

The Enchantment of Goblin Market

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Abstract

This study examines the long allegorical poem *Goblin Market* and the literary character of the creator of this unique work, Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894) from different perspectives. Besides, Rossetti's view of life is suggested as her motivation to write this poem. In this study, *Goblin Market* is interpreted from a religious perspective. The importance of resistance to desires and to remain morally justified are presented as the virtues of women determined by God. This religious perspective is also supported by the patriarchal world where women serve the sense of decency in the society through the stories they tell to raise virtuous children. This study also examines sisterly and womanly solidarity besides religious aspects as the poem tells the story of two sisters. The goblins in the poem are regarded as Rossetti's symbolism of men as the seducers of women with their tricky attractions in the real world. In this study, the point of view regarding desires as sins and weaknesses is considered from religious, social and literary aspects.

Keywords: *Goblin, Fallen, Original Sin, Desire*

Cin Pazarinin Büyüsü

Öz

Bu çalışma uzun bir alegorik şiir olan *Goblin Market*'i ve bu özgün çalışmanın yaratıcısı olan Christina Georgina Rossetti'nin (1830-1894) edebi kişiliğini farklı bakış açılarıyla incelemektedir. Ayrıca, Rossetti'nin hayata bakışı, onu bu şiiri yazmaya teşvik eden etken olarak ortaya konulmaktadır. Bu çalışmada *Goblin Market* şiiri dini bakış açısıyla yorumlanmaktadır. Arzulara karşı koyma ve temiz ahlaklı kalabilmenin önemi, Tanrı'nın belirlediği, kadına özgü erdemler olarak sunulmaktadır.

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Bu dini bakış açısı, erdemli çocuklar yetiştirmek maksadıyla anlattıkları öğretici hikayelerle toplumdaki ahlak anlayışına hizmet eden kadınların da içerisinde bulunduğu erkek egemen dünya tarafından da desteklenmektedir. Bu çalışma dini konuların yanı sıra, şiirde iki kız kardeşin hikayesinin anlatılması nedeniyle, kız kardeş ve kadın dayanışmasını da inceler. Şiirdeki cinler Rosseti'nin gerçek hayatta aldatmacalı cazibeleriyle kadınları baştan çıkararak erkeklerin simgeleştirilmesi olarak yorumlanmaktadır. Bu çalışmada arzuları günah ve zayıflık olarak gören düşünce biçimi dini, sosyal ve edebi açılardan ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Cin , Günahkar, İlk Günah, Arzu*

“A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit”

(Matt. 7:18)

Educated at home by her mother, Christina Rossetti was familiar with many of the literary types like classical poetry, novels, fairy tales and religious works as the atmosphere in their house was an extraordinary one which planted the first seeds of her passion for writing. She was aware of the current issues as the family members were engaged with some Italian revolutionists and scholars, and the important ones were discussed vehemently by her father and his friends at home. She had an access to many works of the important writers of those times and their house was full of books. She had led a happy life until her family faced some financial problems due to her father's health problems. He lost his sight because of tuberculosis and had to quit his respected position as a lecturer at King's College in London. After losing his career and health, he lived for another eleven years, full of depression and misery, as the result of this catastrophe in his life. Other family members including Christina had to cope with all these problems in order to maintain the solidarity of the family. Then, at the age of fourteen, she also suffered from a nervous breakdown and had to leave school. During these years, full of depression, she was deeply interested in the disciplines of the Church of England, and like her mother and sister she majorly devoted herself to religion. Religion had such an important role in her life that it became the mainstay of her choices and decisions in every aspect of life including love and literature. She expressed her devotion in the following lines.

“Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such
I cannot love you if I love not Him,
I cannot love Him if I love not you” (*The Complete Poems*, p. 297).

God was in every piece of her work. In order to understand her literary character, one should consider her works as multi-layered and try to interpret them through unearthing the hidden. On the surface, her works are easy to understand. However, when one reads them in detail, they become ambiguous and difficult to interpret. Besides, the feelings she expresses in her works, such as love, admiration, joy and friendship are devoted to God. So while reading her love poetry we should search for her love of God rather than for a human-being. From her point of view, it is reasonable to fall in love but not to fall into the extremes of sexualized love. She avoids objectifying people, and aims to portrait love as a romantic experience rather than a sexual one, as she states in the lines:

“For verily love knows not “mine” or “thine;”
With separate “I” and “thou” free love has done,
For one is both and both are one in love:
Rich love knows nought of “thine that is not mine;”
Both have the strength and both the length thereof,
Both of us, of the love which makes us one” (*The Complete Poems*, p. 296).

Although she started her writing career at a very early age she did not gain publicity until her thirties as she was busy fulfilling the expectations of her family and the Victorian society at the same time. Reflecting the expectations of the society of women during the Victorian Age, *Goblin Market* is a turning point in Rossetti’s life. As an ambiguous work which was interpreted in various ways, the poem presents the religious views and social vision of Christina Rossetti in an indirect way.

This work, since it was published, has been the subject matter of different approaches related to religion or women studies. It is considered a masterpiece by many critics, feminists and ordinary readers with its multi-dimensional content. When it is told instead of read, it can be regarded as children’s literature, while its complex and suggestive language does

not let us categorize it ultimately into that genre. It suggests a variety of meanings reflecting Rossetti's experiences in different dimensions of life as a daughter, woman, Christian and as as a person enabling prostitutes to rehabilitate, which contributed to her life and made her understand the spirituality of women.

Goblin Market is an allegorical piece of work which describes and graces sisterhood and gives practical lessons at first sight. On the other hand, when it is interpreted in detail, several topics can be examined, such as capitalism, Victorian market economy, eroticism, feminism, sexuality, religion, a lesbian manifest or the cruelty of the society, especially men against women. Rossetti's different and paradoxical periods in her life as a woman have always been open to discussion as the poet of *Goblin Market*.

Considered a deeply religious person of her times, she reveals her religious point of view by means of her poetry to attract women who were not allowed to reach their potential and allowed only a portion of knowledge by the society. This was justified with the idea that if they were educated and intellectually progressed, it could cause their reproductive organs to malfunction. Therefore, women were left ignorant. Contrary to what is expected, some women longed for the feelings, tastes and the knowledge that they were deprived of. They looked for a way to fulfill their existence; but in this case, patriarchal society had a divine reason to put forward; reminding of Eve who ate from the Tree of Knowledge.

Tasting the fruit is a crucial point to understand the way women are treated by men. The story of Adam and Eve has always been an inheritance that makes women scapegoats. Being considered the instigator of original sin, Eve was the one to blame because of her quest of knowledge. It could be shown as the reference for the reason why women were being nurtured in such an oppressive way and why they had to be left perfectly innocent and sexually ignorant, although motherhood was believed to be innate. They were prepared to be good domestic servants in order to fulfill the expectations of their parents and their prospective husbands. A perfect woman was a commodity who was sexual innocence and was dependant upon men's economic position. She had to be desire-free, knowledge-free, passion-free and simply to shoulder the responsibilities of a domestic

servant. Therefore, at the beginning of her career, Christina Rossetti wrote her poetry under the penname of “Ellen Alleyn” in order to protect her maidenly modesty.

Women were expected to be domestic slaves under the control of their fathers, husbands or brothers. An unmarried or divorced woman was considered a loser in the society, and as parents were responsible for the education of their daughters to good wives, it was their failure too. Only the sisters in a family could understand this burden as they had to share the same destiny. They were also the confidantes of one another and used to share their feelings, ideas, passions and the mysteries of the female body and soul. Therefore, the two sisters in the poem, Lizzie and Laura, are the representatives of many feelings, many woman characters and their stories.

In *Goblin Market*, Christina Rossetti tries to suggest her religious point of view. In order to imply her feelings and thoughts, she creates a fantasy world full of goblins who are one of the creatures that are, in many cultures and religions, believed to haunt and abuse women. In this poem Lizzie is entranced and takes risks for her quest of knowledge, even if it might simply be described as tasting a forbidden fruit instead of desire. From Christina Rossetti’s perspective, the reason why these fruits are forbidden might be the patriarchal society on one side or merely Christianity. On the other hand, it is not a simple issue that can be dealt with through cultural or religious restrictions as it has already become the destiny of many women who are labeled as “fallen”. Karen Armstrong, who defines women as angels, likens them to “an island of perfection in a dark world” through the association of Petrarch’s Laura with the Virgin Mary (Scholl, 2003). The Catholic belief states that Mary was an eternal virgin who did not have any sexual interaction but gave birth to a holy son who sacrificed his life for his sacred mission. This belief made the perception of virginity more valuable and precious. On the other hand, such myths have always prevented people from understanding the realities of the world and people. They even ignored the scientific facts to justify their perspectives. Virgins started to regard themselves as the virtuous creatures of the world by suppressing their desires for the sake of selling themselves for a better price in marriage.

When the denotation of “desire” is taken into consideration as ‘a sense of longing or hoping for a person, object, or outcome’, one can take risks in order to achieve the pleasure of fulfilling such a sense. The motivational aspect of desire has long been noted by philosophers. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) asserted that “human desire is the fundamental motivation of all human action” (Lin & Forrest 347). Contrary to this point of view, Rossetti’s poem presents a desirous woman who has a chance to fulfill her desire, learn how the fruits taste and get lost in lust, and when she cannot fulfill her desire again, she may die because of the emptiness caused by the lack of satisfaction. In this case, that motivation is replaced with something dangerous which devitalizes her. This is what the patriarchal society wants to see in it. Instead of chasing a temporary lust, women should tame the fallen women inside themselves and display their skills to their husband. The universe is arranged to serve men. When the incident of Aphrodite giving life to Galatea to fulfill Pygmalion’s desire is remembered, one can become frustrated to see that even a goddess can contribute to the patriarchal world as well as a female writer like Christina Rossetti, like our mothers, or any story teller who probably is not aware of the fact that they serve patriarchy.

Taking Christianity as our reference source, in *Genesis*, Adam and Eve are not allowed access to the Tree of Life, which is a part of their punishment. Similar to *Genesis*, Laura is devoid of the pleasure of eating the goblin fruit and her joy of life is taken away from her as a result of the sin she commits. According to the religious interpretation, all the figures in the poem are the representatives of some religious figures. When we take the goblin men as the equivalent of Satan, the fruits stand for temptation to sin. In this case, Laura represents Eve who is deceived by Satan and Lizzie, as the one who represents the withstanding Christian figure resisting temptation. As the goblins have a wide range of fruits, they show that they have many ways to deceive people, but like in Adam and Eve’s myth, there is no satisfaction, no fulfillment or eternal joy, but only destruction and falling from grace.

On the other hand, Lizzie suffers from the situation that her sister falls in and like Christ, the saviour, she attempts to rescue Laura by bringing her the extract of the goblin fruit. Lizzie sacrifices herself for the good of her sister and the reader is presented with a description of Lizzie in

red, which represents the blood of Christ in the Eucharist rather than fruit juice. Resembling a “lily”, Laura is the only virtuous and pure one who can rescue her sister. This time the fruits Laura desired become the “fiery antidote” (599) she is in search for. The fruit, like any other desire, is given partially through the fruit juice by avoiding to feed her addiction. In this case, we are convinced that both of the trees that provide knowledge and life are from the same divine source and this image is different from the biblical view when we consider Christ’s statement as the epigraph of this paper: “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (Matt. 7: 18)

A long and ambiguous poem with simple expressions, *Goblin Market* represents the solidarity of two sisters at the very beginning. Besides, this rhythmic poem can be very enjoyable to read aloud, as little children usually like poems which start with the names of some fruits and the rhyming words that are easy to remember: “Morns that pass by, -Fair eyes that fly; -Come buy, come buy” (2-4). Yet it is possible to interpret in many ways. When adults read further and see the following lines, it might be inevitable to attribute some other meaning which prevents the text from being a family –friendly one:

She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore’
She sucked until her lips were sore. (134-136).

There is no wonder that sex has always been the most popular topic of for human beings in our history. It is regarded as one of the seven deadly sins when it is experienced with lust in Catholicism. Therefore, whether Laura’s action is considered naive or something full of lust, when her desires are fulfilled and turn into an addiction, religion regards it as a reason to fall from grace. Thus, considering the theme of this poem, eating the goblin fruit and desiring for more can be identified with losing consciousness and religious virtues besides wasting life on the dark side of passion. Satan may deceive and seduce women, as in the story of original sin. Being one of the deadly sins, lust may become like an addiction which may lead to another deadly sin: gluttony. One cannot resist temptation if one tastes something and enjoys it intensely. These deadly sins may turn out to be

deadly risks. In the case of Lizzie, the deal becomes more attractive as there are many different kinds of fruits representing different places and different seasons at the same time.

Not only in Christianity, but also in many other religions, feelings are limited with actions which are controlled by the consciousness in order to lead a virtuous life and return to the place from which Adam and Eve fell. In this way, are other human beings expected to pay back for Adam and Eve's fault by not eating from the Tree of Knowledge and by trying to remain sinless and pure? If it is the Tree of Knowledge, why not eat from it?

The poem being a story told by an omniscient third-person narrator, it might be expected to be an objective narration. However, as we go further, the distant voice turns out to be a narrator who judges one of the female figures of the poem: "Ah fool, to choose such part-Of soul-consuming care!" (511-512). As a deeply religious figure, by associating "eating the Goblin fruit" with eating the forbidden fruit, having passionate sex, losing virginity, Christina Rossetti presents the reader a work of literature which still has many interpretations. Yet the gist of the poem remains the same; if you do not resist your desires, you will be punished.

Today, it may seem irrational to think of a market where money is of no value. However, since before the use of money, the body of a woman has been used in exchange for other things. In the poem, the goblins ask for the gold on her head when Laura offers the gold on the furze (120-123). As her tears are likened to pearls (127), she becomes a valuable commodity. In this case, the poem can be regarded as a feminist and anti-capitalist piece of work.

"Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather."
"You have much gold upon your head,"

They answer'd all together:
"Buy from us with a golden curl."
She clipp'd a precious golden lock,
She dropp'd a tear more rare than pearl
Then suck'd their fruit globes fair or red (116-128)

Compared to "pigeons in one nest" (184-186) or "two blossoms on the one stem" (188), Laura and Lizzie represent sisterly solidarity. Although they do not have similar virtues, they are used as symbols to present the compatibility and to create a meaningful whole. The virtuous one rescues the fallen one and stands firm, and the fallen one feels regretful and thankful to her sister. As a religious person dedicated herself to the teachings of Christianity, Rossetti presents her ideal woman figure through Laura, whose name also means honour and victory.

In addition to the religious interpretations of *Goblin Market*, it has some feministic interpretations which claim that men are goblin-like creatures who try to seduce women, and this may lead to chaos in a woman's life. Women can be considered the rescuers of each other against men. They can share a compatible life, act with solidarity, bring up their children and live in peace. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a lesbian manifesto when the following lines are taken into consideration:

She cried, "Laura," up the garden,
"Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me; (464-473)

In the poem, sisters are also likened to flowers, such as "lilies" (83) (409) which are associated with purity. Like some other flowers, lilies are ready to be plucked from their bower (150-151), which can be interpreted as losing virginity, becoming immoral and corrupted. Virginity is considered

the most important virtue of a girl, and with her value in her untouched state she becomes the object of men. Virginity is thought to be a prize deserved by men in return for having their distinct honour of being chosen as their women.

In the poem, the motivation for tasting the goblin fruits is not in men but goblins. From a women's point of view, it is surprising to see goblins as the decoys rather than men in such an allegorical poem. Rossetti's choice of goblins instead of men may be because of the convincing atmosphere she wants to create. Though these goblins are described as ugly beasts, they might be the representatives of men who are trappers and cheaters like Satan. So men can be identified with Satan. Furthermore, the message that the reader is given by the words "wives - With children of their own" (544-545) can be explained as follows: Women always lead a solitary life even if they get married and have children. In this way, Rossetti gives the signals of the productivity and solidarity of the world of women. Men have only one function for women which is expressed as being pollinated by "wasp and bees" (415-417).

The addiction to the goblin fruit can be associated with the moonlight, as well. Symbols like the "moon" or "moonlight" have always been popular in gothic or other supernatural stories and they never call something good to our minds. Throughout the poem they evoke the same feeling without exception. Jeanie, whose story was told to Laura by Lizzie, had met the goblins in the moonlight, ate the goblin fruit and died (148). Laura also eats the fruit in the moonlight and she starts to dwindle (278-280).

By several critics, as a text including the theme of femininity, *Goblin Market* has been interpreted as Rossetti's answer to her brothers, who encouraged her writing but did not want her to become a part of the world of literature. There is no sign of men but a pure solidarity between two sisters in the poem. It is not the fake sympathy expressed by a brother to his sister, nor is it patriarchal. She did not have to pay back in her own coin and no deals were made. On the other hand, as her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti was the one who encouraged Christina to publish *Goblin Market* and drew the illustrations of this poem, the criticism her brothers receive cannot be justified through this poem.

In conclusion, as a poem full of symbols, Goblin Market has a lesson to give to little girls whom she calls “maids”, but it also has a deeper meaning which will make an adult forget about the child and go on reading for themselves. They can easily find something for themselves which will take them on an interior journey: Desires as weaknesses and sins...Curiosity as the motivation of experience...the Tree of Knowledge versus the Tree of Life...Fruits describing our bodily features; cherries, apples, peaches, quinces, pears or melons...Extract of something which may mean both life and death...Good and evil... Goblin Market has extraordinary depths of insight.

You may come and buy!

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