

Between Angel and Monster: Complicating the Binary in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

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By Hannah Carlson

~ The themes presented in this essay are later developed into a longer paper that Carlson completed for Senior Thesis, the culminating course for all graduating English majors from Northwest University, from which she graduated in 2018. ~

Blonde hair braided back in a tight bun, and her jet-black eyeshadow accents her level gaze. As she jabs a gloved fist at the camera, Ronda Rousey says, "Don't hate me because I'm strong. Strong is beautiful." The image splits, and a laughing Rousey clothed in a white dress squares off with her dark double. Tossing her golden hair, she declares, "I am not one without the other" (Pantene).

Pantene's most recent commercial illustrates the binary concept of Angel and Monster established by authors Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The theory reveals a tendency in Victorian literature to portray women either as an angelic, domesticated figure or as a terrifying monster. While prominent in feminist criticism and useful in its readings of nineteenth-century authorial suppression and confinement, this theory fails to address a woman's ability to inhabit a middle ground between Angel and Monster. In traditional feminist readings of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," the sisters, Laura and Lizzie, are cited as Monster and Angel, respectively. However, in the same way that Pantene's commercial merges strength and beauty, Rossetti's poem complicates the binary by asserting that Lizzie's strength is beautiful and altogether feminine. Rossetti also highlights the balance between Angel and Monster by subverting the patriarchal power structures present in Marxist and Lacanian thought. In Lacanian terms, this subversion is achieved through Lizzie's rejection of the phallus and subsequent reliance on and ability to draw power from the distinct womanly space of Laura's and her home. "Goblin Market" challenges these male-dominated theories, but more importantly, it complicates the traditional feminist idea that the home, and symbolically the womb, is a source of confinement. In a revolutionary move, Rossetti produces a vision of the womb as a uniquely feminine wellspring of creativity, strength, and renewal.

Most literary critics acknowledge the tension between the public sphere of the market and the domestic sphere of the sisters' home. Kristin Escobar points out Laura's inability to separate the two, which allows the temptations of the market to affect her life at home. On the other hand, Lizzie has power over both environments, and according to Victor Mendoza, "her agency emerges from veiled, nonequivalent modes of exchange" (930). Lizzie is able to participate in and use the self-alienating capitalist means of exchange by [...] only because she is firmly rooted in her agrarian, non-alienated life.

In her essay, "The Rossetian Formula: No Love Without Suffering," Robbie McLaughlan pinpoints the other reason for Lizzie's success: her love of Laura. Lizzie's desire remains unfulfilled in any possible Lacanian or Freudian application of the phallus. Instead, her desire for wholeness finds fulfillment after she successfully faces the goblin men and restores Laura. In contrast to Gilbert and Gubar's portrayal of both the home and the womb as a source of confinement, my own argument aligns with and extends McLaughlan's reading. Rossetti's portrayal of Lizzie opposes the idea that a woman "might inevitably feel that now she has been imprisoned within her own alien and loathsome body...[and that] she has become not only a prisoner but a monster" (Gilbert and Gubar 914). Far from feeling as if she is imprisoned within her home, Lizzie draws strength from the home represented by the symbolic power of the womb. Similarly, Hélène Cixous comments on womanly desires: "[A]mong them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood" (891). Cixous understands that the womb works as a mode of overflowing creativity, both on symbolic and biological levels. The rhetoric surrounding Lizzie paints a picture of a woman who, rather than feeling confined by her body and the realm of the home, uses them as a source of strength to propel her act of self-sacrifice.

The goblin men's cry of "Come buy, come buy" situates the poem in a capitalist economy (4). The procession of foreign fruits including the "Citrons from the South" highlights the alien nature of the scene (29). Laura exemplifies the Marxist thought that "the laborer's own physical and mental energy, his individual life...is an activity which turns against him" (253). She transfers from the previous agrarian state occupied by her and her sister where "Moon and stars gazed in at them" and the "wind sang to them a lullaby" to that of a commodity in a capitalistic market (Escobar 136). A clear picture of alienation occurs after Laura returns to Lizzie while the sisters complete their chores. Rossetti descriptively reveals the affects of the two women: Lizzie does her chores "with an open heart" while Laura completes hers mechanically, "in an absent dream" (210-211). The inability to work in the household economy cumulates when "She no more swept the house / Tended the fowls or cows / ...but sat down listless in the chimney-nook" (293-297). Laura, therefore, "does not feel happy, but rather unhappy; [s]he does not grow physically or mentally but rather tortures [her] body and ruins [her] mind" (Marx 252). Laura no longer takes pleasure in her work or participates in the atmosphere of the home because she has tasted the alienated fruits of the goblin men.

In the initial scene when the sisters hear the goblin cry echoing through the woods, it is Lizzie who "veiled her blushes," and, in response to Laura's exhortations to look, replied, "Their evil gifts would harm us" (35, 65). Her modest blush and clear statement of moral truth seem to establish Lizzie as an angelic figure. However, an angel lacks the ability to challenge the structures that confine her. Yet, for the love of Laura, Lizzie "put a silver penny in her purse" (324). Lizzie is well aware of the modes of power present in capitalistic exchange. She arrives prepared and, unlike her sister, forces the goblin men to meet her on even ground. Mendoza writes, "Lizzie's coin helps sanction their [the goblin men's] interpellation by lending her its symbolic authority" (931-32). She emerges from the safety of her home out of her love to restore her sister. Here Lizzie is no longer blushing and veiled, but rather striding through the twilight to confront the goblin men. Escobar states that Lizzie establishes her ferocity "by mastering the masculine and public realm of goblins in service to the sister she loves" (133). McLaughlan agrees with the statement, "Suffering may be the supreme token of seriousness, yet it is also the supreme token of love. More than that, it is through suffering that love is expressed" (260). The goblin men know nothing of sisterly love, so they then begin to heap insults on Lizzie calling her "Cross-gained" and "uncivil." Lizzie refuses to respond, inciting the goblin men to inflict physical abuse. Lizzie is only able to stand firm against the goblin men's onslaught because of her love for Laura.

The poem's focus then shifts away from the aggressors and towards the heroine. Line 408 depicts Lizzie as "white and golden." A list of images follows: "like a lily in a flood," "like a tree," "like a royal virgin town" (409-18). The distinct upright imagery of each simile opens the door for Lacanian analysis. In his article "The Meaning of the Phallus," Lacan states that "in order to be the phallus...the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity" (655). When earlier, Laura falls prey to phallic desire, in this case, however, Lizzie produces a confusing half-phallic, half-feminine picture. Rossetti postures her as strong and erect; however, the words used to describe her are feminine: "lily," "fruit-crowned," "blossoms," and "virgin." Though she stands upright, Lizzie's power is expressed silently. Rossetti explicitly states three times that Lizzie's mouth remained shut, but she "laughed in heart" (442). This illustration of enclosed inaccessibility plays into a Cixous critique of Freud's belief that Medusa was a symbol of horror because she represented a "woman who is unapproachable and repels all sexual desires" (Freud 317). Lizzie's fortitude places her as a repulsive object in the eyes of the goblin men. Since they cannot have her, they seek to destroy her beauty. Mendoza comments on the goblin men's inability to cause any lasting damage saying, "[s]uch violence can only ever amount to an impotent acting-out" (933). Thus, even when the goblin men act, they remain powerless. Lizzie laughs, but she does so inwardly, knowing that if she opens herself up, what power she has gained will dissipate. Lizzie clearly counters her original angelic demeanor by enacting a perfect representation of Cixous' Medusa, who "you only have to look at...straight on to see... And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). Lizzie refuses to reject her femininity, and instead weaponizes it. She takes and retains the beauty of the Angel, while also exhibiting the strength of the Monster. The result is that, though the goblin men have done their worst, Lizzie emerges with the saving juices and only a minimal damage of "ache" and "tingle" (458).

In the end, both Laura and Lizzie find fulfillment in the enclosed place of their home: "Their mother-hearts beset with fear / Their lives bound up in tender lives" (546-547). They are fulfilled in a women-centered utopia, where they teach their children of "the wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men" (553). Laura and Lizzie fully control their surroundings and bodies. They have obtained Marx's species-being: "It is life engendering life. In the art of life-activity lies the entire character of the species" (254). The lack of male presence emphasizes that their wombs, their children, and their home are Lizzie and Laura's sources of contentment. The final lines of the poem highlight that the strength for renewal, creativity, and redemption can be found in the uniquely feminine space of the womb, which acts "to lift one if one totters down / To strengthen whilst one stands" (566-567). Lizzie and Laura are upright without dependence on phallic power, but through community and womanhood.

In defiance of Gilbert and Gubar, Lizzie is both Angel and Monster. She exhibits what Cixous calls "a force that will not be cut off but will knock the winds out of the codes" (882). Her purity and moral code give the goblin men's sexual advances no power, while her tenacious upheaval of both Marxist and Lacanian economies show she is anything but weak. She is not confined within the walls of her home, nor does she see her body as a vessel of containment. Her strength is cultivated through her love of Laura and is rooted in the private economy of their home.

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