

“Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me”: The Dilemma of Sisterly Self-Sacrifice

Preamble

*Eat me, drink me, love me:
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant
men.*¹ (471-74)

So opens the climactic scene in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*. Laura and Lizzie, sisters so alike they seem “two blossoms on one stem” (188), begin in mutual innocence. But Laura, tempted by the “forbidden fruit” of the goblin men, yields to its fatal taste. Only the intervening self-sacrifice of Lizzie makes her salvation possible.

Starting with *Goblin Market*, arguably the most complex and most compelling nineteenth century literary work about sisterhood, I propose to examine six poems by two major Victorian poets in which a strong identification between two sisters is set up and in which the central action is the self-sacrifice of one sister for the salvation of the other. In each case, the fall is occasioned by the indulgence in forbidden fruit by one sister; the language of the salvation is a religious one; and the movement within the poem is from innocence to the experience of self-knowledge. Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, “Sister Maude,” and “Noble Sisters” and Tennyson's two poems identically titled “The Sisters” and his *The Princess* possess in common not only a significant similarity in the working out of the narrative pattern but also a high degree of ambiguity of attitude about the action of self-sacrifice and dissatisfaction with its seeming inevitability. In each of the works dealt with, salvation through sisterly self-sacrifice operates as a societal necessity. Yet both authors argue, by means of subversive techniques, that this necessity is ill conceived.

The dilemma the works illustrate is a socio-literary one. Each of them, regardless of the setting within the literary piece itself, reflects the social and cultural realities of the nineteenth century milieu within which Tennyson

and Rossetti live and work. Specifically, each of them deals with the roles and expectations for women that are possible within that milieu. It comes as no surprise that the works show women's options to be restricted—personally, professionally, emotionally, and imaginatively. The effects of this restriction and the consequences of going outside the accepted boundaries form the thematic context of the poems to be considered.

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The injunction “Eat me, drink me, love me,” which is clearly a Eucharistic one, places the narrative of the two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, squarely within the central Christian framework of temptation, fall and redemption. With only a few dissenting voices,² *Goblin Market* has always been read allegorically as the story of a self-sacrificing act of love on the part of Lizzie for the salvation of her sister Laura. This allegorical reading has persisted, despite Christina Rossetti's own insistence that the poem is fairy tale rather than allegory. William Michael Rossetti writes to Mackenzie Bell: “I have more than once heard [Christina] aver that the poem has not any profound or ulterior meaning—it is just a fairy story: yet one can discern that it implies at any rate this much—that to succumb to a temptation makes one a victim to that same continuous temptation; that the remedy does not always lie within oneself; and that a stronger and more righteous will may prove of avail to restore one's lost estate.”³ From Rossetti's day to ours, such critics as James Ashcroft Noble, Lona Mosk Packer, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have suggested a broad range of interpretations of the poem;⁴ nevertheless, they all agree that at the most fundamental level, *Goblin Market* is a story of temptation and redemption.

At the beginning of the poem, Laura and Lizzie, “crouching close together,” hide their faces and listen to the goblins' cry, “Come buy, come buy” (36,4). The succulent and