

## Discuss the significance of the marketplace for an understanding of Victorian Fiction.

Christina Rossetti frames 'Goblin Market'<sup>1</sup> within a larger biblical metanarrative, alluding to the story of Genesis, for one. As Laura succumbs to the goblin's exotic fruits in the poem, so did Eve consume the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge before her. It is notably 'knowledge' that Eve desired in the fruit. In *Paradise Lost*, the serpent persuades Eve to eat the apple because it has brought about a 'Strange alteration in me, to degree/ Of reason in my inward powers; and speech [...] Thenceforth to speculation high or deep/ I turned my thoughts'<sup>2</sup>. The fruit has given the serpent more than the knowledge of good and evil; it has taught him the means to reason, speak and think for himself. Taking the goblin's market as a parody of the booming capitalist economic marketplace of imperialist Britain – with its persistent advertising 'Come buy, come buy' and fruits from 'the South' (p. 1) - what commodity could better represent such fruits of knowledge within this environment than books? Laura and Lizzie encounter then a literary marketplace; a marketplace that offers up language, sensuality, experience and ultimately, books, to women. And it is significantly to women that these texts are offered, as Rossetti's marketplace is clearly gendered - setting 'maids' (p.1) against the goblin men, 'brother with sly brother' (p. 3) - as the Victorian literary market also was. Thus, Laura is the women colluding in the literary marketplace and its exchange of the fruits of knowledge and language via books.

As Eve is enticed by the serpent's acquired 'speech', so too is Laura drawn to the Goblin's language. Kristeva describes women as "estranged from language"<sup>3</sup> and in a consumer-culture

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<sup>1</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'Goblin Market' (1862), in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Minneapolis, Lerner Publishing Group, 2014), p. 219. This quotation was influenced by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 567.

<sup>3</sup> Kristeva, quoted by Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women, Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 2.

marketplace, where ‘desire is always for that which is forbidden’<sup>4</sup>, Laura yearns for language which, as a woman, she cannot have. She is thereby enticed by the Goblin’s linguistic display, her head turned by the explosion of sibilance and plosives in the truncated opening advertisement of goblin fruits - ‘Apples and quinces/ Lemons and oranges, [...] Crab-apples, dewberries,/ Pine-apples, blackberries’ (p. 1). And verbal seduction continues; ‘The whisk-tailed merchant baid her taste/ In tones as smooth as honey’ (p. 3), echoing the earlier sibilance. The notion of synaesthesia here (sound, texture and taste are referenced in combination) fuses phonology with food. This is later echoed in the Goblin’s ‘iterated jingle/ of sugar baited words’ (p. 7) Language is ‘sugary’ sweet, there to be eaten and consumed, tasting just the same as the ‘sweeter than honey’ (p. 4) fruit. Yaeger speaks of a ‘writer as honey-mad woman, as someone mad for the honey of speech’<sup>5</sup>. Laura is certainly ‘mad for the honey of speech’, getting a taste of the nectar of language in the forbidden fruit. Perhaps Laura is Yaeger’s writer, but equally her honey-madness is befitting of the female reader.

In the poem’s Victorian epoch, female desire for language, both as writer and reader, materialises in the catchpennies, chapbooks, penny dreadfuls, sensation novels, broadsheets and the three-volume novel (to name a few) which flood the literary marketplace. Yaeger’s ‘honey-mad woman’ is also ‘a blissful consumer and purveyor of language’<sup>6</sup>; her use of ‘consumer’ and ‘purveyor’ transferrable descriptors of the capitalist marketplace that literature enters for the female reader and writer as literacy rates soar. The ‘honey-mad women’ is a rampant writer and buyer of books.

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Robbins, ‘Always Leave Them Wanting More: Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* and the Failed Circulations of Desire’ in *Economies of Desire at the Victorian Fin de Siècle, Libidinal Lives* ed. by Jane Ford, Kim Edwards Keates, and Patricia Pulham (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 21-34 (p. 31).

<sup>5</sup> Yaeger, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Yaeger, p. 28.

Rossetti's linguistically charged fruits arguably allude to these popular texts, in particular, works of sensation fiction. While 'Goblin Market' was composed in 1859, and the burgeoning period of sensation fiction is largely defined as the decade of the 1860s, Gilbert notes that the 'sensation story' had 'existed for years in broadsheets and penny papers'<sup>7</sup> previously. Like the goblin's fruits, sensation novels were regarded as highly seductive, consumable and containing, as one Victorian critic wrote, 'forbidden knowledge'<sup>8</sup>. And crucially, as with the interplay between consumable forbidden fruit and language in 'Goblin Market', the contemporaneous critical rhetoric surrounding 'sensation stories' is encoded in gastronomic metaphors of consumption. Female sensation readers are regarded as hungrily 'eating' and devouring books, and thus conversely, Laura's ravenous fruit-eating can be regarded as language-consuming book-reading.

This book-food is regarded as detrimental, both in the poem and reviews. As Heller writes, 'obsessive alimantal metaphors [were] used by reviewers and critics to describe sensation fiction as corrupting and contaminating food for women'<sup>9</sup>. For example, one such reviewer writes of penny fiction:

the feast spread for them is ready and abundant; but every dish is poisoned, unclean and shameful. Every flavour is a false one, every condiment vile, every morsel of food is doctored, every draught of wine is drugged, no true hunger is satisfied, no true thirst quenched; and the hapless guest departs with a depraved appetite, and a palate more than ever dead to every pure taste, and every perception of what is good and true.<sup>10</sup>

*Edinburgh Review* (1887)

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<sup>7</sup> Pamela K. Gilbert, 'Ingestion, Contagion, Seduction: Victorian Metaphors of Reading' in *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth-and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, ed. by Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 65-86 (p. 75).

<sup>8</sup> Oliphant quoted by Susan David Bernstein, 'Dirty Reading: Sensation Fiction, Women, and Primitivism', *Critics*, 36.2 (1994), 213-241 (p. 231).

<sup>9</sup> Heller and Moran, 'Introduction: Scenes of the Apple: Appetite, Desire, Writing', in *Scenes of the Apple*, pp. 1-42 (p. 26).

<sup>10</sup> 'The Literature of the Streets', *Edinburgh Review*, (1887), [n. name], quoted by Gilbert, p. 77.

The similarities between the fabricated feast of popular novels and the false fruits of ‘Goblin Market’ is remarkable, further affirming the idea that Rossetti’s fruits are in fact literary fruits. As Laura’s appetite is insatiable - ‘I ate my fill/ yet my mouth water still’ (p. 5 ) – the female reader is similarly voracious: ‘no true hunger is satisfied, no true thirst quenched’. Sensation fiction was, in accordance, regarded as highly addictive: as one reviewer writes of all novel reading (albeit with masculine pronouns), ‘if he reads many, [he] becomes very soon an intellectual voluptuary [...] an incessant craving for some new excitement.’<sup>11</sup> Like the gin craze that shook the Victorian nation, popular fiction readers ostensibly indulged in the same hedonism. This sybaritic consumer allegedly disregarded textual quality, as is said by the *Edinburgh Review*, they are left with ‘a palate more than ever dead to every pure taste’. Kilgour writes, ‘intellectual taste is associated with choice and control, the mastery of what is eaten by the eater’<sup>12</sup>. The rampant guzzler of sensation fiction supposedly has no such control; her taste belongs to the compulsive consumption of marketplace low-brow fiction. And Laura, with her insatiable craving for literary fruits, can be regarded in the same fashion.

As the bookish feast is secretly poisonous, the lavish goblin fruits are lethal. For the female reader, consumerism is turned on its head; the consumer becomes the consumed. In Genesis it is said of the forbidden fruits, ‘for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’ (Genesis 2. 17). Within this religious subtext, after eating the goblin fruits, Laura fast-approaches death - ‘her hair grew thin and grey;/ she dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn/ to swift decay and burn/ Her fire away’ (p. 8). The *Edinburgh Review* and ‘Goblin Market’ resonate with the ‘the parable of A Tree and its Fruit’, where Matthew states:

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<sup>11</sup> Noah Porter, (1877), quoted by Gilbert, p. 66

<sup>12</sup> Kilgour quoted by Gilbert, p. 67.

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruit. [...] a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

(Matthew 7:15-20)

Popular fiction is regarded the 'false prophet' of knowledge, a false book carrying evil fruits, capable of damaging the reader.

And why were these book-fruits considered profoundly evil and immoral? Perhaps because the knowledge embodied in works of popular fiction, particularly sensation fiction, often unleashed a female sexuality, upsetting the status quo of the patriarchy. Webster writes that, 'the secrecy surrounding sexual activity has been, for me, the price all women paid for femininity. We were not to speak of our desires'<sup>13</sup>. In works of sensation fiction, with their loose sexual codes of adultery and licentiousness, were desires spoken. Accordingly, the critical rhetoric expressing books as a form of consumption used sexual metaphors (in addition to the gastronomic ones). Female sexuality and the female bodies' imbrication in the literary market was two-fold: the female writer was often depicted as a whore, while the female reader was sexually violated or seduced by the text. Denoting the latter, Gilbert reiterates, 'reading is equal to sexual activity, and reading for pleasure is equal to illicit and promiscuous sexual activity'<sup>14</sup>.

Laura could occupy either side of this sexually encoded split of women's place in the literary market; the sexual overtones of the fruit-feasting enters a grey area between violation and collusion. Ardently desiring the fruit but lacking in gold, the goblins say to Laura, "'you have much gold upon your head'" (p. 4), "'Buy from us with a golden curl.'" (p. 4). Her golden locks become economised, her body capital, sold for a taste of the fruit. Laura is depicted much like a prostitute, who 'sells' her

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<sup>13</sup> Paula Webster quoted by Yaeger, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert, p. 67

body. As Laura ‘clipped a precious golden lock’ from her hair, however, Pope’s ‘the Rape of the Lock’ is alluded to, and the symbolic rape which ensues therein. But Laura’s lock is not stolen or ‘raped’ - she willingly gives it over. And devouring the fruit, Laura ‘sucked and sucked and sucked the more’, with sumptuous, sexualised orality, suggesting her collusion in the symbolically sexual act. ‘The control of appetite was an important indicator of a girl’s ability to control or suppress her libidinal appetites’<sup>15</sup> argues Brumberg, and Laura clearly does not succeed in this department. She is the sexually loose woman, feeding on the licentious texts and words that the literary market offers as either writer or reader.

Lizzie, on the other hand, is the restrained woman. In her controlled appetite, her refusal to eat the goblin’s fruit, she abnegates from sexuality, language and books. Upon the first interaction with the goblin calls, ‘Lizzie veiled her blushes’ (p. 2), covering herself in virginal bride-like symbolism from her sexual ‘blushes’. And hence when the goblins ‘toiled her gown and soiled her stocking’ (p. 11), with sexual aggression this time, Lizzie does not eat their fruit. The goblins ‘pinched her black as ink’ (p. 12), inflicting words and pen upon her body. Yet, ‘Lizzie uttered not a word;/ Would not open lip from lip’ (p. 12). She is the silent woman; she refuses to collude in the literary marketplace, she is its antithesis. By Lizzie’s act, Laura is saved: ‘juices/ squeezed from goblin fruits for you’ (p. 13) are brought back upon Lizzie’s body – the antidote to Laura’s suffering. Lizzie’s puritanical sentiment is glorified, like Christ, she is the redeemer. In biblical echo, ‘Life out of death’ (p. 15) is resultantly achieved.

While the ‘honey-mad’ Laura may be henceforth excluded from the literary-goblin marketplace, a place ultimately depicted by Rossetti as dangerous for the female writer and reader,

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<sup>15</sup> Michie Brumberg, summarised by Heller and Moran, p 10.

her voice still persists. The text ends focused on orality and story-telling, the female authorial voice circulating within its own private matriarchy.:

Afterwards, when both were wives  
With children of their own;  
Their mother-hearts beset with fears,  
Their lives bound up in tender lives;  
Laura would call the little ones  
And tell them of her early prime  
[...]  
The wicked, quant-fruit merchant men,  
Their fruits like honey to the throat  
But poison in the blood

(p. 15-16)

The narrative is framed, presumably revealing it to be, in fact, Laura's tale. Heller notes 'the dual association of the mouth with both eating and speaking'<sup>16</sup>; as 'Goblin Market' begins with the mouth (eating) so does it end with the mouth (orality). Followingly, the goblin's fruits becomes Laura's own maternal, oratory fruits which she can feed to 'the little ones'. The knowledge, language and text she has gained from the market endures.

However, the notion of the fiction as one for the 'little ones' to be iterated within the privacy of the home is reductive for the women. 'Goblin Market' has conclusively established a dichotomy between the male literary market of tangible literary goods and the female domestic sphere of oral, children's tales. While female artistry is encouraged by Rossetti (as shown by the orally emphasised ending), women's involvement in the economic literary marketplace as either reader or writer, is ultimately rejected. Paradoxically though, it is the fruits of the marketplace that stimulated this

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<sup>16</sup> Heller and Moran, p. 2

‘children’s story’. And given that the children’s literary market was beginning to burgeon in Rossetti’s epoch, this tale perhaps does not lie so far from the marketplace as the poem suggests. Most ironically of all, ‘Goblin Market’ itself becomes circulated in the literary marketplace; Rossetti becoming complicit in the very marketplace she critiques in her poem.



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