

Claire Chee B077161 To what end is fantasy deployed by High Victorian writing

by Claire Chee

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To what ends is fantasy deployed by High Victorian writing?

While the stigma that the Victorian era receives for being prudish, drab and intolerant may be undeserved, it did in fact place great importance on social propriety (Purchase xi).

These values extended themselves to the establishment of the poem as a system that yields meaning only to the intelligent, deserving reader, concealing Victorian poets' private

thoughts in public forms (Bristow 37). Fantasy, aptly described by Kathryn Hume as

'metaphoric images that...bypass an audience's verbal defences', allows for complex, intimate issues to be made clearer by way of exaggeration as well as providing an additional, protective layer of authorial detachment from the subject matter, and, as such, was a perfect medium for simultaneous expression and concealment (Hume 20). Lord Alfred Tennyson's

The Lady of Shalott and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, written in 1832 and 1862

respectively, serve as examples of High Victorian writing that deploy fantasy, defined in this essay as 'containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural' and a

'departure from consensus reality' (Manlove 3; Hume 21). By analysing their portrayal of the magical and the mortal within an otherworldly realm through the use of language and

imagery in both poems, this essay will argue that fantasy is used to the end of delineating

societally driven, yet highly personal dilemmas of artistic philosophy, commerce and gender.

The Lady of Shalott herself is the most prominent element of fantasy in *The Lady of Shalott*, portrayed as a mystical creature that lives in isolation, serving to elucidate

Tennyson's understanding of the role of art and the artist. The surreal nature of the Lady is

first alluded to indirectly through Tennyson's description of her abode as 'a space of flowers'

where 'the lilies blow' (Tennyson 16, 7). The use of floral imagery in this context connotes

femininity, mystery and a tinge of magic, emphasised further by the fact that 'willows whiten [and] aspens quiver' while 'little breezes dusk and shiver, suggesting the presence of a force

that is greater than nature, having the power to affect it (10-11). Tennyson goes on to perpetuate a sense of mythical fantasy, posing rhetorical questions to the reader about 'who hath seen her wave her hand' or 'seen her stand', emphasising that the Lady's mere existence is uncertain within the already fictitious, Arthurian realm of the poem and it is within this cloudy solitude that the Lady is said to '[weave] by night and day a magic web with colours gay' (24-25, 37-38). This implies that the Lady creates like an arachnid, both instinctively and innately, beyond the limits of circadian rhythm and highlights Tennyson's understanding of artistic tendencies as a compulsion that is born from within and art as an unending, meticulous practice. Not only is the Lady a 'fairy', but 'a curse is on her' to remain on her island, reflecting Tennyson's summative opinion of artists as beings that exist not only outside of mainstream society, but outside of the natural world and its order (25, 40).

Although depicted by Tennyson as transcending convention, the Lady still grows 'half sick of shadows' and seeks to join the mortal world of Camelot (71). The trigger for this desire is Sir Lancelot '[flashing] into [her] crystal mirror', himself a potent example of fantasy as a well-known personality across Arthurian legend (106). Upon his entrance – both into the narrative and the Lady's heart – the sun is described as 'dazzling' and 'flamed' while the bridle of his horse 'glittered' like 'some branch of stars...hung in the golden Galaxy' (75, 76, 82, 83-84). His helmet and helmet-feather also 'burned like one burning flame together' as he rode, compared by Tennyson to 'some bearded meteor, trailing light' (94, 98). Lancelot's otherworldliness is emphasised by Tennyson's profusion of heat and light related diction and imagery and consequent lexical field, establishing him as a messianic figure that provokes the Lady's eventual departure from safety.

Flavia Alaya writes that *The Lady of Shalott* is an 'unresolved expression' of Tennyson's dilemma between artistic dedication and social responsibility, a claim that this


essay believes is better modified by substituting the latter phrase with **social validation** (Alaya 273). The final remark features Lancelot commenting on the Lady having 'a lovely face' and symbolising approval, albeit for the beauty of her countenance, not her art (Tennyson 169). By desiring to interact with the townspeople of Camelot, the Lady represents a conflict between idealistic notions of art created and appreciated in private and the necessity of mortal judgement, however flawed. Despite her seemingly productive, lone existence and the knowledge of her curse, the Lady still resigns to leave, emphasising the intensity of her need for human contact and acceptance and obliging the reader to consider the significance of base desires in the context of artistry, posing the question of whether isolation from them is beneficial, or even possible.

Upon reaching the shores of Camelot however, the Lady meets a dramatic demise; her death is a key contribution to the fantasy of the poem, highlighting Tennyson's personal lack of resolution regarding his stance on issues of desire, satisfaction and conviction. 'Robed in snowy white' and 'singing her last song', an image of purity and doom, the Lady floats towards Camelot, proceeding to chant 'loudly [and] lowly' until 'her blood was frozen slowly and her eyes were darkened wholly' (136, 143, 146, 147-148). Previously described as coming down the river like 'some bold seer in a trance, seeing all his own mischance', the Lady is portrayed by Tennyson to possess supernatural foresight, pre-emptively and appropriately stunned by the graphic events that are to follow (127-128). The entire scene of the Lady's death is highly dramatized and bordering on the occult, a concrete result of her decisive flouting of her curse. In juxtaposition with an undecided Tennyson, it embodies determination, and its surreal nature serves to compensate for his ambivalence. Through the performative death of the Lady, **Tennyson blurs the line between art and artist**, and the ending

of the poem encapsulates his dilemma of desire and denial of society, presenting both the Lady's initial and ultimate state as inhumane.


Unlike the subtlety of *The Lady of Shalott*, fantasy within *Goblin Market* strikes more jarring, explicit parallels with Rossetti's fear of commerce and its associated masculinity in the context of industrial, patriarchal England through the goblins and their magic fruit. Described in ornate detail, the peddled fruits are said to include 'bloom-down-cheeked peaches', 'rare pears and... damsons' and 'wild free-born cranberries' among many others (Rossetti 9, 23-24, 11). Like the Lady's dwelling, the fantasy of the fruit begins in its defiance of natural systems; these fruits are seasonal, with peaches, damsons, pears and cranberries belonging to summer, autumn and winter respectively, and would not be 'sweet to tongue and sound to eye' at the same time (30). Paid for with 'a precious golden lock', the fruit caused Laura to develop 'sunk eyes and faded mouth' and turned her hair 'thin and gray' (126, 288, 277). Rossetti portrays the act of mercantilism as one that requires more than a monetary cost, using the fruit's sinister physical after effects to emphasise deep personal sacrifice to the extent of violation. By equating sufficient payment with hair, Rossetti also demonstrates the universal accessibility of the fruit; one's eligibility to purchase it is independent of class, alluding to capitalist ideology whereby anyone with the means to procure goods may do so, and furthering the parallel between materialism and moral evils that may befall everyone. Rossetti also uses the supernatural fruit and its undesirable repercussions to convey a mistrust of commerce, juxtaposing literal consumption with the growing consumerism that came with Britain's position as the world's leading industrial nation (Purchase 86).

Elizabeth Helsinger reads *Goblin Market* as an expression of Rossetti's strong suspicion of a world of unrestricted exchange 'associated primarily with men', believing that

the fantasy of the poem lies not in the magical lore but in the fact that women can successfully participate in commerce (Helsing 907, 919). This essay agrees with her observation of Rossetti's apparent distaste for patriarchy and masculinity by association, but in a wider context than buying and selling goods. The goblins are confirmed to be men, albeit overtly surreal ones as the group consists of one with 'a cat's face', one '[~~tramping~~ ing] a tail', one '[tramping] at a rat's pace' and one '[crawling] like a snail' (Rossetti 71-76). Rossetti's use of animal imagery is strategic and powerful, mainly naming creatures that are either predatory and pestilent, using connotations of danger and nuisance to evoke an immediate sense of unease.

The danger posed by the goblins' initial appearances is substantiated by the climax of the poem as they assault Lizzie, '[scratching] her, [pinching] her black as ink, [kicking and knocking] her, [mauling and mocking] her' (427-429). This physical violence accompanies graphic imagery of attempting to force fruit into her mouth, resulting in the juices '[lodging] in dimples of her chin and [streaking] her neck' (435-436). The language that Rossetti employs is distinctly sexual, with the sweet, sticky syrup of the fruits resembling male ejaculate and symbolizing dominance, which, combined with their brute behaviour, effectively depicts a scene of rape. In the Victorian era, men controlled all social arenas, and women were thought to be weaker due to their 'uterine economy' and treated as paradoxical figures of seduction and submission (Purchase 74). The 'wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men' represent Rossetti's unfavourable impression of male entitlement and authority, as well as embodying an unsavoury dynamic that was undoubtedly rooted in contemporary gender discrimination (Rossetti 553).

In stark contrast, Rossetti's sanctified perception of femininity and female relationships is also highlighted by *Goblin Market's* use of fantasy in the form of the surreal

idyll of the sisters and their life together. The sisters are described as sleeping like ‘two blossoms on one stem [and] two flakes of new fall’n snow’, rising as a pair to ‘[fetch] in honey [and milk] the cows’, followed by ‘[kneading] cakes of whitest wheat’ (188-189, 203, 205). Rossetti’s invocation of natural imagery conveys a nuanced ideal of sisterhood as involving not only physical closeness but an inherent, intrinsic attachment to one another, similar and united. Her depiction of their daily tasks connotes holiness and purity, with Israel being referred to in the Bible as the ‘land flowing with milk and honey’¹ and white being associated with virtue, ‘whitest’ thereby implying the highest degree of virtuousness, establishing their bond as a paragon of morality (*Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Exo. 3:8). Lona Packer states that no poem by Rossetti is ‘more clearly based on personal experience’, a claim that is supported in the context of female relationships by reference to Rossetti’s personal life, having spent most of her time with women of her family  (Packer 375; Greenblatt 1489). Rossetti’s use of the picturesque is a form of fantasy, especially in its increasing scarcity amidst booming industry, and her idealistic depiction of the relationship between the sisters and their existence reflects her own proclivity towards female companionship.

The Victorian era was an epoch of societal intervention, furious industry and dated gender constructs underpinned by a keen sense of decorum that encouraged moderation and concealment of thought. As such, the Lady and her demise embodied Tennyson’s dilemma over the role of the artist and their art within the pull of society as emphasised by Lancelot’s kindling presence in *The Lady of Shalott*, while the goblins and their fruit represented Rossetti’s distrust of masculinity and capitalism, shown to corrupt the two sisters that reflect her veneration of femininity in *Goblin Market*. By deploying elements of fantasy that ‘[evoke]

¹ “I have come down...to bring them up out of that land to...a land flowing with milk and honey” Exodus 3:8, ESV.

wonder', complex, personal and potentially contentious issues that require dramatization to make clear became more easily illuminated, and the supernatural nature of the characters and their environment allowed the writers to abstract from their subject matter, in keeping with Victorian standards of propriety and privacy (Manlove 1). Moreover, the use of fantasy in High Victorian writing allowed writers to indulge their imagination while interpreting life's convolutions, creating the 'divine illusion' of poetry that harkened an ultimate end of being an escape that '[consoled]... [and sustained them]' (Arnold 1-2).

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GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

85/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

This is a fantastic essay that discusses the uses of fantasy in Tennyson and Rossetti. You engage closely with both poems with high levels of perception and nuance. The way you engage with secondary criticism is particularly impressive and is why I've awarded such a high mark. You confidentially argue with and build upon secondary sources which is very sophisticated for this level.

You have a strong introduction and conclusion. Your structure is effective. This essay is written with an astounding level of clarity and precision, conveying complex ideas concisely and effectively. One small point about your implication of authorial intention on p2- it's best to not talk about the text's meaning via what the author intended unless with reference to context (which you do well on p6). You also don't need bullet points for your bibliography.

PAGE 1



Comment 1

This could be clearer - maybe with another connecting sentence?



Comment 2

Excellent opening

PAGE 2



Comment 3

Good

PAGE 3



Comment 4

Brilliant analysis here



Comment 5

This is great but be careful talking about authorial intent

PAGE 4



Comment 6

Good

PAGE 5



Comment 7

why are you using [] here?

PAGE 6



Comment 8

This is the correct way to talk about authorial context

PAGE 7

PAGE 8

PAGE 9
