

“Come Buy, Come By”:
Miscommunication across Culture,
the Imagined Market, and Colonialism
in *Goblin Market*

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Abstract

Christina Rossetti’s popular poem, *Goblin Market*, “continues to captivate with its critical yet ambivalent assessment of the overlapping sphere of Victorian economics and sexual politics despite its deceptively simple form” (913), as Victor Roman Mendoza has pointed out. However, I will provide a colonial reading of *Goblin Market* in this essay. Who are goblins? Why they are portrayed like “animals”? What is “goblin market” in the poem? What causes the violence on Lizzie at the end of the poem? I suggest that while goblins’ fruits appear as exotic products, Lizzie’s carrying juice with her body symbolizes importation and colonization. I argue that *Goblin Market* represents a misunderstanding of foreign gift-exchange culture from the capitalist point of view. Either “market” or the “merchant” is two sisters’ misinterpretation of goblin’s feast activity and their “remote” identity, rather than Goblin’s self-recognition. Lizzie’s value of trade enforces capitalism in Goblin’s area, which implies and reveals the colonization in nineteenth century.

Keywords: English, Goblin Market, Colonialism

Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* contains stock fairy-tale features, such as two maids who are sisters, goblins as characters, and a moral ending, which suggests that the poem is a cautionary tale containing a didactic moral

about sex and temptation. At the same, the word “market” in the title and the repetitive phrase “come buy” draw scholars’ attention to Victorian economics. As Victor Roman Mendoza points out, *Goblin Market* “continues to captivate with its critical yet ambivalent assessment of the overlapping sphere of Victorian economics and sexual politics despite its deceptively simple form” (913). However, Robin J. Sowards rejects the reading of overlapping sexual politics and economics and suggests that the “market” is the “real subject matter” (115). Sowards reads the poem from the perspective of localism: “the problem with the fruit is that its origins are remote rather than local” (118). In terms of localism, I suggest that *Goblin Market* draws a clear boundary between where the goblins appear and where the two sisters live, defining local and foreign/remote areas. The fruits of the goblin market are exotic non-local products, and when Lizzie carries the juice from the fruits on her body to her sister, Laura, at the end of the poem, this suggests importation and colonization. I argue that *Goblin Market* represents a misunderstanding of foreign gift-exchange culture from the capitalist point of view. The sisters’ misinterpret the goblins’ feast activity as a “market” and their “remote” identity as “merchants.” Lizzie’s decision to trade with the goblins imposes capitalism on the geographical space associated with the goblins, which mimics colonial processes in the nineteenth century.

The brook in *Goblin Market* functions as a boundary that separates the sisters’ home from the glen, which draws a clear line between the place where Lizzie and Laura belong and where the goblins show up. The poem begins with the goblins’ cry, which Laura and Lizzie hear, and then indicates the different areas separated by the brook in the poem: Laura and Lizzie’s “among the brookside rushes” (33) and the goblins’ in the glen. However, the brook is not a safe zone for Laura and Lizzie, but a boundary. It is at the bottom of the glen where Lizzie and Laura can hear the goblins’ voices and have a chance to look at them. As Lizzie says, “we must not look at goblin men” (42) who are “hobbling down the glen” (47). Lizzie’s warning forms two opposite groups of people in this liminal area: “we” (herself and Laura) and goblin men. She recognizes the goblin men and acknowledges their activity by asserting that she and her sister “must not buy their fruits” (43). Here, Lizzie suggests that the goblin men are related to their fruits, and neither of them is trustworthy. As Sowards states, “the problem with the fruits is that its origins are remote rather than local” (118); the same is true for the goblins. Further, Lizzie explains the cause of her suspicions: “who knows upon what soil they fed/ their hungry thirsty roots” (44-45). This passage literally refers to the fruits and the goblins

themselves but, on another level, it also indicates Lizzie's lack of information about the goblin's identity and homeland, which highlights her distrust of unknown people.

Lizzie's vigilance reflects her awareness of the ambiguous boundary around the brook: the boundary is easy to cross and, once crossed, it is hard to re-establish the separation between the territories. Therefore Lizzie chooses to go home, back to the space that is unambiguously her own, while Laura does not listen to Lizzie's warning: she looks at the goblin men and becomes "curious" about them and their fruits (69). She lingers around them. Her "stretched" neck breaks the "last restraint", and attracts goblins to "reach where [she is]" (81-87). At this moment, the brook no longer functions as a divide between Laura's territory and the goblins' territory, but is a place for them to converge. Later in the poem after Laura eats the goblins' fruits, Lizzie meets Laura at the gate of the home to warn her that she "should not loiter in the glen/ in the haunts of goblin men" (145-146). While Laura lingers around the brook area, Lizzie designates that same space as part of the glen. Here the brook is already blurred with the glen. This shows how places are separated not only geographically but also culturally. Lizzie and Laura never go to the glen since it is goblin territory. At the same time, they know nothing about goblins except Jeanie's story, in which Jeanie met the goblins, ate their fruits, and died eventually. Prior to Laura breaking the boundary, there are two distinct communities that have no communication with each other.

While Lizzie and Laura share a similar (and familiar to British readers) appearance defined by whiteness, the goblins, as unknown creatures, are the ones who are racialized in the narrative of the poem. The description of Lizzie and Laura associates them with white and gold, for example: "white and golden Lizzie stood" (408) and Laura also has golden hair (123-126). Whereas the goblin men are associated with animals: "One had a cat's face/ One whisk'd a tail/ One tramp'd at a rat's pace/ One crawl'd like a snail/ One like a wombat prowl'd obtuse and furry/ One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry" (71-75). The description follows with Laura's movement, what she hears and what she sees. The narrative shows that Laura fails to recognize the goblins as beings similar to herself and uses animal features to describe them. As Jill Rappoport suggests in the article "The Price of Redemption in *Goblin Market*": "the goblin men... are exotic creatures, hybridized mixtures of wombat, rat, snail, and parrot, racialized ... by their mysterious and indistinct origins" (866). The goblin men are not only exotic creatures for Laura and Lizzie, but also a kind of creature closer to nature, more wild and indigenous. The narrative contains many action

words and undistinguishable sounds when describing the goblins: “Flying, running, leaping, / Puffing and blowing, / Chuckling, clapping, crowing, / Clucking and gobbling, / Mopping and mowing” (332-336). It shows that the goblins have a different form of cultural expression which Laura and Lizzie cannot recognize or identify the meaning. The incommunicability appears again when Lizzie refuses the goblins’ invitation to feast and the goblins “scratch their pates”, “visibly demurring,” and “grunting and snarling” (390-393). Lizzie has to guess what the goblins try to say by observing their behaviour, “visibly demurring”, since she does not understand their language; to her, it is just like “grunting and snarling”. On the other hand, goblins are closer to nature, less “civilized” and rely on their instinct. Although goblins have their territory (the glen), they do not have a house such as Lizzie and Laura do. Nature is their home. When they leave, they disappear into nature physically: “some writh’d into the ground,/ some div’d into the brook” (442-433).

Sowards suggests that the title of the poem – “Goblin Market” – indicates that “a specific domain of economic exchange, a kind of ‘market,’ is its real subject matter” (115). I agree that there is a “specific domain”; however, the “economic exchange” or the “market” is contradicted by what happens to Lizzie (when goblins do not let her carry their fruits away with a payment of silver penny). I suggest that the “market” is a misinterpretation of the goblin’s activity from the two sisters’ perspective since goblins do not expect a “trade”. The misinterpretation starts with the first instance of the goblins’ cry, “come buy”. The second line of the poem, “Maids heard the goblins cry,” indicates that the content of the goblins cry was based on what the maids “heard” rather than what the goblins intended to say, which implies that the words do not necessarily mean what they literally show, but we should also notice their sound. The goblins’ cry in the opening passage of the poem starts with “come buy”-- “come buy our orchard fruits/ come buy, come buy” (line 3-4)--and ends with “come buy” (31). Since the goblins’ cry emphasizes the word “buy,” many critics focus on the goblins’ advertisement of their fruits and interpret the goblins’ activity as a market or a trade; from this perspective, it is a sneaky transaction under goblin offer: “taste them and try” (line 25). Victor Mendoza analyzes the goblins’ cry as a “jingle,” although “jingle” was not a genre of product advertisement until 1937: “the goblins (and Rossetti) display a keen understanding of how hype produces desire in an increasingly consumer capitalist economy” (922). According to Mendoza, “come buy” is a song for promoting goblins’ products and arousing the consumer’s desire for the products. On the other hand, Sowards also considers “come buy” as offering

“sale, not consumption”, and argues that “taste them and try” is the goblins’ marketing strategy to lead to a sale: “the goblins invoke actual eating only as an advertising gesture designed to lead to a sale: ‘taste them and try’” (120). However, Mendoza and Sowards neglect the unreliability of the narrator’s interpretation. While “come buy” shares the same sound as “come by”, the interpretation depends on how the two sisters understand the goblins’ motivation. What we can be sure of is that the goblins’ cry does mention “taste [fruits] and try”. I suggest that the familiarity with market trade and a lack of knowledge about goblin culture leads Lizzie and Laura to misunderstand the goblins’ intention. The goblins’ activity is not necessarily related to economic exchange, but it could be an invitation to their “feast”.

Lizzie’s warning shows that the sisters are familiar with market trade and they immediately interpret the goblins’ activity as a market. Lizzie tells Laura that “we must not buy their fruits” (43), rather than “we must not eat their fruits”. As Sowards emphasizes, the warning seems “dryly” economic (119). Outside the goblins’ cry with its ambiguous meaning of “buy”, it is the first time the word is used in the poem. By comparing the goblins’ behaviour to regular merchants, Laura finds that this “market” is different: “of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown/ (Men sell not such in any town)” (100-101). The goblins show their great hospitality, which is not the way customers are treated in Laura’s culture. Laura is not sure what the goblins are doing, but she proposes to have a trade with them rather than simply take their offer:

Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather. (116-122)

As Sowards comments, Laura “assumes that money is a prerequisite for the transaction” (120), and thus tells the goblins that she does not have money. At the same time, Laura points out a transaction rule: either it is a trade that she gets the fruits with a payment, or it is a crime of “purloining” if she takes it without paying; then goblins suggest that she can “buy” with “a golden curl” (125). The goblins use the word “buy” in only the economic sense for the first time after Laura points out the transaction rule. But we should notice the

difference between “a golden curl” and other mediums of exchange – “coin”, “silver” and “copper”: “a golden curl” is not actual money for trade. A transaction requires both money and a commodity of equivalent value.

While the goblins propose an exchange of a golden curl and fruits, I suggest that they do not expect a golden curl to function the same as money. Rather, they see it as a gift that Laura will give in appreciation of their offer, which is what Sowards calls “gift economy”: “a gift confers an obligation to give a gift in return” (123). As I mentioned before, the goblins belong to nature and they are part of nature. While fruits naturally grow from the ground, they do not contain labour value, I argue, and therefore the goblins ask something equally natural from Laura as an exchange. Since it is a gift exchange, an invitation to the goblins’ feast, the goblins do not have an obligation to offer another exchange to Laura, or invite Laura as a guest again. Rappoport argues that the gift exchange is unfair to Laura. While Laura’s “gold” lacks the metal’s intrinsic value, the goblins “take much more than a single curl” from this gift exchange, since “Laura loses her hair, her health and her happiness” (861). However, I suggest that Laura loses her health and her happiness not because of the temptation of the goblins’ fruits, but because of her desire to possess more goblin fruits through trade.

Laura does not understand that exchanging with goblins requires an “invitation,” and her last exchange with them was not a “trade”. After she comes home, she says “to-morrow night I will/ Buy more” (167-168). The capital letter “buy” emphasizes Laura’s desire to possess “more”. To the goblins, the gift exchange is fair since both objects (fruits and curls) are derived from nature, but to Laura, goblin fruits have more value than her hair since their fruits are cost-effective (meaning “less cost” coming with more benefit). Laura and Lizzie’s life depends on their work: “[tending] the fowls or cows”, “[fetching] honey and [kneading] cakes of wheat” (294-5). While Laura realizes that she can get the food source without working, she relies on this way of living, so she waits for the transaction everyday, not doing work anymore. The desire of possessing also lies in Laura’s intention of transplanting goblins’ fruits. While she remembers that she has a “kernel-stone” of fruits, she tries to plant it as a crop. It mirrors that “both economists and agriculturists observed the increasingly direct relation between manufacture and agriculture in mid-century England... [According to] Leonce de Lavergn... ‘to bring the land into cultivation is also a manufacture’...” (Mendoza 919).

In order to save her sister, Lizzie meanwhile intends to trade goblins’ fruits with her silver penny after she heard the goblins’ invitation: “give me

much and many: -- / held out her apron,/ toss'd them her penny" (365-367). The goblins reject Lizzie's request to take their fruits, but invite her to join their feast: "our feast is but beginning" (371). This scene again shows an intercultural miscommunication--that one is looking for trade and the other expects a guest coming with a gift. I suggest that Lizzie tries to understand the goblins' activity through the capitalist economic lens, but denies the goblins' voice or their own culture. The goblins' gift culture resembles the gift of indigenous epistemes, which does not relate to economics, and should not be read from a Western perspective. Invoking the idea of the "the gift of indigenous epistemes", Rauna Kuokkanen explains that "classic gift giving has a very different meaning in the indigenous world as opposed to non-indigenous society... indigenous gift giving is based on reciprocity, respect, and responsibility for one another". She also clarifies that although "reciprocity" and "responsibility" mean "one owes or is indebted to" within a Western capitalist economy, those values are positive in indigenous community where "one's responsibility is not primarily to oneself but to the collective". The gift culture is more symbiotic; it is not based on a "two-way relationship of give-and-take exchange", but it is a "circular system" (549). Jonathan Bullen also summarizes Kuokkanen's theory which emphasizes that "a form of generous hospitality" and "a framework for interaction" challenge the logic of Western exchange. As Kuokkanen says, "with the logic of the gift comes a form of generous hospitality that embraces the 'other' and recognises a multiplicity of reciprocal gift practices; in other words, it forms a framework for interaction which varies dependent on the local context, thereby challenging the logic of Western exchange" (586). If we understand the goblins' culture through indigenous gift culture, it is easy to understand why the goblins show great "hospitality" to Laura and invite Lizzie to join their feast but reject Lizzie's desire to take their fruits with her. They are looking for an interaction rather than a material exchange. Thus their activity includes physical contact such as "hugging and kissing," and demonstrates a kind of cheerful ceremony in their treatment of Laura, where "one set his basket down, / one rear'd his plate;/ one began to weave a crown/ of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown" (97-100). The goblin market is an imagined market existing in Lizzie and Laura's mind, while the goblins intend to host a feast in this "market" without any trade.

Through a consideration of the goblins' in terms of indigenous culture, I argue that at the end of the poem, the fruits Lizzie intends to buy symbolize the imported products from colonial places. The goblins' fruit include apples, oranges, pineapples and different kinds of berries. Most of them are tropical

fruits, as the goblins say that “all ripe together/ in summer weather” (16-7). Lizzie and Laura exist in “the cooling weather,” and these fruits are exotic and imported. As I mentioned above, both Lizzie and Laura intend to trade with the goblins for their fruits, rather than simply be a guest at their feast. The goblins are offended when they realize the imposed capitalism in their territory, and therefore they call Lizzie “proud. . . cross-grain’d. . . [and] “uncivil” (394-395). Lizzie wants her silver coin back and refuses to join the goblins’ feast, which breaks their ideology of gift-giving. The goblins force Lizzie to eat as a protest against capitalism and this suggests that the goblins do not want to possess either the silver penny or the fruits. Value for the goblins is derived from the status of the “gift”. In this sense, Lizzie breaks the goblins’ gift culture and transforms it into an economy of exchange.

Lizzie turns fruits into fetishized products. Elaine Freedgood states that Marx’s “commodity fetishism” applies to anxiety about consuming colonial products caused by the violence behind the products: “this anxiety suggests the ways in which acts of consumption were regarded as moral choices at a moment that seems to be prior to the development of the consciousness” (35). The thing contains more meaning from its intrinsic value than its use-value. For example, the juice appears not the same as fruits, but is an essential part of the fruits and contains labour’s work of extraction. In *Goblin Market*, the only time fruits are carried to Lizzie and Laura’s territory is after the violence Lizzie suffers in the goblins’ feast. While the physical violence squeezes fruit into juice, it at the same time adds a deeper meaning to “juice” beyond “juice” itself: “their fruits like honey to throat, / but poison in blood; /... would tell them how her sister stood/ in deadly peril to do her good, / and win the fiery antidote” (555-59). When Lizzie gives Laura the juice, there is a victory in Lizzie’s sacrifice for sisterhood. It is also, however, represents a victory in colonizing the goblins. Thus, the line “that juice was wormwood to [Laura’s] tongue, /she loath’d the feast” (494-495) indicates a form of fetishism. For it is fetishism when Laura has to taste the juice again to feel this history of colonization in the goblins’ feast. The social relation between two communities is revealed in the juice.

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