

“Goblin Market”: Kleptomania and Consumer Culture of 19th Century England

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Abstract

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market", at a cursory level, presents two sisters Laura and Lizzie, who confront the goblins. It is a poem about Laura's temptation and Lizzie's rescue of her sister. On a deeper understanding of the poem, a critical enquiry into the consumer culture of 19th century England can be deciphered. This paper critically examines kleptomania: a recurrent urge to steal, which was a socially recognized crime as markets flourished in Victorian England. "Kleptomaniac" as an ailment gained popularity among the masses of England during the 19th century. It was mainly targeted at defining the middle-class female's crime of shoplifting. The paper makes a close reading of the poem and draws an analogy with the 19th-century consumer culture.

Keywords: *kleptomania, market, consumer, and woman*

Christina Rossetti belonged to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood which was founded in the year 1848 by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In this group, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt were members. The painters who were associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood differed from the Italian painter Raphael. This group had a profound impact on Victorian literature. The poem "Goblin Market" was composed in April 1859 and published in the year 1862. It is a poem which revolves around two sisters Laura and Lizzie who are lured by the luscious fruits sold by the goblins in a clamorous market. The poem is a representation of deception and seduction symbolized by the goblin fruits and mouth-watering appeal respectively. This paper endeavours to shed light on the consumer culture of Victorian England. It critically examines the poem "Goblin Market" to reveal the representation of food frauds and kleptomania.

Christina Rossetti was well aware of the consumer culture that grew during 19th century England. When the industry owners were building factories and attracting cheap labour for employment, there was a growth in bazaars and small shops in industrial England. Goods were displayed for public consumption and women were prime consumers of the materialist goods.

There are references to the consumer culture in England in works that specifically refer to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of whom Christina Rossetti was an integral part. Christina Rossetti's fascination for dresses is mentioned in one of the caricatures drawn by Max Beerbohm. Krista Lysack, in *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and The Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing*, mentions about the painting and argues about the fascination of European markets replete with exotic objects. She stresses on the expression "Come Buy, Come Buy" which is a cry of absolute desperation to sell the products on display. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and painters of the brotherhood bought shawls for the models in painting. They made attempts to find the perfect fit and often lamented the unavailability of products in the market. Lysack's analysis of Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is remarkable as she points about the "gendered desires for exotic

goods" prevalent in the Victorian age (17). Imperialism was germane to the growth of the European market favouring the sellout of oriental goods. Though Rossetti's reputation as a person was not someone who preferred material goods, the poem "Goblin Market" is a testimony of her understanding of consumer culture. Lysack's refers to one of the letters Rossetti sent to Amelia Barnard Heimann which extensively details her understanding of cloaks. In the letter she exposes the subterfuge used by "Swan and Edgar's" to sell cloaks (17). Kleptomania began rampant as shopping became a part of European culture. It was a favourite pastime for Victorian public to explore the marketplaces and spend time out of doors. It was a means to exhibit the flamboyant lifestyle by choosing the different luxurious commodities on display. The Angel in House could venture into the market and purchase goods of their choice. These tempting display of goods and want developed a desire amongst people.

Rossetti's "Goblin Market" presents goblins displaying a variety of fruits for consumption. This reflects the consumer culture in Victorian England. It is difficult to ignore the crime and fraud which took place due to the growth of this new culture. The proliferation of consumer culture was mainly due to the objective of profit-making. The art of profit-making made the sellers attract customers with innovative practices and conceal their identity. There was a tendency to promote the products through advertisements and department stores were established for the consumers. To make the retail market attractive, goods were displayed with flowers for the consumers. The goblins in the poem sell fruits by calling the two sisters to come and buy their orchard fruits. They scream to sell their apples, quinces, lemons, oranges, cherries, berries, peaches etc. To attract Laura and Lizzie, the goblins display the fruits and advertise that they have been brought from exotic lands. The goblins are seen to sound kind and present themselves as lovely creatures to lay two sisters into buying their products. The persistence of the goblins is evident as the two sisters repeatedly hear the goblins cry 'Come buy, come buy.' (107). sellers, The sellers in the capitalistic 19th-century consumer market faced the problem of overproduction. There was immense competition in the retail market as the abundance of goods catered to the English people. They had to either take recourse to marketing or create new products in the market. It was observed that the 19th-century market eventually became saturated. This capitalistic ideology to make profits is visible in Victorian England. The English proliferated the markets outside their own jurisdiction to other parts of the world. Even in the England, the markets displayed goods brought from the orientals. These were sold to the English public and women were prime consumers of these products.

The goblins cheat Laura and Jeanie to eat their fruits. Initially, the luscious fruits appear to be desirable and promising in providing renewed vigour to the women. It is only later that we find Laura growing pale and weak after devouring the fruits of goblin men. The character of Jeanie is extremely important as the two sisters were well aware of the consequences that she faced after consuming goblin fruit. The goblins face the challenge posed by Lizzie as she warns her sister Laura not to wander in the twilight. She warns that goblin men loiter in the night haunting maidens. It was Lizzie who reminded Laura of Jeannie who once met the goblin men in the moonlight, and accepted the gifts provided by them. She reminded me that she ate their fruits and wore their flowers only to grow grey and die in the winter. She reminds the ruthless consequences faced by Jeanie as no grass grows where she was cremated. The goblins are representative of the frauds committed by retailers in 19th-century England. The honesty of the retailers was questioned by the public as it developed unique ways to trick people into buying unnecessary products. In the poem, the fruits are unnecessary for Laura as her sister, Lizzie is

happy leading a life without consuming them. The goblin market resembles the growth of “cheap shops” during the 19th century. Whitlock says that the “cheap shops” were criticized by the English public for selling products at low cost and threatening the established businesses in the country (73). They usually targeted poor people who could not afford expensive products. These cheap shops were quite attractive to the English public as they reportedly took a minimal profit. It was quite tempting for the London public to spend their money on these purchases. The sellers often were accused of duping the customers and making them buy worthless and misrepresented goods.

In the work *Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* Tammy C. Whitlock mentions the development of the notion of kleptomania as:

Beginning as a genderless, if not classless, ailment, the kleptomania diagnosis slowly developed throughout the nineteenth century to become the favored explanation for cases of female middle-class shoplifting. The shifts in the perception of shoplifting and other retail crimes occurred as a result of the changing landscape of English consumption in the nineteenth century. (3)

Shoplifting was notorious in England as the consumer culture proliferated. There was a blame game between the sellers and the buyers. Usually, the people associated with shoplifting blamed the retailers for falsely accusing them of kleptomania. Novels and magazines represented kleptomania during the Victorian age. The poem “Goblin Market” throws light on kleptomania through the following lines:

But sweet-tooth Laura spoke in haste:
 ‘Good folk, I have no coin;
 To take were to purloin: (120)

Laura wanted to consume the fruits but did not have the money to purchase them. She interacts with the goblins and says that if she takes it without paying any money, it would amount to kleptomania. Rossetti was probably well aware of the problem of shoplifting as one can trace laws against shoplifting existing from the late 1500s. Even during the Elizabethan age, there were laws which criminalized the crime of stealing goods from private shops and warehouses. The character of Laura and Lizzie deserves critical attention as women were coercively dragged into the debate of shoplifting. Whitlock reports that well-dressed women in London, notoriously looted tradesmen. The fabric worn by women had extra pockets in skirts and hooks, giving the shoplifters opportunities to shoplift. However, social class was associated with kleptomania. Middle-class women were generally perceived as idealised women who would not foray into shoplifting. The lower class, however, were accused of kleptomania. Laura is conscious of the trade between her and the goblins as she decides not to relegate herself to the social category, which is accused of shoplifting. Nevertheless, her act of consuming the fruits by trading with a lock of her hair amounts to no fair trade for which the goblins later magically make her suffer. In the article “Heroic Sisterhood in Goblin Market”, Dorothy Mermin points out that the sexual desire represented by the goblins is highly imaginative. The fruits are a fraud as they are not real and don't feed the purpose of satisfying one's hunger. The fruits are sold and not found in any town and it seems that they have come from paradise. It refers to a place where no one goes, does not exist and can never be obtained. Laura on the other hand feels that the fruits are real and can satiate her hunger. In the Victorian consumer culture, food fraud was immensely popular in Victorian England. Food alteration was ubiquitous in Victorian households. It was a problem for which the Parliament had to appoint a committee to introduce food safety laws in the nation.

There was an awareness among consumers that made them cautious of food fraud. The poem “Goblin Market” is a representation of food fraud as we find Laura suffering after eating the fruits. It is a kind of adulteration which, through manipulation, is offered to Laura which eventually risks her life. Christina Rossetti takes up the issue of food fraud as the consumer's body is at risk. In the book *Home Economics: Domestic Fraud in Victorian England*, Rebecca Stern explicates the food fraud of Victorian England and perceives “Goblin Market” as a poem dealing with food adulteration.

Christina Rossetti's poem “Goblin Market” is a detailed representation of Victorian consumer culture. The poem endeavours to comment on how women participated in the capitalist marketplace. It deals with issues such as shoplifting and represents kleptomania through the actions of the characters. She doesn't shy away from presenting food adulteration as a mode of deception in Victorian England. The consumer culture of the European market unquestionably laid the breeding ground for the production and sale of commodities.

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