

## Female Body as the Mere Source of Animating Power in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

Sinem EKMEKÇİ<sup>a</sup>

### Abstract

Poetry transforms into a safe harbour to address sensitive socio-cultural issues during the Victorian period. Having grown weary of being trapped within the categories set by the male-dominant world, the Victorian women poets pioneer to fulfil their potential. They subvert male domination simply by addressing the patriarchal systems that shape gender dynamics in their writings. Therefore, writing is not only a resistance to this hegemony but also an animating power for women to reconstruct their identities. The purpose of this study is to illustrate how sisterhood adopts a hardline stance against patriarchy's persistent dominance in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." Rossetti's depiction of male dominance as a marketplace where women are decreased to goods to be exchanged can be characterised as an act of inspirational rebellion. "Goblin Market" is a groundbreaking piece of Victorian poetry in the sense that it pioneers new ways of subverting male supremacy and opens up ways for women writers to use poetry as an animating power.

### Keywords

Victorian Women Poets  
Body politics  
Female body power

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## Introduction

The Victorian era is a period of innovations and advances in many fields of social areas including literature, art, and politics. With the rise of the Industrial Revolution, the British Empire reached its peak, becoming the most powerful nation in the world. With its developing economy, labour demand arose in the British market. While there were many opportunities opened up for men, only a small percentage of women could find a job to earn their lives. There were limited spheres of work for women including governess, nursing, laundry work, or domestic service. Additionally, the traditional gender roles promoted men as the provider and women as the caretaker. Women were considered 'the angel in the house,' whose only duty was to take good care of their household, do the domestic chores, and run the house. Virginia Woolf gives a detailed description of a woman's angelic image in the eyes of Victorian society in her prominent work *Profession for Women* (1993) as it follows:

I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. In those days –the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its angel. (p. 275)

Woolf criticises the fact that a woman is expected to sacrifice herself to be able to fit in society. It is such a pity that every house had its angel, which means women were the ones in houses who were expected to sacrifice their freedom, their independence, and hence, their identity. These stereotypes were tailored in such a way that they permeated society through a variety of ways. Books played an important role in imposing those patriarchal ideologies upon women. Being amongst the most enlightening and eye-opening works of the period, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1997) depicts the lives of those angelic women as a prison as it follows:

In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since her pin money, which depended on the goodwill of her father, was only enough to keep her clothed. (p. 58).

As stated in the quote above, having a space of her own was out of the question for women. Just as women were restricted within the walls, their capabilities were also kept within the bounds of their houses.

The Victorian era marks a period in which women were weakened and even disabled to perform their abilities except for becoming a wife or mother. As Gilbert and Gubar also state in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, it is "debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters" (2020, p. 53). Women who act against society's codes or etiquette are ostracised either because they are considered mad, or immoral. The madwoman image is first generated by Gilbert and Gubar based upon the madwoman character Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's prominent novel *Jane Eyre*. They

use the term to define any marginalised woman who challenges the ideal woman image in the Victorian era. As stated in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, the madwoman in the attic should be “read as the unconscious articulation of the hidden fears of patriarchy and as the protest of the feminine subject against her exclusion and monstrous distortion” (Rice & Waugh, 2001, p. 145). The idea of madness, as Gilbert and Gubar (2020) suggest in their work, can be regarded as a constructive state in which one can reveal their true self.

Writing can also be regarded as a liberating practice for Victorian women. As also stated in “Marianne’s Body Politics in Angela Carter’s *Heroes and Villains*,” in a world where “women are excluded from the privileges of body politics which are only granted to men,” with the act of writing women “recreate politics of their own” (Ekmeççi, 2021, p. 270). During the Victorian period, writing was mostly associated with men and women who were involved in writing were considered daring. Many women including Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) and the Brontë sisters wrote under the name of a male pen so that their works should not be looked at as biased. There were only a few women poets during the Victorian period. This study, thus, aims to scrutinise writing poetry as having the function of creating a space to escape from the societal convictions for Victorian women.

Writing poetry is regarded in this study as a liberating, transforming, and life-giving experience for Victorian women poets. It is also within the aims of this study to cast light on how Victorian women poets, who reject being imprisoned within the categories and constraints set by society, rebuild their female identities by writing poetry. In the study, Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* is scrutinised to demonstrate how poetry functions as building a female identity by being the voice of Victorian women and awakening them to a deeper understanding. The poem is also noteworthy in a way that it pioneers a change in women’s expressing themselves in poetry, which was then regarded as an entirely male profession. The role of poetry readers in breaking this stagnant thought is indisputable. John Ciardi highlights the significance of readers as well as poets in poetry’s gaining its overall meaning in his work *How Does a Poem Mean?* (1975) as follows: “Reading a poem is an act of participation in the poem. By participating, the reader not only makes the performance whole but makes it, in one essential sense, uniquely his” (1975, p. 12). Thus, Victorian women poets not only revolutionised the way poetry was associated with man exclusively but also created an impact in a broader sense with their poetry resonating with the readers. Poets like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Augusta Webster, and Felicia Hemans blazed the trail for the poems which contributed to the construction of female identities by subverting male domination. These women poets also revolutionised the way poetry was categorised, by directly being the precursors of following generations of women poets.

### **The Body as Text: Theoretical Insights into Crafting Female Identity from the Legacy of “The Second Sex”**

Women have always been ascribed certain traditional roles by the patriarchy and have been disabled from performing their full potential. Some gender roles that are only ascribed to men and women are reduced to certain stereotypes. One of these stereotypes during the Victorian period is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that writing is a male-only profession. This stereotype reinforces the sense of social inequality, banning writing from being an accessible career for women. Having already been disheartened by this ideology, women also face many difficulties in the field, struggling with feelings of insecurity about writing. Gilbert and Gubar refer to Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’ regarding entirely male Western history in their *The*

Madwoman in the Attic and state that women writers and poets suffer from anxiety of authorship since they “must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male” (2020, p. 48). Having no female precursors leads women writers and poets to “a radical fear” that “the act of writing will isolate or destroy” them (p. 49).

Another way of limiting women from realizing their potential, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is fabricating gender myths. In her work, *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir scrutinises the woman myth and draws attention to how women are reduced to certain gender roles by patriarchy with the help of fabricated gender myths. Beauvoir states that “woman is other than man” and is regarded as an object (2001, p. 1407). This social construct is simply created by patriarchal structures to limit women's roles in society to be able to maintain their hegemony. They build their selves and reinforce their authority by positioning women into certain roles and defining them as the other. The woman myth, according to Beauvoir, serves for patriarchy to justify “all privileges and even” to authorise “their abuse” (p. 1409). Therefore, femininity “is a false entity;” it is a sham; a mere fabrication that is constructed by patriarchy to make women the second sex (p. 1407). Myriad dynamics play an important role in the construction of female identity. Thus, this is a journey in which one becomes a woman.

Writing is a revolutionary act for Victorian women writers and poets since this is the only way for them to transcend the boundaries set before them. According to Kari Weil, “Women’s desire is what is most oppressed and repressed by patriarchy, and what most needs to find expression” (2006, p.153). One way of expressing their repressed desires is writing, which is, according to Hélène Cixous, “the fastest and most efficient vehicle for thought” (1994, p. xxii). Although Cixous declares that she is not a feminist, she is mostly associated with French feminism whose pivotal concern is to draw a parallel between writing and the female body. According to Cixous, the function of writing is that it “offers a ‘passageway’ to a new relation between self and other in which both coexist and she outlines her vision of a feminine writing” (1994, p. 40). Thus, writing can be considered a pilgrimage, a quest within, through which women construct their identities. In her article titled *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous states

To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal (2001, p. 2044)

Women regain their desires, pleasures, bodily territories, and their identities by inscribing their bodies to the texts. Writing is an act of empowering women, which also performs the function of subverting male domination. By writing, women share their stories along with their joys and pains. Rita Felski highlights the importance of female texts in her *Literature After Feminism* as follows: “An encounter with a female text is like having an intimate and pleasurable conversation with another woman” (2003, p. 39). As stated by Felski, women benefit from one another’s stories in which “women share a common psychology and a common identity” (p. 40). Those stories have healing power for women who are not only imprisoned physically but also mentally. *Écriture féminine*, which gained popularity among French feminists, is concerned about feminine writing. What *écriture féminine* suggests is that women should inscribe their bodies in their writings which have common traumatic stories. Sharing helps them to overcome their traumas and break both their bodily and mental boundaries. Victorian women writers and poets, who made a complete revolution in the

expression of women's thoughts and feelings, played a significant role in the development of feminism and the construction of female identity by liberating their imprisoned thoughts and feelings.

### Female Body as the Mere Source of Animating Power in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

Although poetry is a very old form of art, there were not many precursors of women poets when its history was taken into account. Nineteenth-century marks a period in which both women writers and women poets gained popularity. However, nineteenth-century women's poetry seems to be quite underestimated, though, when compared to the novel genre. In her work titled *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, Angela Leighton calls attention to the fact that "women's poetry of the nineteenth century, much more than the novel, was written and read as part of a self-consciously female tradition" (1992, p. 1). One reason why Victorian women poets are neglected by feminist critics could be, as Leighton further suggests, that

the hidden consequence of such pioneer studies as Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1963), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) was to establish a canon of women's writing which is predominantly [...] that of the novel. (p.1)

Most of these works scrutinise the characters in popular novels which leads to the unintentional overshadowing of the poetry as genre. Nevertheless, poetry was safer than novels in terms of addressing the issues women faced without taking much risk.

Women poets in the nineteenth century used their poems as a tool of subverting male domination. In the first place, they deconstruct the idea of poetry belonging exclusively to men. They also raise awareness in society by raising their voice as women. At the centre of Christina Rossetti's poetry is a woman. She rejects the conventional codes of society that are imposed upon Victorian women and refuses the societal classification of women. As also stated by Karen Alkalay-Gut in her article "Aesthetic and Decadent Poetry," Rossetti "asserts a woman's individual identity by refusing to conform to the conventional rituals of courtship, engagement, and marriage" (2000, p. 236). In her poem *Goblin Market*, Rossetti skilfully depicts the Victorian approach towards women who are always considered to be submissive and open to being deceived. The market depicted in the poem is full of goblins that try to hunt women with irresistibly delicious-looking fruit:

Morning and evening  
Maids heard the goblins cry:  
"Come buy our orchard fruits,  
Come buy, come buy" (1-4)

The marketplace where maids go shopping is full of tempting fruit. Goblins are merchants that try to sell all sorts of exotic fruit including "[a]pples and quinces, [l]emons and oranges, [p]lump unpeck'd cherries, [m]elons and raspberries, [b]loom-down-cheek'd peaches, [s]wart-headed mulberries" to their customers who are just maids in the poem (5-10). It is as if it is not the fruit that is marketed here; yet, the maids who are being exchanged. As Leighton states in *Victorian Women Poets*, "the fruit is not only evil but also beautiful; the goblins are not only devils but also men, brothers or delightful animals; fallen women are not only streetwalkers and sinners but also loving sisters" (1992, p. 137). The poem is about two sisters, Laura and

Lizzie, who go to the Goblin Market to satisfy their curiosity. Goblins try to seduce the two sisters saying that their “grapes fresh from the vine” and they should taste the figs “to fill [their] mouth” (28) and their “[c]itrons from the South” (29) that are “sweet to tongue and sound to eye” (30). How can a woman remain pure among all the delicious fruit? The seducers are portrayed as goblin men and the ones who have tendencies to be seduced, to be lured are portrayed as women.

Rossetti uses exotic fruit as a tempting offer for the maids, which can be considered to have a direct reference to the original sin that causes both Adam and Eve to be expelled from the Garden of Eden due to their disobedience to God regarding the forbidden fruit. Rossetti criticises not only society’s pressure on women but also the way women are reflected in literature. Most of the literature consists of traditional roles suggesting women how to be ‘angels’ at home or what to do not to become a fallen woman by telling the stories of fallen women. According to Felski, Victorian literature consists of codes of etiquette that suggest tailored gender roles for women. As she puts it in her work *Literature After Feminism*, “[b]ooks fulfilled a variety of roles for women in Victorian England. They were often turned to for guidance, as valuable sources of moral advice and religious instruction” (2003, p. 30). Literature functions as imposing patriarchal ideology on women, who are already imprisoned within the walls of their houses. The house is the safest place for a woman to protect her chastity. On the contrary, the outside is full of danger and seductive men who would seduce women and cause them to lose their innocence. Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (2008) represents an unsafe place for women- a place out of their houses where they can lose their chastity.

The two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, exert the utmost effort not to be tempted by goblin men in the market. Even their bodies reflect the stress they are under as they know they are in danger. They walk “[w]ith clasping arms and cautioning lips” and “[w]ith tingling cheeks and fingertips” (38-39). They both need to be cautious not to lose self-control. Although Laura warns Lizzie not to “look at goblin men” and “buy their fruits,” her curiosity gets the better of her (42-43). Although curiosity has always been regarded as a very dangerous passion for women since Pandora opened up the box that is believed to have brought curses upon mankind, it, indeed, serves for reconciliation for the repressed desires of women. Being mesmerised by the mouth-watering fruit, Laura desires to taste the fruit globes. However, she cannot afford to buy fruit. The two sly goblin brothers persuade Laura to cut a golden curl from her hair to be able to exchange the fruit:

“You have much gold upon your head,”  
They answer’d all together:  
“Buy from us with a golden curl.”  
She clipp’d a precious golden lock,  
She dropp’d a tear more rare than pearl,  
Then suck’d their fruit globes fair or red:  
Sweeter than honey from the rock,  
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,  
Clearer than water flow’d that juice;  
She never tasted such before,  
How should it cloy with length of use?  
She suck’d and suck’d and suck’d the more  
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;  
She suck’d until her lips were sore (123-136)

The golden lock represents innocence and virginity, as well as the sacrifice Laura gives in return for this bodily experience. She pays for quenching her curiosity with her bodily sacrifice. No matter how many times Lizzie tells Laura not to "loiter in the glen, in the haunts of goblin men" (145-6), Laura decides to go there again since she has eaten her "fill, yet [her] mouth waters still" (166). Lizzie is concerned that Laura's curiosity will bring her regret in the end, dragging her into a mistake. She warns her reminding her of Jeanie who "met [goblin men] in the moonlight, [t]ook their gifts both choice and many, [a]te their fruits and wore their flowers" and of how she ends up in the end (148-50). Lizzie's anxiety regarding her sister's dangerous acts reflects the attitude of Victorian society towards curiosity. Laura, on the contrary, represents the curious and enthusiastic woman who is definitely not favoured by society as she tends to make mistakes. While Lizzie is "most placid in her look," Laura is "most like a leaping flame" (217-18).

Laura, having tasted once all the delicious fruit the Goblin men sell, is now held back from tasting them ever again by her sister's warnings. She suffers "[i]n sullen silence of exceeding pain" (271) with the thought of not being able to buy "such dainty fruit" again (257). Having seen her sister's decline, Lizzie is terrified to see her sister's "knocking at Death's door" (321). She decides to "buy fruit to comfort" (310) Laura and puts "a silver penny in her purse" to buy some fruit from the Goblin Market (324). According to Jill Rappoport, Lizzie's silver penny represents her power. As Rappoport puts it in her article "The Price of Redemption in the 'Goblin Market,'" "Lizzie's coin insures her against market forces, protecting her to take on the role of rescuer rather than victim" (2010, p. 861). She rescues her sister by resisting the offers of the goblin men in the market. The goblin men do not accept to give her fruit even though she has tossed them her silver penny. They insist Lizzie to "sit down and feast with" them (380). Being rejected by Lizzie, goblin men who once have sweet voices turn out to be evil creatures, "[b]arking, mewling, hissing, [and] mocking" Lizzie (403). They tear Lizzie's gown and twitch "her hair out by the roots" (404). Although goblins harm Lizzie's body by "scratch[ing] her, pinch[ing] her black as ink, kick[ing] and knock[ing] her," she does not even open her mouth to say something so as not to taste their fruit (427-28). Lizzie's struggle with the goblin men for the sake of saving her sister, Laura, represents woman power in subverting male domination. She defies male authority by resisting goblin men and not eating the fruit which they try to "cram a mouthful in" her mouth (432). She not only resists them in a way that she is not seduced by their tempting words, but also shows bodily resistance despite the force they impose upon her body. She runs home and calls her sister Laura:

Did you miss me?  
Come and kiss me.  
Never mind my bruises,  
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
Eat me, drink me, love me;  
Laura, make much of me;  
For your sake I have braved the glen  
And had to do with goblin merchant men.  
(465-74)

Lizzie's confrontation with the goblins results in damage to her body. The bruises on her body represent the traces of hegemonic power over woman body. However, both male power and hegemonic ideological power imposed upon her body are subverted by Lizzie's using her body as the source of animating power to bring her sister to life again. Lizzie has to sacrifice her body to bring Laura back to life. She carries the pulp of the forbidden fruit on her body to be able to give it to her sister. Rossetti highlights the importance of sisterhood both in the construction of female identity and the subversion of male domination. Moreover, she emphasises the power of the female body as opposed to patriarchy's power over women. In *The Goblin Market*, Rossetti not only criticises the approach towards women in Victorian society but also subverts male domination and deconstructs the male power by using the woman body as the mere source of animating power.

### Conclusion

Victorian Era sets the tone for the start of a long-lasting struggle that seeks to dismantle gender stereotypes which have been imposed on women by patriarchy throughout history. Writing, which is considered a male-only profession till then, plays a crucial role in liberating women from the rigid categories of the male-dominated world. Since writing became a precarious act of resistance to societal and institutional norms and codes, especially during the Decadence, poetry is considered a safer domain not only for men but also for women. Victorian women poets pioneered using their pens to challenge the hegemonic structures, which opened up ways and inspired many women successors to craft their identity from the patriarchy's legacy. In this sense, Christina Rossetti's *The Goblin Market* ridicules male hegemony by openly pointing out the issue that what they have established for centuries is an ideological market where women are devalued and marginalised for the sake of maintaining power.

In *The Goblin Market*, Rossetti criticises the male systems which maintain their control over women. This market is established to maintain its order by luring women into buying all sorts of exotic fruit in return for either their money or bodily sacrifices. The poem mirrors how women are viewed as beings who are unable to resist temptation and control their impulses. In this ruthless system, women are left with no choice but to compromise themselves. Rossetti ridicules men by portraying them as goblins which embody wickedness and abusiveness in her poetry. She also highlights the importance of sisterhood in this evil system to survive and maintain their existence regardless of the innocence they lose and the sacrifices they have to make. Lizzie's confrontation with the goblins for the sake of reviving her sister Laura at her deathbed represents the power of sisterhood. Lizzie's using her body as an animating power embodies the women power. Rossetti's *The Goblin Market* encourages women to resist male oppression and highlights the significance of sisterhood to survive in this hegemonic system.

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