

# Anomalous Masculinity and Sacred Femininity. Gender and Power in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

Paola Partenza

Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara  
([paola.partenza@unich.it](mailto:paola.partenza@unich.it))

## Abstract

Drawing on Kristeva's *abjection* theory, this article demonstrates how Christina Rossetti critiques Victorian society to reinforce young women's moral foundations through *re-sacralising* the female role. Rossetti addresses female vulnerability and women's challenges in escaping abjection. *Goblin Market* functions as sharp social critique, exposing dangers within patriarchal structures where women risk being «neither subject nor object» (Kristeva 1982, p. 1). Through Deleuze and Guattari's framework, this analysis proposes how Rossetti's male figures – the goblin men – align with the *anomalous*, representing destabilising forces at social margins.

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## Parole chiave

Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*, poetry

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## Introduction

The relationship between biology, gender, and culture has been a key focus in feminist theory and the history of sexuality. Thomas Walter Laqueur's *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990) made a significant contribution to this field by examining how sexual differences were understood and portrayed in Western intellectual thought. This theoretical framework has been recognised by scholars as one of the most influential studies of the twentieth century in the fields of gender and sexuality. Laqueur's central argument challenges the doctrine of biological determinism by demonstrating that cultural forces primarily shaped understandings of female sexuality throughout history. His analysis reveals how concepts of sexual difference have served broader social purposes. Building on Laqueur's notion of the «body's imperative to ensure reproductive mating»<sup>1</sup>, Karen Harvey argues that this imperative functions «to reassess bodies in order to stabilise and maintain a social order of gender inequality»<sup>2</sup>. This cultural construction of sexuality becomes particularly evident in Laqueur's examination of historical shifts in sexual understanding. As Harvey explains, Laqueur traced how «the move from one-sex to a two-sex model in the eighteenth century was changing understandings of conception»<sup>3</sup>, with one consequence being the «demotion of the female orgasm»<sup>4</sup>. This historical transformation illustrates Laqueur's broader thesis: that sexual knowledge has consistently been shaped by social and political needs rather than objective biological observation. A significant dimension of this critique is grounded in the assumption that the eighteenth century constitutes «the century of sex and the body»<sup>5</sup> revealing how medical knowledge<sup>6</sup> about sexuality reflected both expanding scientific understanding and evolving social structures that shaped new conceptions of womanhood:

Social and political changes are not, in themselves, explanations for the interpretation of bodies. The rise of Evangelical religion, Enlightenment political theory, the development of new sorts of public spaces in the eighteenth century, Lockean ideas of marriage as a contract, the cataclysmic possibilities for social change wrought by the French Revolution, post-revolutionary conservatism, post-revolutionary feminism, the factory system with its restructuring of the sexual division of labour, the rise of a free market economy in services and commodities, the birth of classes, singly or in combination – none of these caused the making of a new sexed body. Instead, the remaking of the body is itself intrinsic to each of these developments<sup>7</sup>.

Subsequent feminist scholarship has illuminated the evolving conceptualisations of reproduction and their implications for women's autonomy and sexual subjectivity. Ruth Perry's analysis emphasises the ideological transformation that occurred once reproduction came to be conceived as a process no longer tied to women's sexual desire

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Harvey, *The Century of Sex? Gender, Bodies, and Sexuality in the Long Eighteenth Century*, «The Historical Journal», 45/4, 2012, pp. 899-916, p. 902.

<sup>3</sup> Ivi, p. 903.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> For scholarly discourse on the application of medical knowledge, see Mark S.R. Jenner and Bertrand O. Taithe, *The Historiographical Body*, in Roger Cooter, John Pickstone, (eds.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Medicine in the Twentieth Century*, London-New York, Routledge, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Laqueur, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Within this theoretical framework, Michel Foucault's socio-political analysis of women's domestic roles proves particularly illuminating. Foucault demonstrates that the prescribed functions of wife and mother are inherently dependent upon the regulation and deployment of female sexuality (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley, New York, Vintage Books, 1990 p. 39). Complementing this perspective, alternative critical approaches have conceptualized women as «a mutable physiological entity» (Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in*

Once reproduction was recognized to be independent of women's sexual pleasure, however, the existence of women's active desire became a matter of debate. Historically women had been perceived as lascivious and lustful creatures, fallen daughters of Eve, corrupting and corrupted. By the middle of the eighteenth century, they were increasingly reimagined as belonging to another order of being: loving but without sexual needs, morally pure, disinterested, benevolent, and self-sacrificing<sup>9</sup>.

The evolution of critical discourse has generated numerous theoretical paradigms examining the intricate interplay between religious pedagogy, gender construction, and Victorian cultural dynamics. The role of religious education in shaping societal consciousness, particularly in relation to feminine subjectivity, has attracted significant scholarly attention. Within this context, the nexus between social conformity and spiritual development has been a primary focus of analysis<sup>10</sup>. Victorian ideology positioned chastity and devotion as essential feminine virtues, serving as protective mechanisms against moral deterioration and social marginalisation. These broader cultural tensions between religious orthodoxy and women's social positioning are manifested in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (composed in 1859 and published in 1862), a poem that exemplifies the complex negotiations between spiritual instruction and social critique. Since the 1990s, scholarship on *Goblin Market* has extensively explored intersecting themes such as religion, sexuality, sisterhood, maternity, and desire; nonetheless, these critical perspectives continue to be actively contested within contemporary literary discourse.

This article, employing Julia Kristeva's theoretical conceptualisation of abjection as articulated in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, aims to elucidate how Rossetti's poem functions simultaneously as moral instruction and cultural critique. Through a strategic *re-sacralisation* of feminine identity, Rossetti both reinforces conventional sexual morality and exposes the precarious position of women within Victorian social structures. Her work confronts the fragile nature of feminine existence, and the challenges women face in transcending abject social conditions. Although not a social reformer, Rossetti was a spiritual absolutist; her verse operates as a vehicle for comprehensive social criticism, illuminating the latent dangers inherent in a society where women risk occupying the liminal space of being «neither subject nor object»<sup>11</sup>. This fundamental tension between spiritual orthodoxy and social critique reveals the sophistication of Rossetti's literary endeavour. Furthermore, this analysis draws upon Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework to interrogate how Rossetti's portrayal of masculine figures – particularly the goblin men – embodies the concept of the anomalous. This approach seeks to demonstrate how these figures, as anomalous embodiments of masculinity, disrupt established gender categories and, through their excess and hybridity, contribute to a subtle destabilisation of patriarchal norms. In doing so, the poem offers a nuanced engagement with Victorian gender relations and moral discourse, complicating rather than simply rejecting traditional structures.

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*Romantic Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Perry, *Colonizing the Breast. Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England*, «Journal of the History of Sexuality», 2/2, 1991, pp. 204-234, pp. 212-213.

<sup>10</sup> A historical examination spanning over a century reveals two fundamental aspects of women's sexuality that have shaped critical discussions. First, the notion of women's sexual *anaesthesia* which Cott identifies as «a nineteenth-century creation» (Nancy F. Cott, *Passionless. An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850*, «Signs», 4/2, pp. 219-236, 1978, p. 219), has persisted as a central point of contention in subsequent academic discourse. Second, middle-class moral ideology established female chastity as the paradigmatic model for human virtue, with Watt observing that «by elevating sexual control highest among human virtues the middle-class moralists made female chastity the archetype for human morality» (Ian Watt, *The New Woman: Samuel Richardson's Pamela*, in Rose Laub Coser (ed.), *The Family: Its Structure and Functions*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1964, pp. 281-282).

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An essay on Abjection*, trans. by L.S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 1.

## 1. Sin and devotion, pure and impure. Exploring dichotomies in *Goblin Market*

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* operates within the complex framework of mid-nineteenth-century moral discourse, particularly as it intersects with contemporary anxieties surrounding prostitution – a social phenomenon that Victorian society regarded as one of its most pressing moral crises<sup>12</sup>. This engagement reflects a broader cultural preoccupation with sexual transgression that defined the period, as Jeffrey Weeks observes in his claim that «sexuality became a major social issue in Victorian social and political practice»<sup>13</sup>, thus illustrating the extent to which sexual discourse was embedded within the governance structures of the nineteenth century<sup>14</sup>.

The prevalence and social significance of prostitution in mid-nineteenth-century urban environments were extensively documented through Henry Mayhew's pioneering sociological investigations of the 1840s and 1850s<sup>15</sup>. Mayhew's ethnographic work is particularly illuminating in its attention to the nuanced distinctions within what was often perceived as a monolithic social problem. His reports differentiate between professional prostitutes and the figure of the *dollymop*, whom he characterises as «young maid-servants, as opposed to professional prostitutes [...] they usually prostituted themselves for their own pleasure, a few trifling presents or a little money now and then, not altogether to maintain [themselves]»<sup>16</sup>. This taxonomic approach reveals the complex social and economic factors that shaped women's experiences of sexual transgression, moving beyond simplistic moral condemnation to examine the material conditions that informed individual choices.

Rossetti's biographical engagement with these social realities proves crucial to understanding her literary intervention in contemporary debates. Her decade-long dedication to work at the Highgate Penitentiary for Fallen Women provided direct exposure to the institutional responses to female sexual transgression and, as Anthony Harrison argues, served as the institutional context that «inspired the composition of *Goblin Market*»<sup>17</sup>. This experiential foundation enables the poem to function not merely as moral allegory but as a sophisticated engagement with the social, economic, and ideological structures that governed Victorian women's sexual autonomy.

Building upon this contemporary social analysis, Rossetti offers her readership a sophisticated critique of sexual transgression. Her poem endeavours to reconstitute feminine identity while articulating – through metaphorical discourse when, not explicitly – a resistance to extramarital sexuality. The work emerges as a sustained meditation on sexual commodification and the reification of the female body, phenomena that precipitate the spiritual mortification of women. As she writes in *Letter and Spirit*, «Even the woman – let alone the man – 'that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth'»<sup>18</sup>. This theological framework casts sensual indulgence as synonymous with spiritual death, providing the moral foundation for her literary intervention. *Goblin Market* operates simultaneously on multiple analytical levels while maintaining thematic coherence. Although conventionally situated within the fairy-tale tradition, the poem

<sup>12</sup> For comprehensive discussions of prostitution, sexuality, and desire in Victorian society, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society. The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*, London-New York, Longman, 1981, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> As Weeks demonstrates, «sexuality became a major social issue in Victorian social and political practice» establishing the centrality of sexual discourse to nineteenth-century governance. *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> See Henry Mayhew, *The London Underworld in the Victorian Period - Authentic First-Person Accounts by Beggars, Thieves and Prostitutes*, New York, Dover Publications, 2005, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti. Illness and Ideology*, «Victorian Poetry» 45/4, 2007, pp. 415-428, p. 416.

<sup>18</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Prose Works of Christina Rossetti. Letter and Spirit. Notes on the Commandments*, London, Thoemmes Press, 2003, p. 179. All subsequent references to *Goblin Market* and *Letter and Spirit* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as GM and LS respectively.

articulates Rossetti's profound maternal solicitude and empathetic identification with young women. At the same time, it presents a nuanced examination of masculine deviance within Victorian moral discourse. Rossetti achieves unity across these analytical dimensions through her focus on moral transgression – a framework that encompasses both feminine vulnerability and masculine predation.

The poem's central concern lies in challenging the conflation of vital essence and libidinal desire. Rossetti demonstrates how such a conflation precipitates damnation, whether manifested as societal condemnation or divine judgment. Her redemptive project seeks to re-sacralise feminine identity through the valorisation of purity and chastity. This moral vision restricts sexual expression to its sole sanctioned function – procreation and maternal fulfilment – thereby offering a path to spiritual salvation for women who might otherwise fall victim to sexual commodification. Transcending its fairy-tale substrate, *Goblin Market's* intellectual significance lies in its engagement with both theological imperatives and urgent sociopolitical concerns, particularly questions of female autonomy and the conceptualisation of reproduction. Rossetti's representation of anomalous conditions participates in broader cultural discourses surrounding the redefinition of female sexuality within Victorian society. This cultural redefinition is illuminated by Karen Harvey's analysis of how Victorian norms privileged women who were rendered "domesticated," "sexually passive," and "desexualized." As Harvey observes, «[T]he redefinition of women as 'domesticated' and 'sexually passive' has been used to explain the reorientation of manhood away from honour grounded in the control of wives' sexuality, and towards an emphasis on restraint in social settings. Desexualized women in the home were no threat to men; instead, sexual dangers [laid] outside marriage and outside home [...]»<sup>19</sup>. This eighteenth-century reconceptualisation of sexuality evolved into a nineteenth century imperative to suppress its visibility altogether.

Joan Perkin's analysis of Victorian marriage patterns confirms this cultural shift toward sexual suppression. In *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, Perkin observes that «[t]he ideal of female passionlessness dominated public discourse on sexuality from the 1820s onwards [...] Sex was civilised by ignoring it; features of the strategy were to ban sex from conversation, to hide it in dark bedrooms, to conceal the shape of women's bodies, to censor sex in books [...] the evils of sex were endlessly discussed»<sup>20</sup>. This cultural context establishes the framework within which Rossetti constructed her moral discourse. In accordance with this prevailing *ethos*, Rossetti frames her discourse on sexuality as a cautionary admonition directed at women, warning against what Julia Kristeva terms «abjection» – a form of self-negation and objectification. Kristeva defines abjection as having «only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I»<sup>21</sup>, thereby conceptualising it<sup>22</sup> as an irreparable degradation of the individual. This theoretical framework helps illuminate how Rossetti understood the reification of women and the commodification of the female body as fundamental threats to feminine identity.

Rossetti's critique operates within an understanding of the body as inherently social and political. As Mary Douglas observes, «The human body is always treated as an image of society and [...] there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension»<sup>23</sup>. In other words, Rossetti recognises

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<sup>19</sup> Karen Harvey, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 276.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 2, my italics.

<sup>22</sup> In Bataille's formulation, abjection represents «merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundations of collective existence)», (George Bataille qtd. in Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 56).

<sup>23</sup> Mary Douglas, in Catherine Gallagher and Thomas William Laqueur (eds.), *The Making of the Modern Body. Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1987, p. 4.

sexuality and the female body as enduring sources of social conflict, predominantly rooted in the patriarchal religious framework of her time.

Aware of her position as a writer operating within patriarchal constraints, Rossetti critiques the objectification of the body by warning against what she perceives as the latent sinfulness of sexuality. In *Goblin Market*, this warning is conveyed through symbolic imagery that condemns the desentimentalisation of love. Responding to the moral imperatives of patriarchy, Rossetti endeavours to construct new models of female subjectivity, portraying womanhood as characterised by restraint and sexual passivity. Consistent with her religious convictions, she restricts the legitimacy of sexual expression exclusively to marriage, where it serves the sanctioned purpose of reproduction. This restrictive approach reflects broader Victorian attitudes toward sexuality. As Max Weber notes, «Sexuality, regarded as one of the most irrational forces, was relegated to the inner core of marriage and sexual play became the ultimate antithesis of rational work»<sup>24</sup>. Rossetti underscores the dangers that lust, moral corruption, and self-degradation pose for women. Drawing upon biblical imagery familiar to her audience, she likens the abundance and variety of fruits to the passions and desires that women must resist: «Their offers should not charm us, / Their evil gifts would harm us» (GM, ll. 65–66). Here, the fruits function as symbols of selfishness, greed, and lust – central elements in Rossetti’s vision of moral decay.

Julia Kristeva’s analysis of excessive desire provides additional insight into Rossetti’s symbolic framework. Kristeva explains that «pleonexia, greed, is etymologically the desire ‘to possess always more’; it connotes an *appetite* that cannot possibly be sated, and that links it, in the writings of Paul, for instance, to sexual transgressions and flesh in general; for the cause of this appetite resides in idolatry as disobedience to divine speech»<sup>25</sup>. This concept of insatiable desire aligns with Rossetti’s understanding of the spiritual dangers posed by uncontrolled sexuality.

Rossetti’s moral framework ultimately seeks to provide women with a dignified position within society that might serve as a safeguard against existential despair, recognising that «the loss of meaning affects subjectivity in the form of despair and/or violence»<sup>26</sup>. This conviction led her to embrace the Church’s doctrine, particularly the Tractarian ideal of reserve, which was «frequently seen as the quintessence of femininity»<sup>27</sup>. Rooted in «the fixity of God’s words»<sup>28</sup>, Tractarianism provided the theological foundation for Rossetti’s approach to sexuality and morality. As she writes in *Letter and Spirit*, «[i]n every creature is latent a memorial of its Creator» (LS, 130), thus instructing her readers on appropriate conduct in relation to religious doctrine.

The centrality of marriage, family, and religion in Rossetti’s poetic work reflects her sustained engagement with the relationship between humanity and God, as well as between Christian culture and sexuality. Laura’s suffering in *Goblin Market* vividly illustrates the tension between external religious constraints and innate desire, revealing a nexus between guilt and sin that traces back to the biblical narrative of the Fall, in which Adam and Eve succumb to temptation. Through this paradigm, Rossetti articulates both the dangers and the possibility of redemption available to women negotiating the complex terrain of Victorian sexuality and morality. From this perspective, Rossetti maintains that women must pursue the path of *purity* and dedicate particular attention to spiritual cultivation. She remains convinced that women must

<sup>24</sup> Max Weber, *Religious ethics and the world: sexuality and art*, in Guenther Roth, Claus Wittich (eds.), *Economy and Society*, 2 vols., Berkley 1978, vol. 1, qtd. in Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 26-27.

<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 123, my italics.

<sup>26</sup> S. K. Keltner, *Whodunit? Reading Kristeva with the Help of Detective Fiction*, in Benigno Trigo (ed.), *Kristeva’s Fiction*, New York, SUNY Press, 2013, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> James Ali Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints. Styles of Victorian Masculinity*, Ithaca and London, Cornell U. Press, 1995, p. 184.

<sup>28</sup> David W. Shaw, *Victorians and Mystery. Crises of Representation*, Ithaca-London, Cornell U. Press, 1990, p. 323.

distance themselves from the archetypal figure of Eve and aspire to achieve a higher spiritual position through what might be termed «effacing the body»<sup>29</sup>. As Kristeva observes, this paradigm reflects a broader Christian tendency: «There is no doubt that, in effacing the body and female sexuality in favour of the ear and virginity, Christianity dangerously censors female fertility, battles paganism and its mother goddesses, and imposes a Mary, pure priestess of asceticism, in opposition to Eve the sinner»<sup>30</sup>.

This spiritual model informs Rossetti's literary treatment of temptation and sin, which assumes primary importance in her poetic enterprise. She transforms temptation into apocalyptic metaphors while maintaining strategic ambiguity about sexuality itself. Rather than making explicit references to sexual desire, she positions the reader at a liminal threshold, suspended between revelation and concealment. Through this technique, she leads her audience into an imagined realm shaped by underlying fears and anxieties – a space defined by tentative emotional surrender, which may be interpreted as a subdued reflection of love, whether in the form of *eros* or its sublimation<sup>31</sup>.

Rossetti's approach to these themes may be understood within the context of Victorian society's radical transformation, which compelled her to reconsider fundamental questions concerning the feminine body and religious authority. She attempted to mediate the competing demands of freedom and necessity, sin and devotion, religion and secular culture, while remaining consistently grounded in Christian values. This mediation was particularly necessary given the era's notorious prudery and sexual repression, within which women functioned as reflections of male authority and economic status.

The commodification of femininity that characterised Victorian society represents what Laurence Telairach Vielmas identifies as a persistent historical phenomenon: «Women have long served as reflections of male power, as so many signs denoting economic success, exhibiting their fathers' or husbands' wealth, the equation of woman with a commodity stands out as a significant issue in many ages»<sup>32</sup>. The concept of commodification constitutes a fundamental aspect of the social context within which Rossetti articulated her distinctive literary voice. This voice both reinforces traditional moral paradigms and engages with contemporary discourses surrounding sexuality and maternity.

Furthermore, Rossetti's conception of domesticity may be interpreted as encompassing the systematic domestication of women – a process that effectively excluded them from participation in the public sphere. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall observe, this ideology positioned women as inherently «home-centred by nature»<sup>33</sup>. In this light, Rossetti's poetic corpus reveals a sustained engagement with divine authority and providential governance over human existence, while simultaneously interrogating the roles prescribed to women within familial structures. Through this theological lens, her work contributes to the broader cultural construction of domestic ideology.

The centrality of the family unit within Victorian social organisation necessitated complex legal, customary, and religious frameworks that fundamentally defined women through their relational identities as *daughters, wives, and mothers*. This conceptual perspective had been critically examined decades earlier by Mary Wollstonecraft in her seminal *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Despite the emergence of subsequent

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Clément, Julia Kristeva (eds.), *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. by Janet M. Todd. Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001, p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> In Kristeva's theoretical framework, «sublimation, on the contrary, is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nom-inial, a trans-objectal» (Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 11).

<sup>32</sup> Laurence Telairach Vielmas, *Victorian Sensational Shoppers: Representing Transgressive Femininity in Wilkie Collins's No Name*, «Victorian Review», 31/2, 2005, pp. 56-78, p. 57.

<sup>33</sup> Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 323.

cultural and political debates, the British political establishment maintained systemic patterns of female subordination to male authority throughout the nineteenth century.

Within this ideological landscape, motherhood retained paramount significance as a social institution, with mothers bearing the dual responsibility of biological reproduction and cultural transmission<sup>34</sup>. The evangelical emphasis on domestic life further elevated the maternal role, positioning mothers as the primary architects of morally and spiritually grounded home environments. Within these boundaries, mothers were expected to embody and transmit appropriate feminine ideals to their daughters while upholding rigorous moral standards. This maternal authority assumed both psychological and social dimensions within the intimate bonds between mothers and their children. As Virginia Sickbert notes, «the mother-child dyad – particularly the mother-daughter relationship – constituted a unique emotional and pedagogical space that both required and reinforced the father's absence from domestic life. This phenomenon was especially characteristic of mid-nineteenth-century familial structures, in which the spatial and emotional separation of fathers from the household created conditions conducive to intensive maternal guidance and moral instruction»<sup>35</sup>.

Through her engagement with these complex social dynamics, Rossetti positioned herself as both a participant in and critic of Victorian domestic ideology. Her work simultaneously reinforced traditional gender roles while exploring the psychological and spiritual dimensions of women's constrained existence. This dual engagement allows her poetry to function as both moral instruction and a subtle examination of the constraints placed upon feminine identity within Victorian patriarchal structures.

## 2. The re-sacralization of women's position and the goblin exception

Despite Rossetti's pronounced spiritual fervour – what Mackenzie Bell terms «religious mania»<sup>36</sup> – and her unwavering theological commitments, *Goblin Market* functions as a didactic narrative centred on three young women who embody distinct paradigms of female identity. These protagonists constitute what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify as «multiple heroines, each representing alternative possibilities for selfhood of women»<sup>37</sup>, serving as archetypal figures whom the scholars further characterise as «angels of destruction and renunciation»<sup>38</sup>.

The narrative trajectory involves these female characters encountering enigmatic uncanny entities – the goblins – whose exotic fruits are inaccessible through conventional monetary exchange, requiring instead something intrinsically personal from each woman. Laura surrenders a “golden curl” as payment, while Jeanie makes the ultimate sacrifice of her virtue and corporeal integrity, a transgression that culminates in her demise: she «Fell sick and died» (GM, l. 315).

Within Rossetti's moral framework, Jeanie's fatal outcome may be interpreted as the inevitable consequence of her premarital sexual transgression – her early indulgence in pleasures «for joys brides hope to have» (GM, l. 314). This punitive narrative structure reinforces conventional Victorian moral imperatives surrounding female *chastity* and the *sanctity* of marriage.

Lizzie's encounter with the goblins follows a markedly different trajectory. When she attempts to purchase their fruits through conventional monetary exchange, the uncanny vendors reject her offer and demand instead a payment deemed «too dear»

<sup>34</sup> For diverse scholarly perspectives on the construction of maternal identity, see Cristina Giorcelli and Marina Morbiducci (eds.), *M/Other. Scansioni di alterità*, Napoli, Guida, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> See Virginia Sickbert, *Christina Rossetti and Victorian Children's Poetry. A Maternal Challenge to the Patriarchal Family*, «Victorian Poetry», 31/4, 1993, pp. 385-410, p. 387.

<sup>36</sup> Mackenzie Bell, qtd. *Christina Rossetti: a Biographical and Critical Study*, in Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1984, p. 564.

<sup>38</sup> Ivi, p. 583.



(GM, l. 311). This refusal of a standard commercial transaction underscores the goblins' fundamental disruption of normative economic and social structures.

As Anna Despotopoulou observes in her analysis of Rossetti's liminal spaces, the poet demonstrates a remarkable capacity to «blend the spiritual with the physical, the religious with the sexual»<sup>39</sup>, creating what she identifies as «the paradoxical blend of violent fantasy with moralism» that renders Rossetti's texts «profoundly mystifying»<sup>40</sup>. This synthesis of seemingly contradictory elements positions Rossetti's work within what may be characterised as a realm of the *anomalous* – a literary space primarily embodied by the goblin figures themselves. Thus, the textual universe of *Goblin Market* facilitates the reader's immersion into this liminal and transgressive domain, a space situated at the boundaries of conventional representation where, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, «the becoming animal of the human being [seems to be] real»<sup>41</sup>. The goblin men function as semiotic constructs, serving as symbolic projections of transgressive acts characterised by barbarism, cruelty, and deviance that Rossetti strategically emphasises throughout the poem.

The poem's opening establishes this *anomalous* marketplace<sup>42</sup> through a vivid depiction of cacophonous commercial activity, wherein the goblins – characterised as boisterous vendors employing aggressive rhetoric – display their exotic wares to potential female consumers. The initial relationship between the *anomalous* merchants and the young women is mediated through seductive descriptions of the fruits' superior quality:

MORNING and evening  
 Maids heard the goblins cry:  
 "Come buy our orchard fruits,  
 Come buy, come buy:  
 Apples and quinces,  
 Lemons and oranges,  
 Plump unpecked cherries-  
 Melons and raspberries,  
 Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,  
 [...]  
 Sweet to tongue and sound to eye,  
 Come buy, come buy" (GM, ll. 1-31).

The opening lines establish the goblins' seductive commercial rhetoric while simultaneously positioning their marketplace as a space operating outside conventional economic and moral boundaries, thereby creating the *uncanny* realm within which the poem's moral drama unfolds<sup>43</sup>. The concentration of sensory imagery in these lines functions both as topographical description and situational exposition. Rossetti constructs a marketplace whose *excess* serves as a metaphor for moral corruption, while also depicting the precarious circumstances in which innocent young women find themselves ensnared. This morally destabilising environment operates through

<sup>39</sup> Anna Despotopoulou, *Nowhere or Somewhere? (Dis)Locating Gender and Class Boundaries in Christina Rossetti's Speaking Likenesses*, «The Review of English Studies», New Series 61 / 250, pp. 414-434, 2010, p. 415. In Gbogi's analysis, «*Goblin Market* presents Victorian society as essentially phallic» requiring women seeking to «reclaim [their] identity, humanity and essence» to adopt a stance of resilience, standing «like a lily in a flood, / Like a rock of blue-veined stone» (GM, ll. 409-410; qtd. in Tosin Gbogi, *op. cit.*, p. 508).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi, London- Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 238.

<sup>42</sup> According to Gilbert and Gubar's critical framework, Rossetti's text «exploits the sexist imagery of the market-place [...] occupied as it is by scary and oppressive merchant men» (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *op. cit.*, pp. 510-511).

<sup>43</sup> See also Megan A. Norcia, 'Come Buy, Come Buy': Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' and the Cries of London, «*Journal of Victorian Culture*», 17, no. 1, 2012, pp. 24-45.

cumulative temptation, systematically corrupting feminine virtue through a strategic appeal to the senses. Rossetti's deliberate emphasis on visual perception reveals the initial mechanism of deception, as her descriptive adjectives consistently invoke sensory experience. While the fruits and their associated pleasures may indeed appear «Sweet to tongue and sound to eye» (GM, l. 30), the goblins' commercial invitation serves as a subtle mechanism reinforcing patriarchal authority. It subjects young women to trials designed to test their capacity for moral resistance. The poet strategically interweaves two symbolic elements in her exploration of feminine sexuality: the fruits and the goblins themselves. Both align with desire and carnality. The former serves to warn against food as a vehicle of impurity – what Clement and Kristeva identify as «dirty foods»<sup>44</sup> that suggest lust. As Kristeva elucidates, «Lust» or *epithumia*, rooted in biblical discourse, encompasses sexual desire while relating «particularly in the Old Testament, to food as well as to various material goods»<sup>45</sup>. This latter element manifests through *deformity* and *excess*, in that the goblins' bestial characteristics invoke mythological rather than realistic representation. These quasi-diabolic figures emerge as creatures that «invite [the girls] to regress, draw [them] into a narcissistic contemplation»<sup>46</sup>. The goblins thus embody the *anomalous*, generating aberrant effects upon both women and society. As Deleuze and Guattari observe, «If the anomalous is neither an individual nor a species, then what is it? It is a phenomenon, but a phenomenon of bordering»<sup>47</sup>.

Through their physical description, Rossetti accentuates the perilous transformation of masculine identity into something fundamentally bestial. This metamorphosis corresponds to what Deleuze and Guattari describe as occurring on «new levels, [...] where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them»<sup>48</sup>:

One had a cat's face,  
One whisked a tail,  
One tramped at a rat's pace,  
One crawled like a snail,  
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,  
One like a ratel tumbled hurry-scurry. (GM, ll. 71-76)

These verses establish an explicit correlation between the goblins' marginal positioning – from which they attempt to render the girls as *Other* through insidious manipulation – and their physical and linguistic representation. The poet's similes transform the goblin men into treacherous quasi-brothers, entities existing in an indeterminate liminal space. Verbs such as *whisked*, *tramped*, and *crawled*, alongside the animalistic sounds of «barking», «mewing», «hissing» and «mocking» (GM, l. 402), emphasise their existence within a purely physical universe. This universe is governed by base instincts and violent conquest, trapping them within corporeal limitations. These pseudo-human entities thus assume the characteristics of the previously mentioned *anomalous*, which «is neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects [*sic.*], it has neither familiar nor subjectified feelings, nor specific or significant characteristics. Human tenderness [...] is as foreign to it as human classifications»<sup>49</sup>.

The goblins' alienation from authentic communication, empathy, and respect becomes increasingly apparent through Rossetti's depiction of their evolving approach to the young women. Following their initial encounters, their persuasive rhetoric degenerates into violent language and threatening tones that herald impending danger.

<sup>44</sup> Catherine Clement and Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>45</sup> Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>46</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 245.

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, pp. 244-245.

This behavioural ambiguity marks a central feature of their moral deviance and unsettling alterity.

### 3. The beast within. Demonic transformation into animal corporeality

Rossetti's depiction of the goblins encapsulates the intricate thematic nexus of aggressive sexuality and domination, articulated through both their corporeal manifestation and their fundamental sterility. Drawing on Heideggerian ontological frameworks, one might argue that these figures represent a peculiar reversal of concealment. In his work, Martin Heidegger suggests that «the thingness of the thing»<sup>50</sup> typically withdraws from human understanding. However, in this case, the goblins' essential nature emerges with stark clarity; their malevolent essence becomes transparent rather than concealed. This ontological transparency reveals intrinsic qualities that mirror the barren realm they inhabit, where their sterility engenders nothing beyond violence itself – a destructive force devoid of creative potential.

This destructive essence aligns with what Deleuze and Guattari describe as «degraded transformation», representing not «an evolution by descent and filiation» but rather a «degradation representing a deviation from the true order»<sup>51</sup>. As «demonic animals»<sup>52</sup>, they appear as a distorted reflection of human nature; their *becoming-animal* manifests as a form of corrupted humanity rather than natural development. This characterisation accentuates the dichotomy between their predatory cunning and the innocence of their female victims, as evidenced in the poem's central dramatic tension, when Laura first encounters the goblin merchants (see *GM*, ll. 32-45). Laura's inability to perceive the inherent menace of these liminal beings renders her particularly susceptible to their assault. This vulnerability, in turn, transforms their encounter into an exercise in domination, wherein, as Hannah Arendt asserts, «violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power»<sup>53</sup>. The poet's depiction of this violent subjugation is made explicit in the text. This becomes especially evident when the goblins physically overpower Laura, reducing her to a passive recipient of their aggression:

Their tones waxed loud,  
Their looks were evil  
Lashing their tails  
They trod and hustled her,  
Elbowed and jostled her,  
Clawed with their nails,  
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,  
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,  
Twitched her hair out by the roots,  
Stamped upon her tender feet,  
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits  
Against her mouth to make her eat. (*GM*, ll. 396-407)

This passage encapsulates the convergence of sexual violence and alimentary coercion, where the goblins' assault transcends mere physical domination to encompass a profound violation of bodily autonomy and spiritual integrity. While the intensified imagery in these verses highlights female subjection and reinforces themes of powerlessness, acquiescence, and passivity, the narrative also testifies to resistance against patriarchal dominance. The poem's trajectory builds a narrative tension that crystallizes Rossetti's central concern: preserving feminine purity against corruption, commodification, and abjection. Within this framework, Lizzie emerges as the embodiment of moral strength, serving as the guarantor of ethical values through her steadfast resistance to corrupting illusions and masculine domination:

<sup>50</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York, Harper Collins, 2001, p. 168.

<sup>51</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>52</sup> Ivi, p. 241.

<sup>53</sup> Hanna Arendt, *On Violence*, New York-London, Harvest Book, 1970, p. 35.

Lizzie uttered not a word [...].  
At last the evil people,  
Worn out by her resistance,  
Flung back her penny, kicked their fruit  
Along whichever road they took,  
Not leaving root or stone or shoot. (GM, ll. 430-441)

These verses reveal how the poet's invocation of physical violence simultaneously reinforces and perpetuates conventional power relations. The goblins represent the material embodiment of human aberration – the corruption that infiltrates the very essence of humanity itself. As Gerald Bruns observes, «The paradox of being human is that only human beings are capable of transgressing the boundaries that determine what they are»<sup>54</sup>. Thus, the goblins embody a distorted form of masculinity, expressed through abject behaviours, symbolising humanity's capacity for self-transgression and moral decay.

However, while Rossetti's depiction of these grotesque figures exposes the latent violence inherent in male dominance<sup>55</sup>, the narrative concurrently functions as a counter-discourse of resistance. The poem's dual structure acknowledges the patriarchal threat yet asserts the possibility of feminine agency and moral victory over corruption.

The moral imperatives woven into the poem's allegorical framework transform *Goblin Market* into a complex ideological space where desire, temptation, and damnation intersect within the narrative arcs of the young women. Through her vivid portrayal of Laura and Lizzie confronting the dangerous allure of the goblins' fruits, Rossetti – placing strong emphasis on sensory experience – constructs an intricate allegory that critiques extramarital sexuality and highlights the severe repercussions of public dishonour, which could lead to women's exclusion from protective social structures. Rossetti's commitment to restoring women's nurturing role is articulated through the dialectical opposition between the metaphorical representations of earthly corruption (symbolised by the forbidden fruits) and Lizzie's salvific maternal function. Meanwhile, Jeanie epitomises the naïve maiden betrayed by mercantile masculine forces; having tasted the forbidden fruits and fallen under their sway, her fate signifies not only the loss of innocence but culminates in literal death: «She thought of Jeanie in her grave» (GM, l. 312), whose demise is described as follows:

Then fell with the first snow,  
While to this day no grass will grow  
Where she lies low: I planted daisies there a year ago  
That never blow (GM, ll. 157-161).

Jeanie's deliberate transgression of moral and religious boundaries, Rossetti suggests, precipitates her own destruction. Like the goblins themselves, Jeanie embodies the aberrant, positioned as «outside [and] against the rules»<sup>56</sup>. However, her transgressive conduct may also be interpreted as a form of feminine rebellion, whose excesses testify to the disorder generated by the absence of traditional maternal guidance and the failure of conventional socialization mechanisms.

Her behaviour thus delineates a fundamental schism between her individual desires and communal expectations, resulting from the absence of proper maternal guidance and the metaphorical «nurturance model»<sup>57</sup>. Isolated from appropriate feminine mentorship, Jeanie erroneously develops «her sense of self separate from

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<sup>54</sup> Gerald Bruns, *On Ceasing to Be Human*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 67.

<sup>55</sup> This dimension is further explored in Franzese's scholarly analysis. (See Robert J. Franzese, *The Sociology of Deviance. Differences, Tradition, and Stigma*, Springfield, Charles Thomas Publisher 2015, p. 131).

<sup>56</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

<sup>57</sup> George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things. What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 80.

domestic identities»<sup>58</sup>, manifesting what scholars have identified as «voracious female sexuality»<sup>59</sup>, which conflicts with the Victorian ideal whereby «sexual feelings would only be evoked through love in marriage»<sup>60</sup>. Jeanie thus represents the embodiment of moral corruption, having satisfied her «sexual appetite [that] was considered one of the chief symptoms of moral insanity in women; [...] [and] regarded as abnormal or pathological»<sup>61</sup>.

Jeanie's tragic fate provides a tangible and visible manifestation of perversion and immorality («Who [She] should have been a bride; but who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died»; GM, ll. 313-315). Her moral dissolution precipitates her own annihilation, reducing her corporeal form to mere vacancy. She epitomizes the archetype of the «maniacal and destructive woman»<sup>62</sup> whose «premature and illicit experience of such 'joys'»<sup>63</sup> transforms her into what Anthony Harrison identifies as a «fallen woman!»<sup>64</sup>. Moreover, Jeanie's narrative trajectory enables Rossetti to demonstrate that those who indulge in deviant behaviour – regardless of gender – become increasingly susceptible to degeneracy and sin. Thus, like Jeanie and Laura, women continued to be constructed «as disorderly and unruly beings whose sexuality needed to be controlled»<sup>65</sup>, reinforcing the poem's investment in disciplinary mechanisms designed to contain and regulate feminine desire.

Consequently, Jeanie's calamitous and agonizing predicament functions as a moral deterrent for the sisters: her experience serves as an exemplary lesson regarding the consequences of transgressing moral imperatives. Rossetti simultaneously emphasizes the fundamental importance of both the mother-daughter relationship – evoked in the poem's conclusion – and sisterly solidarity, which reinforces the conception of mother or sister as redemptive figures. Indeed, «When Laura falls, Lizzie rises to prevent her total disintegration»<sup>66</sup>, demonstrating that «the tragedy of Jeanie seems to have inspired Laura and Lizzie to build a sisterly community in which they can protect each other»<sup>67</sup>. Jeanie's death represents the poem's climactic moment, amplifying Rossetti's underlying mission to elevate the figure of mother or sister as capable of creating an alternative to feminine corruption. As Robin J. Sowards observes, «Jeanie's narrative is thus not a cautionary tale about how one should not give in to temptation, but a cautionary tale about what happens when you do not have a community of sisters to protect you. *Goblin Market* is about the need for, and the birth of, such a community»<sup>68</sup>.

Rossetti's narrative strategy operates on dual levels: first, she depicts the degenerative process afflicting young women subjected to irrational and instinctual regression («She gorged on bitterness without a name: / Ah! fool, to choose such part / Of soul-consuming care! / Sense failed in the mortal strife», GM, ll. 510-513). Subsequently, she demonstrates their redemption from vice and corruption through the devoted intervention of Lizzie, who assumes a protective stance toward the vulnerable Laura («That night long Lizzie watched by her, / Counted her pulse's flagging stir, / Felt for her breath, [...] » GM, ll. 525-527). While Rossetti's objective includes raising feminine consciousness, Lizzie's emblematic gesture simultaneously affirms that maternal instinct

<sup>58</sup> Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi, p. 170.

<sup>60</sup> Ivi, p. 342.

<sup>61</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. From Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing*, London, Virago, 1991, p. 120.

<sup>62</sup> Carol Smith-Rosenberg, *Puberty to Menopause*, in Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own. From Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing*, London, Virago, 1991, p. 121.

<sup>63</sup> Anthony Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 416.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>65</sup> Ruth Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>66</sup> Tosin Gbogbi, *Refiguring the Subversive in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'*, «Neohelicon», 41, 2014, pp. 503-516, p. 508. DOI 10.1007/s11059-014-0233-1.

<sup>67</sup> Robin J. Sowards, *Goblin Market's Localism*, «Modern Philology: Critical and Historical Studies in Literature, Medieval Through Contemporary», 1, 2012, pp. 114-139, p. 135.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*.

– represented through her pseudo-maternal care for Laura – transcends biological reproduction. Through nurturing acts such as feeding, Rossetti underscores Lizzie's moral influence as a surrogate maternal figure, projecting her broader ethical vision. This politicisation of maternity and sexuality signals Rossetti's broader ideological investment in the regulation of feminine virtue – not merely within the privacy of domestic spheres but as part of the moral fabric of society. By positioning Lizzie as a redemptive agent whose maternal conduct restores Laura to both moral and physical health, the poem aligns Christian ethics with a model of feminine agency grounded in care, sacrifice, and spiritual discipline. Lizzie does more than save Laura; she enacts moral instruction, rescuing her sister from the consequences of transgressive desire, and reintegrating her into the social order.

Moreover, this rehabilitative process underlines Rossetti's belief in the restorative potential of feminine solidarity as a counterforce to male violence and commodification. Through Lizzie's intervention, the narrative replaces traditional tales of female downfall – often marked by isolation, shame, and death – with a vision of collective resilience rooted in sisterhood. *Goblin Market* thus advocates for a reordering of feminine roles: women are not passive recipients of patriarchal norms, but active moral agents capable of resisting and undoing the damage inflicted by a corrupt, masculinised marketplace.

Beyond Rossetti's archetypal and traditional vision of femininity, her portrayal of the goblins engages with the Deleuzian concept of "becoming" – a process that resists imitation, identification, regression, or linear progression. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, becoming is «not imitating or identifying with something: neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation»<sup>69</sup>. The goblins' violent behaviour, Rossetti suggests, reveals the sterility of unchecked desire – an infertility mirrored in Jeanie's fate, who suffers both social stigma and death for her transgression. Her aberrant conduct represents more than mere deviation from Victorian norms; Rossetti constructs the goblins' world as a space of moral and sexual ambiguity, ultimately warning women about the dangers of unmediated sensual indulgence rather than condemning desire itself.

Although Rossetti acknowledges that sensual experience and desire are vital components of human relationships, *Goblin Market* interrogates masculine moral responsibility by highlighting how predatory exploitation – not desire per se – threatens the ethical order she seeks to preserve. The goblins embody the kind of masculine self-indulgence Rossetti critiques in *Letter and Spirit*: «Human interest centres on what a man is, rather than on what he has or even on what he does. It is the man himself whom anger, malice, revenge transform into a very devil; whom self-indulgence bestializes and brutalizes (*LS*, p. 114). Their reduction to a purely instinctual state signals the moral degradation that occurs when desire becomes detached from ethical accountability. This interpretation supports Tosin Gbogi's provocative suggestion that Rossetti may «subvert patriarchal hegemony through the demonization of the masculine figure(s)»<sup>70</sup>, though the poem's moral framework is more nuanced than simple role reversal. While Rossetti channels sensual impulses into religious and moral discourses that hold men accountable, her approach to female sexuality remains complex. The poem's rigorous attention to sexual boundaries does not merely aim to repress or moralize feminine desire but rather stages a negotiation between protection and pleasure – one that challenges conventional moral categories. The poem's treatment of sexual morality proves more subversive than straightforwardly didactic. While Laura's rescue might initially seem to reinforce traditional values, Rossetti complicates this reading through the quasi-erotic imagery surrounding Lizzie's sacrifice, which blurs the line between sisterly devotion and sensual experience. The poem's resolution – grounded in female solidarity rather than male intervention – suggests that women must ultimately protect themselves from the very forms of brutality men should prevent but routinely fail to

<sup>69</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>70</sup> Tosin Gbogi, *op. cit.*, p. 509.

confront. Furthermore, the lush, sensuous language that saturates the text undermines any simplistic moral interpretation. The goblins' fruit remains irresistible even as it proves dangerous, suggesting that Rossetti's relationship with sexual desire is conflicted rather than purely condemnatory. This tension between the poem's moral surface and its sensual undercurrents reveals the inadequacy of binary distinctions between virtue and vice. In doing so, Rossetti opens space for a more complex understanding of female desire – one that neither wholly condemns nor uncritically celebrates sensuality.

### Conclusion

Rossetti's *Goblin Market* operates as a complex ideological apparatus that simultaneously reinforces and subverts Victorian gender paradigms. Rather than simply denying feminine sexuality, the poem's moral framework strategically contains and redirects sexual energy within socially acceptable boundaries, positioning women as moral arbiters capable of critiquing masculine behaviour. This approach differs markedly from more direct forms of advocacy: where Mary Wollstonecraft sought, half a century earlier, «to render [her] sex more respectable members of society»<sup>71</sup> through rational argument and explicit critique of social inequities, Rossetti employs moral authority as a form of cultural leverage, using religious orthodoxy to legitimize her interrogation of masculine responsibility.

By strategically deploying conservative discourse, Rossetti articulates criticisms that might otherwise have been dismissed as improper for a Victorian woman. Grounding her critique in established moral frameworks grants her the authority to examine masculine failures – the goblins' *predatory behaviour*, their reduction to purely *instinctual states*, and their embodiment of the *self-indulgence* that bestializes and brutalizes. Her method is not conservatism but tactical sophistication: she transforms moral discourse from a tool of feminine constraint into an instrument of masculine accountability. The poem's vision of collective feminine identity emerges as both a protective mechanism and a foundation for broader resistance. Lizzie's sacrifice demonstrates how individual moral courage can disrupt established power structures – her confrontation with the goblins succeeds precisely because it operates through moral authority rather than physical force. The concluding image of sisterly solidarity – «Then joining hands to little hands / Would bid them cling together» (GM, ll. 560-561) – extends this model beyond the immediate crisis. The «little hands» represent future generations of women who will inherit both the knowledge of danger (the goblin threat) and the means of protection (sisterly solidarity). This intergenerational transmission suggests that moral education becomes a form of cultural transformation, creating networks of female knowledge and support that persist beyond individual encounters with masculine predation. *Goblin Market* demonstrates how women writers could embed radical potential within apparently orthodox frameworks. Rossetti's achievement lies not in rejecting Victorian moral discourse but in revealing its internal contradictions and redirecting its critical power. Her model of feminine community, grounded in shared moral purpose rather than mere sentiment, offers a vision of female agency that draws strength from traditional values while fundamentally challenging their application. The significance of *Goblin Market* extends beyond its Victorian context, revealing that moral orthodoxy and social critique are not opposing forces but rather interdependent modes of ethical reflection.

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<sup>71</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, p. 83. For a literary depiction of women's oppression within patriarchal society, see also Wollstonecraft's novel *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992.