *and* regenerate:

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me. (ll. 468-72)

Rossetti's image reimagines the Christian Eucharist as a moment of sexual expression which brings the bodies of the sisters into direct physical and sexual contact. In her perversion of this Christian ritual, Rossetti's sexual Eucharist highlights the symbiotic relationship between love and suffering.

This is consumption doubling as consummation, the climactic moment when her spiritual hunger and sexual hunger can be satiated. The poetic narrator informs the reader that Laura's body is 'dwindling' until it is at the perilous point of 'knocking at death's door'; this description of the withering body uncannily parallels Julia Kristeva's conception of the abject as a moment of 'death infecting life'. (Kristeva 4) However, instead of being experienced as a traumatic moment of mortality at its limits, as it is for Kristeva, Lizzie's body is reworked through suffering that is charged as a form of organic fantasy that carries regenerative possibilities to maintain 'Life out of death' (Kristeva 4). This depiction of the body as both a vessel of death and the source of life, for Bakhtin, is a grotesque corporeal vision:

Actually, if we consider the grotesque image in its extreme aspect, it never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body. It is a point in transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception. (Bakhtin 318)

The logic of the carnivalesque is governed by way of a 'grotesque realism', which is structured as a 'degradation that is the lowering of all that is high spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity,' and linking it with 'the bodily lower stratum' (Bakhtin 19). In the same way that the carnivalesque represents the transgressive moment when the established ideological orthodoxy becomes subverted so that authority is anarchically overturned, 'grotesque realism' exposes the body in all of its corporeality. This notion of 'degradation' is a liberating idea that rejoices in the exposure of bodies for what they are – fleshy, fertile, producers of all sorts of fluids – and not the impossibly idealised form that we find in Pre-Raphaelite art. As Bakhtin writes:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one [....] Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving. (Bakhtin 19)

It is only once Laura consumes the fruit from Lizzie's degraded body that salvation from sin is permitted. Lizzie's bruised, beaten and abused body captures Bakhtin's notion of degradation as a hopeful moment of regeneration. She is quite figuratively

reimagined through degradation from the Christ-like figure ('White and golden Lizzie') into the bruised and battered figure who offers her body up to her sister. The maternal super-ego figure who once 'upbraids' Laura for eating the fruit, radically assumes the role of symbolic mother whose degraded body now provides life to her sister. It is only after Lizzie's body is made to suffer through the implication of her rape, and then through the consumption of fruit that results in consummation of repressed Sapphic, incestuous desires, that Lizzie's body is radically rendered as a locus of conception; a degraded body in pain that is now capable of maternal possibility. In the penultimate verse the poetic voice observes that 'Laura awoke as from a dream', that 'her breath was as sweet as May, / And that light danced in her eyes' (ll. 537-42). This notion of rebirth through degradation (facilitated by suffering) concludes the poem when Laura herself becomes a mother after the birth of her children, and she recounts the grotesque tales about suffering and love. The poem, then, ends with two forms of childbirth, one figurative (the rebirth of Laura) and one literal (the children they have at the end). By climaxing in such a way, Rossetti reveals that it is only through suffering that love is possible.

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Notes

¹ See *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, ed. by Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison and Lorraine Jansen Kooistra (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999).

² See Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 67-187.

³ We find this triptych encoded at a structural level within the poem. It can be roughly, and a little crudely carved up, as following a narrative formula: of temptation – fall – redemption.

⁴ As with Satan so with Eve; John Milton's *Paradise Lost* follows a similar philosophy of looking in that as long as Eve gazes directly at the apple, the apple

rewards her with a yield of pleasure, no matter how much suffering her voyeuristic looking may cause her. This is the Lacanian *jouissance* of looking.

⁵ Janet Galligani Casey provides a fascinating discussion of both Florence Nightingale and Christina Rossetti alongside nineteenth century concept of a 'female Christ'. Janet Galligani Casey, 'The Potential of Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 29 (Spring, 1991), pp. 63 – 78 (64).