Redemption and Representation in *Goblin Market*:

Christina Rossetti and the Salvific Signifier

Critical pieties die hard on the well-trodden slopes of Christina Rossetti’s ‘mossy glen’[[1]](#footnote-2) (l 87). *‘[T]here is no market* in *Goblin Market*,’ Simon Humphries pointed out in 2007[[2]](#footnote-3): an observation that has gone stubbornly unnoticed, or unprocessed, in subsequent scholarship on the poem. As if incapable of reconsidering the now venerable tradition of market-oriented readings of Rossetti’s text – a tradition whose founding moment we may locate in the early 1990s, when scholars such as Elizabeth Campbell, Terence Holt, Elizabeth K. Helsinger and Richard Menke proposed their influential accounts of the poem as a more or less radical critique of commodity capitalism[[3]](#footnote-4): in Herbert Tucker’s catchy formula, ‘put[ing] the *market* back in *Goblin Market*’[[4]](#footnote-5) – recent critics have simply ignored this exceptionally clear-sighted, and disruptive, element in Humphries’s analysis. In an article published in 2010, Jill Rappoport signals that it is business as usual in the critical agora with her description of how, ‘[i]n critical readings of Christina Rossetti’s most popular poem, the titular and titillating market has increasingly taken center stage as a site of coercive practices and a symbol of gendered trade’[[5]](#footnote-6); and Robin Sowards, writing in 2012, takes as his starting-point the contention that ‘it is not obvious how we are to reconcile the economic [reading] with the sexual [reading]’ of the poem – a difficulty that he will resolve through the concept of ‘localism’ – without questioning for a moment the assumption that such an economic reading will address itself to ‘the long supply chains of global capitalism’ that underlie, and exemplify, as he would have it, the goblins’ nefarious activities[[6]](#footnote-7). In Sowards’s argument, as in Rappoport’s, ‘capitalism’ or ‘trade’ are virtually synonymous with the nefarious, the ‘evil’ (Sowards 115), the ‘coercive’ (Rappoport 853), for bound up with the seemingly unshakeable determination to construe the goblins’ behaviour in terms of commercial practices is an equally robust idée fixe concerning the malign nature and effects of ‘the market’ as a principle of economic organisation and a widespread phenomenon of socio-historical reality. It is literally impossible to find a single modern literary-critical account of Rossetti’s poem (published either before or after Humphries’s 2007 essay) that refers to ‘the market’ without conforming to theanti-mercantilist shibboleth. Certainly there’s something a little gauche, a little *retardataire* about Gbogi’s 2014 characterisation of ‘Rossetti’s presentation of the market square, occupied [...] by scary and oppressive merchant men [and] hint[ing] at the patriarchal ideology of her time’[[7]](#footnote-8); but even in the smartest boulevards of contemporary scholarship – where an increasingly specific or granular historicism has displaced the smoother generalisations of such shop-soiled sub-Marxian rhetoric – we may observe a routinised deference to the tradition lingering among the bright new wares. ‘As a practical and fashionable destination for shoppers and a popular subject for writers across several genres,’Clayton Carlyle Tarr wrote in 2012, ‘Covent Garden Market’s cornucopia of sights, smells, sounds – *and most certainly its prospect of danger* – would have been familiar to Rossetti, a life-long Londoner, and may have provided impetus forher poetic guidebook, *Goblin Market*’[[8]](#footnote-9), while, also in 2012, Megan A. Norcia seemed to feelsimilarly obligated to temper the attractiveness of her account – of the relation between the goblins’ cry of ‘Come buy’ and ‘the famous sounds of London cries by sellers of goods such as hot cross buns, cherries, or milk’ – with reference to ‘[t]he caveats that the poem offers about daily commerce’.[[9]](#footnote-10)‘Rossetti’s poem,’ Norcia writes, ‘is situated between the lived, urban aurality of the streets around her home and the literary representations of the city that translated theoral cries into written discourse, *so that readers could consume particular morallessons about buying and selling*.’(l26; my emphasis) Just as the presence of the market in *Goblin Market* continues to be taken for granted, so too it is apparently to be taken as read that any ‘moral lessons’ pertaining to the topic – whether drawn from Rossetti’s poem or from the contemporary ‘literary representations of the city’ to which Norcia refers – will certainly not redound to the credit of that market. Fiat forum: caveat emptor.

In this article I will take Humphries’s observation that there is no market in *Goblin Market* as the starting-point for a new account of Rossetti’s poem, an account that will, in the first place, challenge the persistent critical projection of a putative mercantile project onto the figure of the goblins and the equally endemic critical failure to observe the norms of exactly such a market expressed in the behaviour and expectations of the poem’s attractive human protagonists. Whereas anti-mercantilist critics have unhesitatingly identified the logic and practices of the market as the socio-political problem to which Rossetti’s protagonists, and Rossetti’s poem, seek to formulate a solution, I will show that for Rossetti the market is one of the solutions – or*figurations* of the solution – that may resolve or redeem what this poem identifies as the intrinsically unsatisfactory state signalled and symbolised by the *absence* of normative mercantile practices of trade and commerce. Further, I will show that Rossetti’s work makes use of at least two other sustained and elaborate metaphors in order to articulate this problem of an absence of order, and its possible regulatory solution: a vision of the anarchic maternal dyad as against the postoedipal realm of paternal law, and, in parallel to that model, a religious account in which a postlapsarian world and its always already fallen human subjects are contrasted to a state of redemption and union with God. In essence, I will argue that Rossetti understands the market as an iteration of symbolic law, and seeks to demonstrate through the story of its institutionalisation the crucial importance of achieving a transition from concrete to symbolic functioning, a transition, that is, from a world of moral lawlessness and unmediated presence to a state that is regulated and redeemed by the representational work of the signifier. My reading will thus imply a critique of the bifurcated or disaggregated nature of scholarship in the field – split between two or sometimes three focuses of attention: the market, gender and sexuality, and theology or religion – and propose, in contrast, an account that highlights in Rossetti’s verse the working of a particular *theory of representation* that may be seen to transcend, or, perhaps, underlie, its startlingly various iterations across the tonal and rhetorical spectrum of Rossetti’s poetic imagination.

My discussion will be organised into three sections. First, I will explore afresh the goblins’ characterisation and propose an understanding of their behaviour, and of their significance in the poem, that will engage with another neglected reading of the text – this time by the critic Ellen Golub – that has been virtually ignored by forty years of Rossetti scholarship since its publication in 1975. Wishing not to anticipate my argument unnecessarily, I will specify, at this point, simply that the goblins present a problem of radically unreliable supply.Secondly, I shall look more closely at the nature of Rossetti’s human protagonists, because, as I will demonstrate, the problem explored in the complex symbolic ensemble that is *Goblin Market* is not located exclusively in the grotesque figures of the goblins but pertains also to the poem’s sympathetic female subjects, who manifest a kind of digestive incapacity in relation to the fruit that they desire – an incapacity that Rossetti explores also in the language of sexual appetite and frustration. On the other hand, and in distinction to almost all published criticism of the poem to date, I shall, in the third part of the article, argue that both the fruit and the sexual goods with which it is aligned in Rossetti’s imagination are indeed *good*, unambiguously good, and that the solution proposed by *Goblin Market* to the problem that it has laid out is essentially a matter of supply, or transmission, of the goods, or the Good, to the women who long for it. It is a transmission that depends, in Rossetti’s account, on the institution of a symbolic order and on the representational capacity of what we may think of as the *salvific signifier*, a technology of symbolic transfer variously explored in Rossetti’s poetry in terms of the operations of the market, the phantasmatic constitution of sexual subjectivity, and the Anglo-Catholic theology of the Eucharist. My discussion will focus on *Goblin Market*, but I will look too at some of Rossetti’s other verse in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862): both in order to strengthen and refine my reading of what is certainly her most celebrated single work and to suggest the profound affinities that connect the energies, topics and arguments of *Goblin Market* with those of the larger body of Rossetti’s work, at least in this relatively early period of her writing life.

1. Goblins: Supply

I want to begin, then, by looking afresh at the nature of the problem faced by Laura and Lizzie, and meditated upon so vigorously by Rossetti’s narrative poem – a problem that has been identified as, or ascribed to, the characteristic operations of ‘the market’ by so many anti-mercantilist analyses of the text. ‘Morning and evening’ – as we all know – ‘Maids heard the goblins cry: / “Come buy our orchard fruits, / Come buy, come buy”’(l1-4). Certainly the goblins *sound* like merchants – sound in particular, as Norcia has recently shown, like the nineteenth-century street vendors of Rossetti’s London neighbourhood, or, in Tarr’s comparison, the stallholders of Covent Garden whose compelling vocal solicitations constituted a distinctive form of advertising practice in this most literal of Victorian markets. But as Humphries has pointed out, the goblins’ behaviour conforms in no other way to that of merchants seeking to make a sale: ‘the goblins are [...] insistent that young women should eat their fruit’, but seem to want nothing in exchange (Humphries 396). In confirmation of this, we should notice that Jeanie, another young woman who heeded the goblins’ cry, ‘Took their gifts both choice and many, / Ate their fruits and wore their flowers’ (l149-50) without – at least in Lizzie’s telling of the tale – being required to make any payment in return. The goblins do accept from Laura that now notorious ‘precious golden lock’ (126): but, as Humphries observes, it is Laura who initiates the discussion of money and assumes that in order to eat she must pay – ‘“Good folk, I have no coin; / To take were to purloin’” (l 116-7), which invites us to understand the goblins’ specification of a lock of hair as an acceptable form of currency in terms of a *strategy* to secure her compliance with their real goal, that of getting her to eat. Laura, like so many critics after her, had always assumed that she was dealing with a market (‘“We must not look at goblin men, / We must not *buy* their fruits”’ [l 42-3; my emphasis]); understanding this, the goblins sensibly collaborate with her expectations in order to get what they really want without rousing her alarm. In contrast, Lizzie fears from the start that the goblins cannot be understood as rational mercantile actors (‘“Their offers should not charm us, / Their evil *gifts* would harm us”’ [l 65-6; my emphasis]) and so it is with a sense of conscious opposition, even defiance, that she seeks to purchase fruit with her now equally famous silver penny. Whereas Laura’s ‘payment’ with her golden curl had testified to her misrecognition of her encounter with the goblins as a standard commercial transaction, Lizzie’s silver coin marks the terms of her resistance to what she perceives, correctly, as the goblins’ *independence* of the contractual norms of the market: ‘“Good folk,” said Lizzie, / *Mindful of Jeanie*: / “Give me much and many:” – / Held out her apron, / Tossed them her penny.’ (l 363-7; my emphasis)

Given both young women’s unexceptional competence in, indeed their evident habituation to, the norms of the market place it is difficult to understand why so many of Rossetti’s readers have sought to portray the sisters as set apart from the world of trade and commerce that the goblins, conversely, are held to exemplify and represent – unless we are to hypothesize, simply, that the settled conviction among literary scholars of the market’s unvarying wickedness produces as an unexaminable interpretative sequela the presumption of the market’s alienation from the sympathetic lifestyle of Rossetti’s heroines – what Rappoport smiles upon as their ‘private, self-sufficient household management’ (854). Once assumed, the sisters’ virtuously extra-commercial identity is generally held to be manifest in Laura’s financial embarrassment – her pennilessness – when she wishes to buy fruit; but how, though, does Lizzie come by *her* penny, ‘[i]n light’ – to quote Sowards – ‘of all the other indications that Laura and Lizzie live entirely outside the market’? Does it not ‘see[m] strange that Lizzie would have any currency at all’? (Sowards 127) Noting that Richard Menke, back in 1999, described Lizzie’s penny as ‘the central mystery of the poem’ (Menke 127), Rappoport observes that ‘[c]ritical conversation is still searching for a way to talk directly about a coin that appears out of nowhere and serves no real purpose in the market: the goblins hold it briefly but do not finally accept it’ (862). (As we have noted, Rappoport persists in ascribing a mercantile project to the goblins.) Rococo theories about the provenance of the penny abound. Rappoport suggests that it might be understood as fairy money, the silver coins with which the little people of folklore traditionally reward maidens for good housekeeping; she also lays out at length an alternative interpretation of the penny as human but of ‘nonstandard issue’ (861) – specifically, Maundy money – a theory with which Sowards concurs. Maundy money is ‘the currency of service’ (Rappoport 865); it represents Eucharistic imagery and offers salvation; ‘Lizzie’ssilverpennycanthusbeconstruedashavingbeencreated notforthemarketbutfordistributionasagiftmotivatedbycharity(*caritas*), linkedultimatelytothepuregifteconomyofChristianagape.’ (Sowards 128) Critical determination to purify the poem’s heroine of the taint of trade has thus conjured around this silver coin an elaborate vision of supramercantile transcendence, in a kind of rhetorical elevation or rapture of Lizzie and her penny into a moral empyrean in which the sordid transactions of the market can find no purchase.

But I do not make out any evidence of the sisters’ practical or moral quarantine from the mid-Victorian market economy, any evidence that, in MaClure’s terms, ‘Laura and Lizzie live in a bubble of natural, cyclical time, seemingly cut off from any outside world’[[10]](#footnote-11). On the contrary, they look to me like fully recognisable inhabitants of mid-nineteenth-century rural England. Of course Laura doesn’t have money to pay for fruit with on the momentous occasion when, after endless solicitations, morning and evening, the goblins finally succeed in securing her attention: it’s an impulse buy – she came out without her purse because she had had no intention of heeding the goblins, and, living in the countryside, she has no reason to carry money on an evening walk down to the river. On the other hand, it’s equally a matter of course that the women have money at home: without it, they could not have bought the modest variety of consumer goods and agricultural equipment that we may observe or infer in their possession – pitchers (household crockery was cheaply produced, throughout the century, in factory moulds and priced to appeal to the mass market [l 216]); pins, needles, scissors, thread (l 208); stockings (l 403); bed curtains (l 187); Lizzie’s purse (probably leather, given the ‘bounc[e]’ and ‘jingle’ of the penny inside it [ll 453/452]. There’s no suggestion in the poem that these two women have tannery facilities or skills); milking stalls and stools, a butter churn, beehives (l 203-207). Some of these commodities will have been bought from itinerant pedlars, some in the small shops of the nearby market town, and some in the local market itself, to which it is likely that the sisters drive, once a week, to sell their surplus dairy products and buy fresh supplies of those goods that they cannot produce themselves (the ‘whitest wheat,’ for example, which seems unlikely to have been harvested or milled on their own smallholding [l 205]).*Pace* Simon Humphries, it’s therefore not quite right to say that there is no market in *Goblin Market*: there is no *goblin* market, certainly – but there is a perfectly ordinary farmers’ market just off-stage, as it were, the source of Lizzie’s silver penny and of much of the sisters’ domestic and agricultural object-world alike.

In sharp contrast, the goblins are not only not merchants: it would appear that they do not frequent markets or shops as prospective purchasers, either, for although, as Rappoport notes, the goblins ‘hold [the penny] briefly’ they ‘do not finally accept it’ (862). The goblins diplomatically countenance the penny – neither accepting nor rejecting it – for as long as they remain hopeful that they may persuade Lizzie, like Laura and Jeanie, more or less voluntarily to cooperate with their desire to feed her. Alert to the difference between Lizzie’s aim and Laura’s – whereas Laura (and, presumably, Jeanie) had wanted to eat the fruit on the spot, Lizzie is determined to take it away for her sister – the goblins abandon their commercial rhetoric in favour of an equally tactical language of hospitality that they judge better adapted, in this instance, to furthering their goal: ‘Sit down and feast with us, / Be welcome guest with us, / Cheer you and rest with us’ (l 380-2). A guest should respect the rules of the house – in this case, the goblins’ decree that the fruit must be eaten on site – but a consumer may do what she likes with the goods she has bought.‘So without further parleying,’ Lizzie says firmly,

‘If you will not sell me any

Of your fruits tho’ much and many,

Give me back my silver penny

I tossed you for a fee.’ (l 385-9)

Lizzie’s insistence on the commercial nature, and limitations, of the transaction, and on the function of the silver penny in instituting and enacting a contractual relationship between buyer and seller, thus brings home to the goblins the unwelcome realisation that this time they will not be able to secure by persuasion a suitable human recipient for their ambiguous intimate nourishment. Switching from rhetorical to physical compulsion, the goblins make a brutal attempt to force-feed Lizzie, but when she successfully withstands their assault by refusing to open her mouth (‘One may lead a horse to water, /Twenty cannot make him drink’ [l 422-3]) they rather suddenly give up and, ‘[w]orn out by her resistance’ (l 438), disappear, not so much affronted or afflicted as exorcised, dematerialised, undone, as if by some catastrophic negation: ‘[K]ick[ing] their fruit / Along whichever road they took, / Not leaving root or stone or shoot’, they ‘writh[e] into the ground,’ ‘div[e] into the brook,’ ‘scu[d] on the gale without a sound’ or, simply, ‘vanis[h] in the distance’ (l 439-446). In this context, their ‘[f]l[i]ng[ing] back [of] her penny’ looks neither strategic nor spiteful, but appears as an act of essentially *ontological*propriety, a metaphysically congruous rendering unto Caesar, or unto Lizzie, of the things that are Caesar’s, which emphasizes the goblins’ complete lack of interest in the abstract utility of coin. Neither sellers nor buyers, the goblins have no use for symbolic currency, except when, as in their successful manipulation of Laura, they may exploit the psychological dimension, for the consumer, of the act of purchase (and of such makeshift substitutes for it as Laura’s tendering of a golden curl) to further their own radically anti- or extra-commercial project of feeding young women for free, and watching them eat.

The reader who thus disperses the collective critical hallucination of the goblin market is left with an intriguing interpretative puzzle, for, notwithstanding MaClure’s recent claim that ‘[w]ithout the presence of the goblin market, the poem would be without a plot’ (156), the goblins’ actions – once disencumbered of their putative economic legibility – may come into focus as intensely evocative phenomena. Here are creatures who work very hard to get you to eat; who will pretend to want your money (or your hair) in exchange, but only in order to humour you and secure your compliance with their project of feeding you; who make available to you what – in the ruthless euphoria of the feed – you take to be infinite quantities of utterly delicious fruit (Laura’s orgy of feasting is brought to a close not by any petering-out of the food supply, or diminution of her appetite, but by her own physical incapacity to carry on: ‘She sucked and sucked and sucked the more / [...;] She sucked until her lips were sore’ [l 134-136]): but – and this is the terrible, terrifying aspect of the creatures’ behaviour – this bountiful provision is for *one time only*. The goblins, it appears, are desperately, bafflingly keen to feed you, once, but having fed you once, they will never appear to you again – and this, I contend, is the most immediately apparent form of the problem faced by Laura and her sister Lizzie, and, before Laura, by Jeanie: it is, we may say, the question of food security that would confront any population of would-be consumers if suppliers showed themselves to be motivated entirely by the incalculable promptings of generosity, self-gratification or whim. For what is freely given may be equally freely withheld, as Jeanie and Laura have discovered to their grief, the goblins’ providing and depriving alike merely different aspects or expressions of a single superb omnipotence. It is face-to-face with this predicament that Lizzie seeks to impose on the goblins the contractual norms of the market, endeavouring to limit their dangerous autonomy by means of the regulating function of the silver penny, and displacing with the predictable logic of economic self-interest the commercial irrationality that has hitherto characterised the goblins’ behaviour as suppliers of desirable fruit.

To identify food security in the absence of a goblin market as the most urgent materialisation of the problem facing the protagonists of Rossetti’s poem begs the question, however, of what, or who, the goblins represent, and thus why they act as they do (as well, of course, as the more fundamental question of the nature of the problem of which an unreliable class of suppliers is merely the most prominent or readily apprehended form – a question that will need significant further exploration). It is an oddity of much critical commentary on *Goblin Market* that while the poem’s idealising but fully recognisable picture of the sisters’ nineteenth-century agricultural way of life has been effortfully mystified, the frankly fantastical element of Rossetti’s verse narrative has gone largely unremarked by those same critics – or unremarked, that is, *as fantasy*. Readers who have fretted and romanced over Lizzie’s supposedly mysterious penny have accepted with perfect equanimity the presence in the poem’s fictional world of crowds of grotesque goblins tramping about the glen. Why balk at a penny but never blink at a goblin? It might be argued that a poem called ‘Goblin Market’ signals its generic commitment to fantasy from the outset, but, as we know, this title was a late addition by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (who thereby inaugurated the critical tendency to project the figure of the market onto the extra-commercial community of goblins). Christina Rossetti had originally called her poem *A Peep at the Goblins*, which recalls the name of her cousin Anna Eliza Bray’s collection of tales *A Peep at the Pixies* (published in 1854): both of *these* titles, I would argue, identify the little people of folklore as the object of a partially obscured, or only momentary vision, as if a spectator’s desire to look, or capacity to see, were complicated by a powerful ambivalence or resistance in relation to the creatures under observation. Thus the poem’s original title draws attention to a dynamic relation between what we see and how we look, and might in this way invite us to think about the mythic or fantastical genre of the text as a function, as well as a factor, of its content. Insofar as Rossetti’s poem deploys tropes from fairytale and folklore to thematise, at the level of form, the derealising effect of repression upon its objects, we might then identify the goblins of the sisters’ mossy glen as examples of anamorphic phenomena – disturbances in the field of vision that at once register and disguise the presence of something that is too alarming to behold. Rossetti’s poem, I think, implies that ‘seeing goblins’ may be a way of turning a blind eye upon a looming problem: a ‘goblinisation’ or *pixilation* of a troubling object of thought whose provocative nature is thereby simultaneously adumbrated and disavowed.

Resistant as scholarship has shown itself to Humphries’s challenge to the collective critical projection of a goblin market on to the little people of Rossetti’s poem, it is as nothing in comparison to the really astonishing feat of scholarly repression that has been sustained in relation to Ellen Golub’s account, published in 1975, of the goblins’ distinctively maternal aspect. Literally nobody who has gone into print, in professional-level English-language literary-critical scholarship, on the topic of *Goblin Market* has made any attempt at all to engage with Golub’s argument – which is concise, coherent, and deploys its psychoanalytic idiom purposively, if without much grace.

Typically, the mother is the agent who delivers love to the infant with food. To the child-object of these affections, all of life becomes a taking in with his mouth as the mother’s breast and nipple become his sole desires. The oral zone comes to be his – and our – first experience with erotogeneity. As the poem deals with the pleasures and pains of orality, it does so with the controlling figure of that stage: the mother.[[11]](#footnote-12)

In Golub’s account, the poem reflects back upon the anguish, for a baby, of weaning, and highlights the symmetrical peril, for an adult, of regression: the first, a difficult passage from the breastfeeding dyad to the establishing of a greater independence from Mother, the second, a dangerously seductive fantasy of reunion that would throw that developmental trajectory into reverse. ‘[Rossetti’s] poem,’ Golub argues, ‘presents us with an enormously attractive experience but also with one that is threatening. For though we might all long for that once idyllic human condition of dependence and total gratification of desires, we know that to remain fixated in the oral stage is to be at the mercy of parental figures whose sustenance we would require. Both experience and this poem teach that we dare not trust in such a fate.’ (161-2)

The hypothesis that to peep at goblins is to look, and to avoid looking, at Mother, will immediately allow us to make new sense of many of the critically contested details of Rossetti’s poetic narrative. For example: having ‘clipped a precious golden lock,’ why does Laura ‘dro[p] a tear more rare than pearl’ (l 126-7)? Many readers have taken this as a confirmation of Laura’s corruption by the market: the golden lock is a symbol of her virginity; her surrendering of it to the goblins is a form of self-prostitution; her tear expresses her awareness of what, from the anti-mercantilist viewpoint, figures as a neo-religious ‘fall’ – her commodification as an object of sexual desire. Golub, in contrast, classes the tear with the lock as a mere bodily product, rather than as an expressive form: ‘She carelessly offers the products of her own body as payment (they mean little to her and she has nothing else to offer)’ (161). What I think that Golub’s account misses here is the conflict in Laura, at this moment, between the evoked and remembered experience of being a baby, and the consciousness and self-awareness of the competent adult; thus I think it’s right to understand the tear as expressing a feeling of discomfort in relation to a sense of self-loss, but whereas an anti-mercantilist reading would identify the market as the agent of dispossession it is, for Rossetti, the *derogation* of commercial norms by which Laura is – and feels – threatened. Although Laura clutches at the goblins’ psychologically acute proposal that she use a lock of hair as a substitute for currency, her foreclosed distress reveals that she is nonetheless troubled by an obscure anxiety about the implicitly regressive nature of the transaction. For a modern subject of the market economy, there is something distinctly humiliating in engaging in more primitive forms of trade: at best, the transaction may be understood as an example of barter, a falling-off from a more sophisticated currency-based negotiation; at worst, it may intimate a suspension of economic logic altogether in favour of the incalculable maternal regime of the free gift. For who is the first person to claim a lock of our hair, and cherish and preserve it for years – a lock whose value to that person is evident, although it is a value that has never been monetized, and could never be? – *Mother*. Chronically desirous of the goblins’ goods, Laura suppresses her suspicions but cannot prevent that single tear from expressing her sense of self-betrayal, her shameful, smothered awareness of having colluded in her own infantilisation.

1. Maidens: Demand

However, the problem that Ellen Golub and I associate with the figure of the mother is not, in Rossetti’s poem, located exclusively outside the self; it is not a problem wholly confined to what contemporary psychotherapy would refer to as ‘environmental provision,’ and theology as ‘the world.’ In fact, although I want to retain in my analysis an emphatic recognition of the goblins’ maternal characterisation and appeal, I shall begin now to highlight the analytic inadequacy, for Rossetti’s reader, of too exclusive a conceptualisation of the problem in terms of the supply-side agency of Mother. Food security, that is to say, is not the totality of the problem facing Laura and Lizzie; it is only one aspect of a problem that manifests itself also as a fundamental difficulty or essential imperfection in the other party to the breastfeeding dyad too – the baby, or, in the language of the market place, the consumer. As we have noted, Laura’s feasting is limited only secondarily by the goblins’ unfathomable withholding of food when she wishes to repeat her experience; it is limited at first by her own inability to prolong the feed, as, before she can achieve an experience of satiety, her lips become too sore to carry on sucking. Back at home, Laura confirms that although the supply was abundant her appetite remains undiminished: ‘I ate and ate my fill, / Yet my mouth waters still; / Tomorrow night I will / Buy more’ (l 165-68). It’s easy to be vicariously appalled by what Golub describes as the ‘radical weaning’ (162) to which Laura and Jeanie are made helplessly subject; but – and here my reading of the poem makes a decisive move away from Golub’s, with its characterisation of the infantile experience of breastfeeding as one of ‘total gratification’ – this should not obscure from us Rossetti’s postulation of an *a priori* insufficiency that haunts Laura’s consumption, an insufficiency not, therefore, in supply, but in Laura’s capacity to suck, to take in food; or to digest, or metabolize, what she eats.

From this point of view, we may discern in the state of starvation to which Jeanie and Laura decline following the goblins’ withholding of food (‘dwindling / [Laura] seemed knocking at Death’s door’ [l 320-21]) a mere *literalisation* of a predicament that had always already confronted the human inhabitants of the mossy glen. Just as Laura had remained unsated despite gorging freely on fruit, so too, in the weaning crisis ostensibly instigated by the goblins’ withdrawal, she, like Jeanie before her, appears unable to derive nourishment from the foodstuffs that do in fact continue to be available to her – for the poem gives us no reason to think that Lizzie, at least, does not continue to bake, and to work the sisters’ smallholding, producing honey, eggs, butter, and cream (l 203-8). Surrounded by comestibles, Laura ‘sat down listless in the chimney-nook / And would not eat’ (l 297-98). Laura’s predicament is explored in closely comparable terms in Rossetti’s poem ‘Shut Out,’ which begins:

The door was shut. I looked between

Its iron bars; and saw it lie,

My garden, mine, beneath the sky,

Pied with all flowers bedewed and green:

From bough to bough the song-birds crossed,

From flower to flower the moths and bees;

With all its nests and stately trees

It had been mine, and it was lost.[[12]](#footnote-13)(l 1-8)

As if she were a maiden of the mossy glen in the wake of the goblins’ disappearance, the speaker seeks to understand her state of starvation – or, in the metaphorics of this poem, her state of exile – in terms of a catastrophic deprivation: the state of being ‘shut out,’ the speaker would have us believe, is the result of her expulsion from a garden in which, until that moment of traumatic exclusion, she had been perfectly at home. ‘It had been mine, and it was lost.’ (l 8) From this perspective, the solution to the problem of exile is surely one of return, just as the hungry young women of *Goblin Market* imagine that the problem of starvation may be solved by re-establishing contact with the goblin suppliers of fruit. And so, just as Jeanie ‘[s]ought [the goblins] by night and day’ (l 155) and Laura ‘kept watch in vain’ for another sighting of the goblins ‘[h]awking their fruits along the glen’ (l 270/275), the speaker of ‘Shut Out’ begs the ‘shadowless spirit’ who ‘ke[e]p[s] the gate’ to ‘bid [her] home remember [her] / Until [she] come to it again’ (l 9; 15-16). But the goblins never do reappear to the starving women, and the guardian of the gate – instead of rewarding the speaker’s faithful gaze through the bars – ‘took / Mortar and stone to build a wall; / He left no loophole great or small / Thro’ which my straining eyes might look’ (l 17-20). This makes for a pathetic spectacle indeed, as does, certainly, the portrayal of the starving Laura’s ‘sunk eyes and faded mouth’ and of Jeanie ‘dwindl[ing]’, ‘gr[o]w[ing] grey’ and ‘f[a]ll[ing] with the first snow’ (l 156-57).‘So now I sit here quite alone,’ the speaker laments in the penultimate verse of ‘Shut Out,’

Blinded with tears; nor grieve for that,

For nought is left worth looking at

Since my delightful land is gone. (l 21-4)

But just as Laura’s state of inanition cannot be ascribed to an external lack of food alone but seems, rather, to literalise the insufficiency in her capacity for consumption that the poem identified in her original feast, so too ‘Shut Out’ declines to endorse the speaker’s contention that her state of exile was inaugurated by her expulsion from the garden, for the poem concludes:

A violet bed is budding near,

Wherein a lark has made her nest:

And good they are, but not the best;

And dear they are, but not so dear. (l 25-28)

The end of the poem thus aims to administer a mild but stinging shock to the reader, who may well have responded to the speaker’s inconsolable grief by imagining the place of exile as a barren land, if not exactly Hell then Purgatory at least, a vale of tears unrelieved by the presence of fragrant flowers and singing, nesting birds. But by indicating that the speaker is now in another garden, a garden that – so far as the speaker herself tells us – is as vital and as valuable as the garden whose loss she bewails, Rossetti’s poem invites us to reconceive of the speaker’s predicament in terms of an essential inability to be at home, an original incapacity to make use of *any* garden’s beauty and its fitness to be loved. What Rossetti is doing, I think, is identifying in these protagonists – the baby in the maternal dyad, the exemplary human subject in the world – an unrelenting insatiability, an incapacity to be successfully fed, that we may understand as the internal manifestation or psychical counterpart of what appears in the exterior world as the problem of anuncontrollable, unreliable supply of food (‘Mother’). Mother’s dangerous omnipotence, that is, has as its intrasubjective correlative and continuation what we might think of as ‘Mother-in-me’: a *totalitarian appetite*.

Rossetti combines the horror of just such a totalitarian appetite with the terror of an external omnipotence in the grotesque figure of a despotic crocodile in her poem ‘My Dream.’ Inviting us to ‘Hear now a curious dream [she] dreamed last night’ (l 1), the speaker of the poem describes seeing ‘a gaunt blunt-featured crew’ of crocodiles ‘well[ing]’ up out of the ‘myriad pregnant waves’ of the River Jordan[[13]](#footnote-14)(l 7; 6):

Each crocodile was girt with massive gold

And polished stones that with their wearers grew:

But one there was who waxed beyond the rest,

Wore kinglier girdle and a kingly crown,

Whilst crowns and orbs and sceptres starred his breast.

[....]

So he grew lord and master of his kin:

But who shall tell the tale of all their woes?

An execrable appetite arose,

He battened on them, crunched, and sucked them in.

He knew no law, he feared no binding law,

But ground them with inexorable jaw[.] (l 13-28)

At once maternal tyrant and uncontrollably hungry baby, the crocodile demonstrates that omnipotence and insatiability are two faces of one moral anarchy – a lawless ensemble that Rossetti frequently identifies with the content of bad dreams, trance states, hallucinations. ‘My Dream’ might remind us of a comparably lurid passage in ‘The Convent Threshold.’ ‘I tell you what I dreamed last night: / A spirit with transfigured face / Fire-footed clomb an infinite space’ [[14]](#footnote-15)(l 85-87): this, an account of Lucifer that similarly associates unregulated power – he is ‘Exultant in exceeding might’ (l 95) – with an unquenchable and destructive oral desire; he ‘dipped / His thirsty face, and drank a sea, / Athirst with thirst it could not slake’ (l 97-99). In *Goblin Market*, Laura’s futile ‘drea[m] of melons’ in the aftermath of her encounter with the goblins (l 289) thus associates her with the torment of these monsters whose cravings – like those of a hypertrophied infant – cannot be satisfied, as does her state of what the poem characterises as unwholesome autoerotic abstraction on the morning after her tantalising feast. The sisters

Talked as modest maidens should:

Lizzie with an open heart,

Laura in an absent dream,

One content, one sick in part;

One warbling for the mere bright day’s delight,

One longing for the night. (l 209-214)

We may note, then, that while the troubling ensemble of omnipotence and insatiability is figured, in *Goblin Market*, predominantly in relation to the question of food security and the experience of appetite, the poem also deploys a distinctively sexual rhetoric of erotic arousal, excitement and frustration to explore the inter- and intrasubjective difficulties facing its heroines. When evening comes, the sisters go down to the river, and the goblins fail to appear to the woman who has been fantasising about fruit all day, Laura’s disappointment is figured as a vital detumescence: ‘Her tree of life drooped from the root’ (l 260).

She said not one word in her heart’s sore ache;

But peering thro’ the dimness, nought discerning,

Trudged home, her pitcher dripping all the way;

So crept to bed, and lay

Silent till Lizzie slept;

Then sat up in a passionate yearning,

And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept

As if her heart would break. (l 261-68)

The imagery of teeth gnashing in a mouth that wants to be filled is certainly oral, as is the salivary drip of Laura’s pitcher on the way home; we will recall her telling Lizzie, the night before, about her unappeasedly watering mouth. But there is also a strong intimation here of a missed sexual encounter, of an ache of unresolved desire and the plentiful drip of lubricating secretions, as if Laura were a would-be consumer not of fruit but of sex and had been ‘peering thro’ the dimness’ of an urban backstreet in hopes of discerning a prostitute for hire. This predicament is repeated in the bedroom scene with Lizzie, who, like the absent streetwalker of the riverbank, fails to attend to Laura in her aroused state, guilelessly falling asleep and leaving Laura desperate for consummation; and it is the predicament, I think, that explains the terms in which Lizzie will later think about what went wrong for Jeanie, ‘Who should have been a bride; / But who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died’ (l 313-15), as if her encounter with the goblins were a kind of premarital sexual experimentation that stimulated desire without resolving it, its intolerable prolongation eventually proving itself a literally fatal condition.

Here, again, then, we may observe the identification of Mother’s supply-side caprices as a grievous problem for the would-be consumer; the anguish, incomprehension and powerlessness of the weaning crisis – ‘Why won’t she feed me?’ – loses none of its rawness, and gains considerable rhetorical power to shock, in the transposition into sexual terms: ‘Why won’t she make me come?’ But here, again, too, Rossetti makes it very clear that the difficulty of obtaining satisfaction cannot be blamed exclusively upon the outside agent of supply, but must be understood also in terms of a demand-side incapacity to achieve relief. It is as if there is something essentially excessive, or, perhaps, essentially ineffectual, in the desire that torments Laura and Jeanie, as if, no matter how much stimulation they receive, they are unable to reach a sexual climax, or experience, after a sexual climax, a quietening or diminution of their desire. Indeed, I think we may discern, in the dwindling, sullen figures of these frustrated women, an intimation of the sex-addict – the nymphomaniac, or the masturbator – as a figure of futile self-stimulation, irreversibly subject to a perverse law of diminishing returns. In this ontological dystopia, it is the body itself that prevents the satisfaction of the body: Laura’s lips become too sore to suck, and on the next evening she literally cannot hear, or see, the goblins’ enticing performance, the hitherto exciting parade of little people carrying fruit, that made of the mossy glen the prostitutes’ de facto shop window, or front parlour of a populous brothel. ‘Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit?’ she asks herself; ‘Must she no more such succous pasture find, / Gone deaf and blind?’ (l 257-59)

Furthermore, Rossetti transposes or extends this terrible autogenic deprivation into the terms of fertility and reproduction, thereby aligning the precious and seemingly impossible experience of orgasm with the achievement of conception, for several of these balked, frustrated women are associated with the grief and shame of childlessness as well as with the shamelessness of sexual insatiability. ‘One day remembering her kernel-stone,’ Laura ‘set it by a wall,’ ‘Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root, / Watched for a waxing shoot’ – ‘But there came none’ (l 281-85), a failure that recalls how, after Jeanie’s death, Lizzie planted daisies on Jeanie’s grave, but ‘to this day no grass will grow / Where she lies low,’ and the flowers never bloom (l 158-161). At least Jeanie, being dead, is spared the social humiliation of her barren state – unlike the speaker of Rossetti’s poem ‘An Apple-Gathering,’ who finds that a premature attempt to access adult sexual agency results only in a mortifying retardation, or foreclosure, of reproductive function:

I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple tree

And wore them all that evening in my hair:

Then in due season when I went to see

I found no apples there.

With dangling basket all along the grass

As I had come I went the selfsame track:

My neighbours mocked me while they saw me pass

So empty-handed back.[[15]](#footnote-16)(l 1-8)

In this predicament, blaming Mother will assuredly no longer suffice, for it is my own maternal identity – mother-in-me, again – that is at fault. Why can’t I conceive? Because I picked the apple blossom and thereby eliminated the possibility that the tree might bear fruit: that ‘*mine* apple tree’ might bear fruit (my emphasis; l1). I did this to myself. I am my own problem.

In the first part of my discussion I showed how Lizzie seeks to rectify the problem of unreliable supply by imposing the regulatory norms of the market upon the economically irrational activities of the goblins; and to do this, as we saw, she equipped herself with her silver penny, in contrast to Laura, who failed to bring currency to the mossy glen and so found herself surrendering power in a regressive act of barter, or perhaps even of infantile dependence upon the goblins’ maternal generosity. What, then, is the correspondingly efficacious body of law, or set of norms, with which, in the context of the poem’s sexual imaginaire, the sisters may regulate the demand-side manifestation of the problem that faces them – the problem, that is, of an insatiable appetite for erotic gratification, a relentless craving for the sexual consummation that Rossetti often associates with conception? To put this starkly, the order by which Lizzie seeks to regulate the demand-side, sexual materialisation of the problem of moral anarchy is the Law of the Father, and the token or signifier of that law, with which Lizzie demonstratively equips herself, is an imaginary penis; in fact, Rossetti suggests that Lizzie conceives of her whole body in phallic terms. We may observe this first in the form of Lizzie’s resistance to the goblins’ attempt to force-feed her, as she stands, ‘[w]hite and golden,’ an almost sculptural embodiment of an heroic vertical ideal (l 408):

Like a lily in a flood, –

Like a rock of blue-veined stone

Lashed by tides obstreperously, –

Like a beacon left alone

In a hoary roaring sea,

Sending up a golden fire, –

Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree

White with blossoms honey-sweet

Sore beset by wasp and bee, –

Like a royal virgin town

Topped with gilded dome and spire

Close beleaguered by a fleet

Mad to tug her standard down. (l 409-421)

I want to highlight two features in particular of this sequence of overlapping images. For a start there is the evocative figuration of the perpetual but indecisive erotic stimulation to which Laura has been frustratingly subject, the parallel, in this sexual register, of the consumer’s unappeased appetite for fruit: a kind of foreclosed foreplay that is now performed upon Lizzie also – the at once hostile and exciting actions of obstreperous tides, a foaming, roaring sea, aggressive multitudes of wasps and bees, a bellicose fleet of ships attacking a high-up city from below. Such lashing, stinging and cannonades seem apt to provoke and aggravate arousal, without, however, offering any real prospect of its resolution: no matter how obstreperous those tides, for example, we should remember that it is in the nature of a tide to recede as well as to advance, to be as characteristically going as coming.

Secondly, there is the emphatic picturing of Lizzie as a slender, shapely, but stalwart penis-like erection – lily, beacon, orange-tree, ‘royal virgin town / Topped with gilded dome and spire’ (l 418-19): an erection, crucially, that intimates in its ejaculatory performance, its ‘[s]ending up [of] a golden fire,’ a capacity both to bring about *and to experience* sexual satisfaction. Whereas Laura’s ‘tree of life droop[s] from the root,’ Lizzie is potent: Lizzie gets hard – as hard as ‘a rock of blue-veined stone’ (the coincidence of geological and anatomical terminology makes for an especially graphic image here), and Lizzie comes. Thus when Lizzie returns home to her sister, her head and face sticky with a liquid that is both (in the external reality of the poem) fruit juice and, in phantasmatic terms, seminal fluid, her invitation to symbolic fellatio – ‘Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices’ (l 468) – is not so much a request for her own satisfaction (or not only a request for her own satisfaction) as it is an invitation to Laura to learn from her, to incorporate, at once orally and in imagination, her own hard-won phallic capability. The goblins had left Laura drooping and unsatisfied, but Lizzie’s virtually pedagogic intervention resurrects her sister’s appetite in proudly phallic form in order that it may be decisively quelled at last: ‘[l]ike the watch-tower of a town / Which an earthquake shatters down,’ or like ‘a lightning-stricken mast,’ ‘a wind-uprooted tree’ or ‘foam-topped waterspout / Cast down headlong,’ Laura ‘fell at last,’ her death-like orgasmic collapse the expression at once of her desire’s ultimate satisfaction and of its almost autogenic conquest, its temporary but triumphant eradication of itself (l 514-521). Together the sisters celebrate the potency of the phallus, the salvific agent of orgasmic redemption from the purgatory of unassuaged desire.

The paradox of the phallus’s self-limiting potency is explored in strikingly similar terms in Rossetti’s poem ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857.’ Besieged by a mob of Indian mutineers, a young English couple, representatives of imperial power, take refuge inthe suggestively denominated architectural erection of the poem’s title:

A hundred, a thousand to one; even so;

Not a hope in the world remained:

The swarming howling wretches below

Gained and gained and gained. [[16]](#footnote-17)(l 1-4)

Here again is a phallic structure beset by a ‘swarm’ of angry, aggressive, unindividuated creatures – in the language of empire, natives, rather than the multitudinous insects of Lizzie’s ordeal; and we might discern in the form of this ‘round tower’ a bolder anatomical precision than Rossetti had dared in the more cautiously bipartite or disaggregated image of the royal virgin town ‘[t]opped with gilded dome and spire.’ The rest of the poem comprises an account of the final conversation of the marital pair as they tenderly bid each other goodbye prior to the husband’s shooting of his wife, and then of himself, in the head. (The considerate husband attends to the satisfaction of his wife’s needs before that of his own.) Playing on the language of orgasm – ‘“Is the time come?’ – ‘The time is come!’” (l 6) Rossetti figures the suicidal conclusion of the couple’s intimate exchange – ‘Close his arm about her now, / Close her cheek to his, / Close the pistol to her brow’ (l 9-11) – as the supreme consummation of their love, at once the ultimate satisfaction of the desire whose arousal is implicitly ascribed to the stimulating actions of the mob below, and its – in this case – permanent eradication. For the couple in the apex of the Round Tower, the rest – at least after the gun goes off – is silence; for Laura and Lizzie, however, a reproductive future awaits, ‘Days, weeks, months, years / Afterwards, when both were wives / With children of their own’ (l 543-45). Many critics have expressed disappointment in relation to the relatively muted tone of *Goblin Market*’s final vignette, and in comparison to the thrilling scene of sexual combat by which it is preceded this sentimental picture of the women’s ‘mother-hearts beset with fears, /Their lives bound up in tender lives’ (l 346-7) is inarguably anticlimactic – or, rather, post-climactic, for having achieved decisive orgasmic redemption the sisters are now released from the state of perpetual craving, of original insatiability, that had itself ‘beset’ them from the start. There is indeed something disconcertingly subdued about this ideal domestic quietus, a state instituted by a ‘little death’ but not perhaps fully distinguishable from the more permanent variety,as if the totalitarian longing of the human subject might only be quenched by the total extinction of natural life. ‘Sense failed in the mortal strife’ before Laura ‘fell at last’: ‘Is it death or is it life?’ (l 513; 521; 523) ‘Life out of death,’ *Goblin Market* determines (l 524); but ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857’ decides otherwise, projecting into the speechlessness beyond its final stanza the sounds of two pistol shots – the retorts of one almighty bang.

Kiss and kiss: ‘It is not pain

Thus to kiss and die.

One kiss more.’ – ‘And yet one again.’ –

‘Good bye.’ – ‘Good bye.’ (l 17-20)

1. Goods/ the Good/ God and the Salvific Signifier

I want at this point to highlight what I would characterise as the perhaps unexpectedly sex-positive implications of Rossetti’s thinking in poems such as ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857,’ *Goblin Market*, and ‘An Apple-Gathering.’ The latter two poems, for example, articulate a deep concern, on Rossetti’s part,with the mistake, as she sees it, of sexual prematurity, of trying, like Jeanie, to access too early the ‘joys brides hope to have,’ but the grounds of her concern are robustly practical. For what we may discern here is a lamenting of premarital sexnot on the grounds that it is in some moral or religious sense wrong, but because it doesn’t work: it cannot (according to Rossetti’s symbolic reasoning) make you pregnant. By the same token, we may discern in Rossetti’s characterisation of Laura’s unwholesome sexual obsession a critique not of her desire but of her impotence: waiting for the goblins to return cannot satisfy her longing for erotic gratification, cannot make her come. And coming, as ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857’ makes clear, is a literally ultimate good, a supremely worthwhile consummation. Sexual pleasure, and what Rossetti positions as its reproductive counterpart, conception, stand out in Rossetti’s early poetry as absolute goods, or, at least, as figures of an absolute good, or of *union with an absolute good*: the question is simply how to access these goods, how to achieve such a union.

By the same token, it is crucial, I think, to recognise that there is nothing in *Goblin Market*that gives us any reason to look to the nature of the fruit itself as a cause of the young women’s trouble. Critical suspicion of the fruit, however, is rife in Rossetti scholarship. For a start, many readers have distrusted the frankly extraordinary nature of what seems to be on offer, the seasonally various fruits described by the goblins as ‘All ripe together’ in evident contravention of the laws of nature (l 15). MaClure, for example, writes of the fruit’s ‘dangerous temporal origin’ (159), while Sowards, taking his cue from Laura’s own bewilderment as to the source of such bounty, decides that ‘[t]he origins of the fruits are [...] necessarily remote; the fruit is intrinsically imported,’ a damning conclusion in a reading informed by the ecological creed of the local (118). Moreover, there is the question of the relationship between young women’s consumption of fruit and their premature mortality, a question whose answer is confidently presumed in much Rossetti scholarship: it is thus common for readers of all critical persuasions to write of Laura, and of Jeanie before her, as having been ‘poisoned’ by the goblins’ provisions – a recent example is Tarr’s speculative identification of the fruit as belladonna, which ‘grew wild in the English countryside, prompting countless writers to warn parents of its potential appeal to children[;] cases of accidental poisonings were also prevalent in the city’ (308). In order to square this putatively toxic action with the poem’s celebratory account of the fruit’s exceptionally good quality (‘Sweeter than honey from the rock. / Stronger than man-rejoicing wine, / Clearer than water flowed that juice’ [l 129-131]) considerable conceptual ingenuity, often calling on Christian doctrine, has been applied in support of the contention that this fruit has a ‘double power’, it is a ‘poison that cures’ (Humphries 392). Thus the fruit is held to be both good and bad, or good (or bad) at first and bad (or good) in subsequent tastings; Sowards, for example, claims that the fruit conforms to ‘a systematic pattern’ in Rossetti’s poem – a pattern frequently to be found in the Bible – in which ‘a particular word or image appears in two contrary forms, *in bono et in malo*, where the point of the repetition is to bring out the contrast between the two’ (117). In an under-theorised part of her reading, Golub too describes the fruit as ‘alter[ing] in function, being sometimes dangerous, sometimes restorative’ (159); it is ‘both poison and elixir’ (159-160).

But I think that such readings ascribe to the fruit an ambiguity that should properly be identified as a characteristic, rather, of the compromised nature of the goblins and of the maidens alike, for each of these groups – as we have seen – manifests what I have described as a kind of original inadequacy in relation to this most marvellous of foods. There’s nothing wrong with the fruit; indeed, the fruit is perfect. What’s wrong, Rossetti contends, or what’s missing, is something in the *relationship* between the fruit, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dyadic ensemble constituted by the ‘maternal’ world and its always already unsatisfied inhabitants. Certainly, the juice that Laura tastes on her sister’s body when Lizzie returns home from her conquest of the goblins does not produce the exquisite sensations that characterised Laura’s original banquet in the glen: ‘Her lips began to scorch, / That juice was wormwood to her tongue, / She loathed the feast’ (l 493-4); but this seems to me to speak not at all of an alteration in the nature of the fruit itself, or of an original ‘unsound[ness]’ in it (this is Rappoport’s word [853]), than of an agonising recognition in Laura of the tragic quality of her relationship to the wonderful fruit to date. For what Rossetti’s poem posits as the starting-point of its narrative (and as the fundamental problem confronting its human protagonists) is a state of affairs in which there is a choice between having no fruit and, perversely but more or less successfully, tamping down one’s appetite for it – Lizzie, refusing to be charmed, blocking up her ears, closing her eyes, running home (l 64-68); or, as the alternative, having lots of fruit but at the cost of suffering a ravening appetite that cannot be sated *even while the fruit is made available in infinite quantities*. It’s a choice between suppressing appetite or being tormented by appetite: there seems – at least, until Lizzie’s heroic acquisition of fruit for her sister – not to exist a third option in which appetite can be experienced, responded to and eventually satisfied by a good – even an exceptionally good – meal. To repeat: there’s nothing wrong with the fruit; the fruit is perfect. And there is nothing wrong with my need or my desire for fruit; I do need fruit, I am right to desire it. What’s more, insofar as it is possible to separate the goblins’ act of supplying me with fruit from their equally characteristic act of refusing to supply me with fruit, we may say that they do me no harm: for how could it be harmful to feed me with the best of all possible foods? No: the wrong or flaw inheres equally in the nature of the postlapsarian world, which I am accustomed to regard as the only supplier of fruit, and in my own fallen nature, which prevents me from ever being satisfied by fruit, no matter how ample its provision.

For Rossetti’s diagnosis of the maidens’ trouble draws, as very many critics have argued, upon the religious logic of Christian redemption to provide the poem with a theological answer to the problem of original sin. What has not been comprehensively understood, however, is, firstly, the exact way in which this religious logic is figured in the symbolic terms of Rossetti’s poem, and, secondly, the broader conceptual consequences that flow from a more precise reading of Rossetti’s theological parable. In essence, I want to show that because religious readings of the poem have failed to recognise the divine nature of the fruit they have been unable to recognise, also, the fundamentally *semiotic* model that underlies Rossetti’s account of redemption. Rossetti, I contend, characteristically and consistently identifies redemption – or, as it is troped in *Goblin Market* and elsewhere, the satisfaction of appetite, or gratification of sexual desire – as a matter of cognitive or psychical restructuring: which is to say thatredemption, for Rossetti, is effected by, and as, the subject’s achievement of a transition from concrete to symbolic functioning. It is a transition from what Rossetti characterises as the lawless regime of the maternal dyad in which access to food, and to the good, and to God, is fatally compromised from the start, to the regulated world of the symbolic order in which access to bodily and spiritual nutrition is guaranteed by the representational capacity of the signifier, the agent, or host – though not the source – of salvation. The accession to representation, in Rossetti’s account, is a redemptive restructuring of our relationship to God, the inauguration of a technology of *symbolic transfer* without which His presence can neither be satisfactorily ‘supplied’ nor satisfactorily ‘consumed’.

Mary Arseneau and Marylu Hill have each written authoritatively about the importance of Tractarian sacramentalism for an understanding of Rossetti’s work, highlighting in particular its salience to the consideration of her use of and attitude towards symbolism. ‘[I]t is crucial,’ Arseneau argues,‘that we recognize that one of the most fundamental assumptions underlying Rossetti’s poetry is her theologically based belief that the created world is capable of communicating moral and spiritual meaning, or, in her own words, that “All the world over, visible things typify things invisible”.’[[17]](#footnote-18) As both Arseneau and Hill make clear, the most distinctive Anglo-Catholic assertion of such a symbolic capacity is to be found in the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ, the belief, that is, that the communion bread and wine do not, as in mainstream Anglican accounts of the Eucharistic sacrament, merely figure or evoke the Son of God, but instead make *objectively present* the body and blood of Christ[[18]](#footnote-19). Thus Arseneau’s account and Hill’s each identify in Tractarian sacramentalism the crucial role of the salvific signifier, which is exemplified by the bread and wine of the Eucharist and reiterated, in Arseneau’s analysis, by the ‘visible things’ of the ‘created world’ and in Hill’s by the erotic body, through which the Christian lover may experience the joy of spiritual union with God. Hill’s identification of the erotic body as an example or figuration of the salvific signifier is a rare example of a religiously-oriented reading that attends to the representational capacity of Lizzie’s body – a capacity to which I will return below. But because Arseneau shares the widespread critical distrust of the fruit (which she sees as ‘disturbingly ambiguous and difficult to interpret’ [86]) she is unable to recognise in Lizzie a figure of the Eucharistic bread and wine – the salvific signifier which makes present a value with which it is not itself identical – and instead identifies her with Christ. ‘The juices smeared on Lizzie’s face,’ Arseneau argues, ‘become less important than Lizzie’s Eucharistic offering of herself: “‘Eat me, drink me, love me; / Laura, make much of me’” (ll 471-472); ‘Like Christ, Lizzie redeems the fallen, and brings “Life out of death”’(l 524). (90) Lizzie’s role, the role of the salvific signifier, is indeed crucial, but it is the role of the agent of transfer, not of the origin or source of the precious stuff of salvation, the infinitely marvellous fruit.

The conceptual consequences of this more exact understanding of the symbolic and theological logic of Rossetti’s poem are threefold. Firstly, it will allow us to appreciate what I have called the fundamentally semiotic character of Rossetti’s account, in *Goblin Market*, of the Eucharist. At stake in the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ are the twin questions of the transferability of value, or meaning, and of the existence of a competent agent of symbolic transfer: questions, these, that Rossetti dramatises in the conflict between Lizzie and the goblins over the possibility of take-away. The goblins insist that the fruit cannot be transported to another place for consumption: ‘Half their bloom would fly, / Half their dew would dry, / Half their flavour would pass by’ (l 377-9); and they refute, also, the possibility that there exists an agent capable of making such a transfer: ‘Such fruits as these / No man can carry’ (l 375-6). The goblins are literalists, concrete thinkers (if that is not an absolute oxymoron), partisans of unmediated presence. In essence, they deny the possibility of representation – of extracting meaning, or value, from its original form and confiding it to the symbolic capacity of the signifier for dissemination further afield. And it is certainly true that when the little people disappear they are able to take all the fruit away with them, as if it belonged to them – to the postlapsarian world, to the fallen human subject – and therefore could not exist away from its worldly claimants. But although the fruit is in the world, it is not of the world. The goblins don’t even try to remove from Lizzie’s body the pulp and dew that they have smeared all over her during the course of their futile attempt to force-feed her, and thus she is able to run home, euphoric, ‘quite out of breath with haste / And inward laughter’ (l 462-3), bringing Laura the ‘juice that syruped all her face, / And lodged in dimples of her chin’ (l 433-4). Perhaps fruit cannot be carried, but its essence – its juice, its pulp, its *meaning* – can evidently be extracted and taken away, borne on the salvific body of the bread and wine, the Eucharistic host, to the woman whose union with God it will thereby make possible.

Secondly, a recognition that Rossetti’s theory of redemption is at bottom an affirmative theory of representation will allow us to clarify the sexual politics of the account of psychosexual development and maturation that is at work in *Goblin Market* and in other poems of Rossetti’s early career. Insofar as Rossetti’s poetry accedes to the normative logic of a patriarchal culture that poses the Law of the Father as the regulatory regime that can intervene in the moral anarchy of the maternal dyad, the crucial question to be answered concerns the nature of the phallus, the signifier of paternal authority and exemplary demonstration of the relationship between paternal authority and the very possibility of signification *per se*. The goblins, as we’ve seen, are remorseless literalists, fanatical proponents of unmediated presence who insist that the meaning or value of fruit cannot be extracted, like juice, from its rind, and carried away in the form of the salvific signifier. Transposed into the lexicon of psychosexual development, such a position would refute outright the possibility of a woman’s phantasmatic assumption of a penis, insisting instead on the irreducibly physical nature of the organ of paternal power. In contrast, a strong reading of the representational function, in Rossetti’s account, of paternal law, and of the function of the phallus as an agent of symbolic transfer, will allow us to recognise the sexually egalitarian nature of the transition by which Rossetti’s exemplary female figures may emerge from the infantile dependence of the maternal dyad and achieve an adult subjectivity. *Goblin Market* presents us with a world in which women can and do assume the phallus, a world which therefore comprehends a fully postoedipal model of female sexual subjectivity. By logical extension, then, it is also a world in which a lesbian sexuality can be understood not as a return to the primitive condition of the maternal dyad but as a fully postoedipal formation of adult sexual subjectivity.

Thirdly, we may observe that the perfect formal alignment or conceptual homology that we have discerned in Rossetti’s analyses of the redemption of original sin by the sacrament of the Eucharist, and of the transition from the maternal dyad to the world of paternal law by the supersession of concrete by symbolic functioning extends also, in Rossetti’s work, to the figure of the market. We have looked in detail at the regulatory function of the market as against the anarchic quality of the goblins’ supplying of fruit, and at the function of the silver penny in instituting a relationship of contractual obligation between buyer and seller, but we have glanced only momentarily at the representational function of the market and at the work of its currency as a system of signification. In the context of the market, the transition from concrete to symbolic functioning is known as ‘monetization,’ and it takes place at the point at which Lizzie and Laura bring their surplus produce to market in order to sell it: not to barter it, or give it away, but to effect a transposition or translation of its value into the symbolic form of money. Like the phallus, the imaginary token of paternal law, and like the bread and wine of the sacrament of the Eucharist, Lizzie’s silver penny may thus be recognised as an iteration, in the context of the mid-nineteenth-century market economy, of the salvific signifier, the agent of symbolic transfer that allows value to be extracted or abstracted from a calf or a pot of honey or a jug of cream, stored, and accessed when needed, notwithstanding the separation in time and place that has subsequently intervened between the object of the signifier’s representational labour and the original form of its embodiment. Rossetti’s implicit comparison of the process of monetization with the establishing of the psychic conditions that enable her female protagonists’ achievement of a phallic sexual subjectivisation should therefore contribute to a critique of the anti-mercantilist prejudice that manifests itself in market-oriented readings of *Goblin Market*, for the comparison serves to position the deploying of the buying power of a standard-issue coin as the operation of a crucial technology of sociosexual maturity.

Moreover, the setting out of these structurally identical or conceptually homologous models may simultaneously highlight the extraordinarily catholic range of Rossetti’s symbolic repertoire, and of her audacious tonal diversity, and thereby suggest also the consequent need for readers to attempt a greater degree of discursive and emotional integration than has hitherto characterised responses to Rossetti’s poetry in general and to *Goblin Market* in particular. For Rossetti’s work does not merely present readers with a sustained challenge to such contemporary verities as the corrupting nature of the market and the moral superiority of an extra-commercial communitarianism under the benevolent sign of the maternal; it asks also for a radical extension of its reader’s discursive scope, a renovation not only of our accustomed beliefs – about, in particular, the social and symbolic significance of the market economy – but also of our habitual separating-out of our thinking about such commercial practices from our own or our colleagues’ attention to the psychic constitution of gender and from the very much more emphatically segregated field of theological inquiry and interpretation. If it is a shock to be confronted by such a call, it is a shock whose thematisation inaugurates the action of *Goblin Market* itself in the form of the astonishing agricultural blazon of fruits that really are, as the goblin suppliers insist, ‘All ripe together / In summer weather’ (l 15-16).

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2. Simon Humphries, ‘The Uncertainty of *Goblin Market*,’*Victorian Poetry* vol 45 no 4 (Winter 2007): 391-413, p. 397 (my emphasis) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Elizabeth Campbell, ‘Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*’ *Victorian Studies* 33 (1990): 393–410; Terrence Holt, ‘“Men Sell Not Such in Any Town’: Exchange in *Goblin Market*,’*Victorian Poetry* 28 (1990): 51–67; Elizabeth K. Helsinger, ‘Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*,’ *ELH* 8 (1991): 903–33; Richard Menke, ‘The Political Economy of Fruit: *Goblin Market*,’ in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, ed. Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (Athens, Oh., 1999), 105–36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Herbert Tucker, ‘Rossetti’s Goblin Marketing: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye,’ *Representations* vol 82 No 1 (Spring 2003): 117-133, p. 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Jill Rappoport, ‘The Price of Redemption in *Goblin Market*,’ *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol 50 No 4 The Nineteenth Century (Autumn 2010): 853-875, p. 853 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Robin Sowards, ‘*Goblin Market*’s Localism,’ *Modern Philology* vol 110 No 1 (August 2012): 114-139, p. 115 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Michael Tosin Gbogi, ‘Refiguring the Subversive in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*,’ *Neohelicon* (2014) 41: 503-516, p. 511 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Clayton Carlyle Tarr, ‘Covent Garden Market,’ *Victorian Poetry*, vol 50 No 3 (Autumn 2012): 297-316, p. 297, my emphasis [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Megan A. Norcia, ‘Come Buy, Come Buy’: Christina Rossetti’s*Goblin Market* and the Cries of London, *Journal of Victorian Culture*(March 2012) 17:1, 24-45, p.25 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Jennifer MaClure, ‘Rehearsing Social Justice: Temporal Ghettos and the Poetic Way Out in *Goblin Market* and *The Song of the Shirt*,’ *Victorian Poetry* vol 53 No 2 (Summer 2015): 151-169, p. 156 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ellen Golub, ‘Untying Goblin Apron Strings: A Psychoanalytic Reading of *Goblin Market*,’ *Literature and Psychology* 25 (1975): 158-165, p. 161 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Christina Rossetti, ‘Shut Out,’ in *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, ed Betty S. Flowers, London: Penguin, 2005: 50-51. Included in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). All references are to line numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Christina Rossetti, ‘My Dream,’ in *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, ed Betty S. Flowers, London: Penguin, 2005: 33-34. Included in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). All references are to line numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Christina Rossetti, ‘The Convent Threshold,’ in *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, ed Betty S. Flowers, London: Penguin, 2005: 55-59. Included in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). All references are to line numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Christina Rossetti, ‘An Apple-Gathering,’ in *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, ed Betty S. Flowers, London: Penguin, 2005: 37-38. Included in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). All references are to line numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Christina Rossetti, ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857,’ in *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, ed Betty S. Flowers, London: Penguin, 2005: 20. Included in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). All references are to line numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Mary Arseneau, ‘Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement, and *Goblin Market*’,*Victorian Poetry*, vol 31, No 1 (Spring, 1993), 79-93, p. 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Marylu Hill, ‘“Eat me, drink me, love me”: Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*’, *Victorian Poetry* vol 43 No 4 (Winter 2005): 455-472, p. 457 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)