

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "GOBLIN MARKET"
AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

"Being a woman poet is a peculiar social and psychological situation, to which the poetry that women write is related. . . . To be a woman poet in our society is a doublebind situation, one of conflict and strain. For the words 'woman' and 'poet' denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles,"¹ writes Suzanne Juhasz, a feminist literary critic. This "doublebind situation" is reflected not only in the poetry of Christina Rossetti but also in critical attitudes towards her work. Rossetti has been treated by critics as a "woman" rather than as a "poet," a trend which began as early as her obituary in the London Times: "There can be little doubt that we are now deprived of the greatest English poet of her sex which is made to inspire poetry rather than to create it."² It is for this reason that feminist literary criticism is a valuable and necessary way of analyzing the poetry of Christina Rossetti.

Feminist literary criticism developed in the early 1970's as a part of the women's liberation movement. A new form of criticism, its tenets are often embryonic or unclear. However, it is both a recognition of the historical difficulties which beset women writers, and an attempt to define any traits of the "female imagination." The critic Cheri Register, in her "Bibliographical Introduction" divides feminist literary criticism into three areas: analyzing the images presented of women in literature, discussing women writers, and creating a form of criticism which "attempts to set standards for literature that is 'good' from a feminist viewpoint."³ In feminist literary criticism the question of female sensibility or imagination is unavoidable. Is there a female, as distinct from male or universal, imagination which is then translated into art? Register believes that such a sensibility exists, although she qualifies it with a quotation from Joanna Russ on the nature of female subculture. "Culture is male . . . There is a female culture but it is underground, unofficial, minor culture, occupying a small corner of what we think of officially as possible human experience."⁴ Women authors deal specifically with female rites of passage, which include adolescence, sexual initiation, marriage, and childbirth. These experiences are culturally quite distinct for women. For this reason, women authors often not only describe them in detail, but use rites of passage as a way for their heroines to achieve autonomy and adulthood.

The work of Christina Rossetti has recently drawn the attention of feminist literary critics who hope to examine her poetry in a new light. As one of the few major women poets of the Victorian era, or