

## Christina Rossetti: *Goblin Market*

### I. Background

- A. Christina Rossetti was one of four children of an exiled Italian poet, and sister of Dante Gabriel Rossetti
- B. She wrote love poetry, but did not marry, despite three offers of marriage
- C. One of her poems is the text for the popular Christmas carol, "In the Bleak Mid-Winter"
- D. *Goblin Market* is her most famous work, and brought her critical acclaim
- E. It was published as a kind of fairy tale
  - 1. Whether Rossetti herself regarded it as a children's story is not clear
  - 2. Note that Victorian fairy tales and children's stories were often quite dark and provocative

### II. *Goblin Market*

- A. Two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, hear the goblins crying every morning for them to buy their orchard fruits
  - 1. The fruits are described richly, with lush, sensuous sounds
  - 2. Lizzie warns Laura not to listen to or look at the goblin men, but Laura is more curious and is drawn to them
  - 3. The goblin men themselves are described grotesquely, with animal strangeness
- B. Laura wishes to buy some of their fruits, though she has no money
- C. They tell her "Buy from us with a golden curl" of her hair
- D. The fruit is "Sweeter than honey from the rock, / Stronger than man-rejoicing wine, / Clearer than water"
- E. Laura, having had a taste of this fruit, wishes for more: "I ate and ate my fill, / Yet my mouth waters still."
  - 1. Laura plans to buy more fruit the next day, but can no longer hear the goblin men
  - 2. Lizzie, who has not eaten the fruit, still hears them
  - 3. Lizzie warns Laura about a woman named Jeanie
    - a) Jeanie ate the fruits, then pined away when she could not get more
    - b) She eventually died, and no grass grows over her grave
  - 4. The poem frankly describes Laura's unquenchable nightly desire for the fruits, like an addiction
  - 5. Laura grows more and more listless by day
  - 6. Her hair turns grey and she begins to waste away
- F. Lizzie decides to buy the fruit for Laura, and meets the goblin men with a silver coin
- G. They are not interested in her money and want her to eat the fruit
  - 1. They claw her, tear her clothes, and smash the fruits against her face
  - 2. The scene is disturbingly reminiscent of a sexual assault
  - 3. Lizzie refuses to open her lips
- H. Lizzie returns home, the juices all over her face
- I. Laura is at first afraid that Lizzie will suffer the same fate
- J. But needing the fruit herself, Laura kisses her sister, and licks the juices from her face
  - 1. The juices scorch her lips and are bitter in her mouth
  - 2. "Swift fire spread through her veins, knock'd at her heart, / Met the fire smouldering there"
  - 3. Laura lies all night in a death-like sleep
  - 4. In the morning, she awakens as her former self

5. Her hair is no longer grey, "And light danced in her eyes."
6. The juice from Lizzie's face has been a "fiery antidote" to the dark power of the fruit
7. Laura has regained her innocence
- K. At the end of the poem, we are telescoped forward in time
  1. The goblin men are gone, and the two are wives and mothers
  2. The poem ends on a note of celebration for the love of sisters

### III. Critical responses

- A. *Goblin Market* has enjoyed much critical attention
  1. Feminist critics praise its depiction of female solidarity in the face of masculine aggression
  2. Marxist critics celebrate its critique of the capitalist marketplace
  3. Queer theorists note its depiction of transgressive love ultimately domesticated by marriage and children
  4. It has also been read as a meditation on drug addiction
- B. The explicit scene of Laura kissing the juices from Lizzie's mouth and face has provoked numerous interpretations
  1. It is sometimes seen as a lesbian love story
  2. It is sometimes seen as an allegory of the Eucharist, with Lizzie having suffered mockery and physical abuse in an act of sacrifice for Laura's redemption
- C. Some interpretations of the fruit itself
  1. Illicit drugs
  2. Sexual desire
  3. The fruits of capitalistic excess