

QUESTIONING MILTON, QUESTIONING GOD: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S CHALLENGES TO AUTHORITY IN "GOBLIN MARKET" AND "THE PRINCE'S PROGRESS"

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"Let woman fear to teach and bear to learn" (Sonnet 15 of *Later Life*). Christina Rossetti did not follow her own advice very well. Her devotional prose clearly testifies to her belief in her ability, even duty, to teach and advise her fellow Christians, both men and women. This willingness to teach stems from an equal unwillingness to learn from male authority without questioning or challenging it. In her poetry, too, Rossetti offers an alternative vision to that of sanctioned male authority. "Goblin Market" rewrites *Paradise Lost*, questioning Milton's vision of Adam's sexual fall. In "The Prince's Progress" Rossetti sets her sights even higher than Miltonic authority, challenging the very Author of her Being: she puts her God to the test and finds Him wanting.

"Goblin Market" has been read many times as an allegory of the fall and redemption of humanity. While some critics have tried to escape or evade the religious dimension of the poem, others have equated Laura with Eve and the goblin fruit with the fruit from the tree of knowledge. If Laura is Eve, then Lizzie seems to represent Christ. Several critics have stressed Lizzie's status as a female Christ, and have often gone on to interpret her gender as a feminist move on Rossetti's part. Marian Shalkhauser identifies Lizzie as Christ and Laura as "Adam-Eve and consequently all of sinful mankind," concluding her brief study with the statement that Rossetti created "a Christian fairy tale in which a feminine Christ redeems a feminine mankind from a masculine Satan" (19-20). Shalkhauser does not explicitly draw a feminist moral here, but Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt, who makes reference to Shalkhauser's reading, does: "There appears within the work a conscious effort to turn biblical and Miltonic myth with its misogynistic intent, into heroic affirmation of the female, Christ-like principle of loving self-sacrifice and creative self-assertion through rebirth or resurrection" (41). Other critics who see Lizzie as a female Christ include Angela Leighton, who reads the poem as a "religious allegory, of a tempted Eve who becomes a saintly Christ" (138), and Linda H. Peterson who reads the poem in terms of typology: "Although Rossetti's tale may not reproduce typology