

Poetic Temptation: Gender Dynamics, Power Structures, and Economic Exchange in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

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Abstract

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* critiques Victorian gender norms through its intricate exploration of temptation, consumption, and redemption. This paper analyses how Rossetti frames female agency within patriarchal power structures and economic exchange, arguing that her portrayal of the goblin merchants reflects coercive capitalism and gendered exploitation. Through Lizzie's defiant rejection of commodification and her reclamation of sisterhood as a site of resilience, *Goblin Market* articulates an alternative framework for female empowerment that transcends the conventional Victorian moral order. Synthesizing feminist theory, economic discourse, and historical perspectives, this study highlights Rossetti's nuanced engagement with the complexities of gender and commerce, ultimately critiquing the precarious conditions under which women navigated agency and survival.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender dynamics, subjugation, autonomy, grotesque

Introduction

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is often classified as a children's fairy tale or a Christian allegory, yet its engagement with gender and economic structures reveals a profound critique of Victorian society. Written in 1859 and published in 1862, the poem is embedded within the anxieties surrounding female autonomy, consumerism, and patriarchal control. The goblin merchants, with their enticing yet destructive wares, symbolize the dangers of unchecked desire, where economic exchange becomes a mechanism for subjugation. At its core, *Goblin Market* examines how temptation, consumption, and redemption interact within a system that commodifies female agency.

In considering gender dynamics, Rossetti's portrayal of Laura and Lizzie underscores the Victorian construction of femininity—fraught with tensions between desire and restraint. Through close reading and feminist analysis, this paper explores how Rossetti's poem illustrates the coercion implicit within patriarchal and capitalist systems, ultimately proposing female solidarity as an alternative economy of resistance.

Review of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* has been widely analyzed for its intricate allegory, feminist themes, and economic critique. Scholars have debated its meaning, ranging from a Christian redemption narrative to a proto-feminist exploration of female agency. One of the

most compelling interpretations situates the poem within Victorian anxieties surrounding gender and commerce, arguing that Rossetti critiques patriarchal capitalism through the goblin merchants and their coercive marketplace.

Elizabeth K. Helsinger's analysis, *Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire*, highlights the mercantile language of *Goblin Market*, emphasizing how Rossetti constructs a gendered economy where women are both consumers and commodities. Helsinger argues that the goblin men's aggressive marketing tactics reflect Victorian fears of female autonomy in economic spaces, reinforcing patriarchal control through transactional coercion.

Similarly, feminist readings of the poem, explore how Rossetti critiques the double standards imposed on women in Victorian society. The poem's depiction of Laura's decline after consuming the goblin fruit mirrors the moral discourse surrounding "fallen women," while Lizzie's resistance subverts traditional narratives of female passivity.

Another perspective, explored in *Feminism in Goblin Market: The Economics of the Victorian Woman*, situates the poem within broader discussions of economic independence. This analysis argues that Rossetti's portrayal of female consumption reflects the precarious position of women in Victorian capitalism, where economic participation often led to moral scrutiny and social exclusion.

Overall, *Goblin Market* remains a rich text for feminist and economic critique. Rossetti's nuanced engagement with gender and commerce challenges Victorian norms, offering a radical vision of female solidarity as an alternative to patriarchal exchange. The poem's enduring relevance speaks to its ability to interrogate power structures that continue to shape gendered economies today.

The need for this paper emerges from critical gaps in existing scholarship on *Goblin Market*, particularly in its intersection of gender dynamics, power structures, and economic exchange. While numerous studies have examined the poem's feminist and allegorical elements, few comprehensively analyze its economic framework in direct relation to patriarchal control. This paper addresses key gaps and offers a fresh perspective by synthesizing feminist, economic, and historical lenses.

Identified Research Gaps and Justification for Study

1. Insufficient Focus on Economic Exchange as Patriarchal Control

Existing feminist analyses of *Goblin Market* often focus on female desire and agency but less frequently interrogate the economic systems that regulate them. Helsinger's *Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire* highlights Rossetti's engagement with consumer culture, but it does not fully explore how patriarchal capitalism dictates female autonomy. This paper builds upon Helsinger's argument by emphasizing how consumption becomes a site of subjugation rather than empowerment, offering a deeper economic critique.

Lack of Interdisciplinary Approaches Connecting Feminist and Economic Theory

While studies such as Hissa's *Female Economics in Goblin Market* recognize the transactional nature of gender relations, they often treat economic themes as secondary to feminist discourse. This paper bridges that gap, drawing from Marxist economic theory and Victorian feminist critiques to illustrate how Rossetti frames the goblin market as a mechanism for male dominance.

2. Limited Discussion on Sisterhood as an Alternative Economic Model

Many interpretations view Lizzie's resistance as a moral redemption arc rather than an economic subversion. This paper shifts the focus to how Lizzie repurposes patriarchal commerce into a counter-economy based on reciprocity and solidarity. By expanding the notion of *Goblin Market* beyond individual moral redemption, this study presents sisterhood as a viable framework for resistance against capitalist exploitation.

Contribution to Literary Scholarship

By addressing these gaps, this paper contributes significantly to literary studies by:

Providing a nuanced reading of *Goblin Market* that foregrounds economic systems alongside feminist critique.

Strengthening interdisciplinary connections between literary, economic, and feminist theory.

Reframing the conclusion of *Goblin Market* as a radical vision of female economic autonomy rather than a mere moral restoration.

Gender Dynamics and Power Structures

Rossetti's depiction of the goblin men offers a compelling allegory for Victorian patriarchy, where women are both consumers and commodities. The goblin merchants embody coercion, exploiting female desire through aggressive and predatory tactics:

"Their looks were evil.

Their whiskers twitch'd, their tails were interlaced." (Rossetti 29-30)

The goblins are described in grotesque, animalistic terms, highlighting their deviant masculinity. This depiction resonates with Victorian fears of male temptation and corruption, wherein women were cast as passive objects vulnerable to male exploitation.

Laura's succumbing to temptation mirrors the societal anxieties surrounding female desire. Her act of consuming the goblin fruit positions her within the Victorian trope of the "fallen woman," whose indulgence leads to decline:

"She suck'd and suck'd and suck'd the more

Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;

She suck'd until her lips were sore." (Rossetti 128-130)

Laura's loss of vitality following her consumption reflects the Victorian moral narrative that equated female desire with degradation. Her experience parallels broader anxieties about the commodification of women's bodies, particularly in relation to economic dependency.

Lizzie, in contrast, disrupts this dynamic. Her defiance against the goblins represents resistance to patriarchal control, positioning her as an agent of redemption:

"White and golden Lizzie stood,
Like a lily in a flood,
Like a rock of blue-veined stone." (Rossetti 412-414)

Lizzie's body becomes a site of resistance, absorbing male aggression without succumbing to it. Her struggle against the goblins subverts Victorian expectations of female passivity, reinforcing the possibility of reclaiming agency.

The Goblin Men as Agents of Coercion

The Goblin Men are symbolic agents of coercion, embodying the exploitative forces of patriarchal and capitalist systems. They represent a masculinized force that seeks to dominate and consume female agency. Their aggressive marketing of fruit to Laura and Lizzie mirrors the Victorian commodification of women's bodies and desires. They are not simply vendors of fruit; they symbolize the manipulative forces of patriarchy that lure women into submission. Their physical descriptions, laden with grotesque animalistic imagery, heighten their menace:

"One had a cat's face,
One whisk'd a tail,
One trampled at a rat's pace,
One crawl'd like a snail." (Rossetti 71-74)

This passage distorts masculinity, associating the goblins with predatory, unnatural creatures. Their insistence that Laura partake in their market suggests parallels with Victorian courtship and economic dependency, where men controlled access to resources and dictated the terms of exchange. Women, in turn, were expected to adhere to rigid moral codes, reinforcing their subjugation within a male-dominated system.

Their chant-like cries mimic the seductive language of consumer capitalism. The fruits they offer are exotic, excessive, and unattainable without cost—paralleling the exploitative allure of Victorian market culture.

Mechanisms of Coercion

Verbal and Physical Aggression: The Goblin Men use persuasive language to entice Laura—"Come buy, come buy"—but when Lizzie resists, they resort to physical violence, symbolizing the shift from seduction to coercion when women assert autonomy.

Addiction and Dependency: Laura's craving for the fruit after her initial indulgence reflects how coercion operates through dependency. The Goblins' power lies in creating a cycle of desire and deprivation, echoing both sexual and economic exploitation.

Psychological Manipulation:

Gaslighting and Guilt: The Goblins' disappearance after Laura's consumption of the fruit intensifies her psychological torment. Their absence becomes a form of coercion, forcing Laura into a state of longing and self-blame.

Laura's Fall: Consumption and Desire

Laura's interaction with the goblin merchants underscores the dangers of female desire when regulated by patriarchal structures. Her eager consumption of their fruit marks her transgression—a direct challenge to Victorian ideals of purity and restraint:

"She suck'd until her lips were sore;
Then flung the emptied rinds away." (Rossetti 130-131)

Laura's unchecked indulgence results in deterioration, aligning with the Victorian moral narrative that equated female autonomy with moral decline. Her inability to hear the goblins after her initial consumption signals a loss of agency; she has moved from active participant to passive victim. Rossetti here engages with the trope of the "fallen woman," suggesting that patriarchal society punished female desire while enabling male dominance.

Lizzie's Defiance: A Counter-Economy of Resistance

Unlike Laura, Lizzie refuses to capitulate to the goblins' control. Instead, she actively disrupts their mechanism of coercion, positioning herself as an agent of resistance. When the goblins attempt to force-feed her fruit, her refusal undermines their authority:

"White and golden Lizzie stood,
Like a lily in a flood,
Like a rock of blue-veined stone." (Rossetti 412-414)

Lizzie's unwavering stance transforms her into a symbol of moral fortitude, a contrast to Laura's earlier vulnerability. Her body becomes a battleground where patriarchal violence is exerted yet ultimately rendered ineffective. Instead of being consumed, Lizzie repurposes the goblins' aggression, bringing their fruit back to Laura as a cure rather than a curse.

Sisterhood as a Site of Empowerment

Central to Rossetti's critique of patriarchal control is the concept of female solidarity. Unlike conventional Victorian narratives, which often positioned women in competition or moral binaries (virtuous vs. fallen), *Goblin Market* prioritizes mutual support:

"For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather." (Rossetti 562-563)

Lizzie's self-sacrifice and Laura's redemption challenge the patriarchal economic model, proposing sisterhood as an alternative economy—one built on reciprocity rather than exploitation. This communal healing stands in direct opposition to the goblins' transactional logic, reinforcing the poem's feminist undercurrent.

Economic Exchange and Female Autonomy

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is deeply entwined with Victorian anxieties surrounding economic systems, female agency, and moral regulation. The goblin market operates as both a literal space of trade and a symbolic structure through which patriarchal control is exerted over women. Within this framework, consumption is not merely about desire—it is a transactional mechanism that enforces subjugation, wherein women are commodified under the guise of economic participation. Rossetti critiques this dynamic by positioning female solidarity as a counter-economy to exploitative capitalism, one rooted in mutual care rather than coercion.

The Goblin Market as a Capitalist Economy

The goblin men operate a seductive, hyper-commercialized market, peddling exotic fruits to young women. Their cries mimic street vendors, evoking the bustling Victorian marketplaces.

The fruits are not just literal produce but symbolic commodities—representing forbidden knowledge, sexual temptation, and economic entrapment.

The goblins' insistence on barter rather than coin ("You have much gold upon your head") suggests a patriarchal economy where women's bodies and beauty become currency.

Laura's Transaction and Loss of Autonomy

Laura's exchange of a lock of hair and a "tear more rare than pearl" for the goblin fruit marks a moment of economic and bodily vulnerability.

Her consumption leads to addiction and decline, echoing Victorian anxieties about female desire and the consequences of transgressing social norms.

Laura's initial lack of autonomy is underscored by her inability to resist the goblins or return to the market once she is "spent."

Lizzie's Resistance and Reclamation

Lizzie's refusal to consume the fruit and her insistence on a fair, non-exploitative exchange ("Buy from us with a golden curl") positions her as a figure of moral and economic agency.

Her endurance of the goblins' assault without yielding to consumption transforms her into a Christ-like figure—redeeming Laura through self-sacrifice and sisterly love.

Lizzie's actions subvert the exploitative economy by introducing a new model of exchange: one based on solidarity, not desire or domination.

The Goblin Market as a Metaphor for Economic Control

Rossetti's depiction of the goblin market parallels Victorian commercial culture, particularly the expanding consumer economy that increasingly targeted women. As middle-class women became key participants in marketplace transactions—both as consumers and commodities—Victorian discourse framed them as inherently vulnerable to the moral hazards of economic engagement. The goblin men's aggressive marketing tactics reinforce this notion:

"Come buy, come buy:
Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine." (Rossetti 4-6)

The repetition of "**Come buy**" constructs a predatory imperative, suggesting that women's economic engagement is not entirely voluntary but coerced. The goblins dictate the terms of trade, determining who may purchase and at what cost. Laura's initial exchange mirrors the Victorian anxieties surrounding female consumption—her purchase of fruit is both literal and symbolic, signifying her participation in an economy that commodifies female purity.

The Commodification of Female Desire

Laura's transaction with the goblin merchants illustrates the gendered nature of economic exchange, where female sexuality becomes currency. The goblins do not accept traditional payment but instead demand something more abstract—her innocence. When Laura attempts to revisit the market for more fruit, she is met with silence:

"She never heard their tone,
Never saw their goblin faces more." (Rossetti 266-267)

Laura has exhausted her economic value within this patriarchal system; once she has been "used" by consumption, she is no longer of interest to the merchants. This reflects Victorian discourses surrounding "fallen women," wherein female desire, once expressed, resulted in exclusion from respectable society. In this model, economic participation does not grant agency but instead facilitates social ruin.

Lizzie's Resistance and Economic Subversion

Unlike Laura, Lizzie refuses to partake in the goblin market's exploitative trade. Her rejection of consumption transforms the economic transaction into an act of resistance. When the goblins attempt to force-feed her, she reframes the exchange:

"Eat me, drink me, love me." (Rossetti 471)

Here, Lizzie repurposes patriarchal commerce into an alternative economy—one founded on female solidarity rather than exploitation. By enduring violence yet refusing submission, she

disrupts the goblins' capitalist framework. Her ability to bring back the fruit to Laura not as poison but as cure suggests that female agency, when exercised through mutual support, can transcend the constraints of economic oppression.

Conclusion: Gender, Economy, and the Radical Vision of *Goblin Market*

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* operates as more than a simple moral allegory; it is a sophisticated interrogation of Victorian gender norms and economic exploitation. Through the figures of Laura and Lizzie, the poem dramatizes the precarious conditions under which women navigated agency, desire, and survival. The goblin men serve as embodiments of coercive capitalism, manipulating female consumers while enforcing rigid economic control. Their marketplace is not a neutral site of commerce but a system of predatory exchange, where desire itself becomes a commodity and women are simultaneously consumers and consumed.

Laura's initial succumbing to temptation exposes the dangers of female economic participation within patriarchal constraints. Her inability to return to the market after consumption reflects the Victorian moral discourse surrounding female sexuality, where indulgence led to exclusion and ruin. Her decline reinforces the idea that economic exchange, when governed by patriarchal forces, does not grant women autonomy but instead ensnares them in cycles of dependency and deterioration.

Lizzie's resistance, however, offers an alternative model—one that subverts the transactional logic of patriarchal commerce. She refuses to participate in the goblin economy as a passive consumer, instead repurposing their aggression into an act of defiance. Her endurance transforms the market's exploitative framework into an opportunity for reclamation, highlighting the radical potential of female solidarity. By carrying the goblin fruit back to Laura, Lizzie does not reinforce patriarchal exchange but instead rewrites it—turning poison into cure, subjugation into salvation.

Rossetti's resolution reinforces this idea, positioning sisterhood as a viable counter-economy to patriarchal capitalism. Unlike the goblin market, which thrives on coercion and consumption, the bond between Laura and Lizzie is built on reciprocity and healing. This model disrupts Victorian expectations of female dependency, suggesting that women can construct networks of support outside male-dominated economic systems.

Ultimately, *Goblin Market* is a radical text that challenges both gender and economic structures. Rossetti does not merely critique patriarchal oppression; she envisions a world where female agency is reclaimed through mutual care rather than transactional subjugation. In doing so, she offers a powerful feminist vision—one in which desire does not lead to ruin but is instead reconfigured through communal empowerment. By transforming consumption into salvation, Rossetti proposes that women need not be passive subjects within capitalist exchange but can instead be active agents of their own liberation.

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