

# Rossetti and the Risorgimento: An Allegorical Reading of *Goblin Market*

*Audrey Ling*

## **Abstract**

An examination of the biographical details of Christina Rossetti's life opens up the possibility of a political allegorical reading of Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market*. Rossetti's family connections to Italian nationalism suggest that her writing expresses pro-Risorgimento sentiments in support of nineteenth-century Italian unification. *Goblin Market*'s politicized narrative presents Rossetti's two female protagonists, Laura and Lizzie, as figures who embody both the oppressed landscape of Italy and the collective of local inhabitants who are threatened by colonialism and imperialism. My reading builds on Robin J. Sowards's economic interpretations of *Goblin Market* in "Goblin Market's Localism", in which he analyzes dichotomies of the foreign and the local, the colonizer and the colonized. Laura's consumption of foreign goblin fruit indicates her submission to foreign imperialist forces, and the allegory can expand further to construe Lizzie as a symbol of Britain, a cosmopolitan centre that wielded a stronger sense of national identity and economic power than other European nations in this period. Reading Lizzie's position in *Goblin Market* in terms both of Italian revolutionary forces and Britain's continental solidarity underscores Sowards's assertion that Rossetti's preferred alternative to a global capitalist market is a self-sufficient local community. This desire for an autonomous local community in *Goblin Market* parallels Italian nationalists' desire for independence and for equal status as an individual nation amongst European relations. The exploration of *Goblin Market* as a political allegory seeks to draw conclusions about the influence of Rossetti's family background in her writing, and it allows the poem to be read beyond the traditional literary confines of sexual, religious, or economic readings that have appeared in previous scholarship.

**Keywords:** Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*, Risorgimento, Italy, Colonialism, Political Allegory, Victorian women writers and feminism

A myriad of consumerist, economic, feminist, religious, or sexual readings – and even an anorexia reading – of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* are easily unearthed when the title of the poem is keyed into a journal database search engine. Yet, for all this extensive scholarship, there do not appear to be many political readings of *Goblin Market*. This is surprising considering the fact that Rossetti’s family’s political origins are embedded in an Italian nationalism that culminated in revolution during Rossetti’s lifetime. I posit that a closer examination of certain biographical details of Christina Rossetti’s life provides a historical context for a reading of *Goblin Market* as a piece of allegorical writing that supports the Italian unification movement, or Il Risorgimento<sup>1</sup>, in nineteenth century Europe. The significance of Rossetti’s family experience, as a politically displaced or exiled figure, lends gravity to the reconstruction of *Goblin Market* as a political platform, and places the poem on the level of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “pro-Risorgimento stance in *Poems before Congress* (1860)”, a Victorian era publication that Alison Chapman surveys in “European Exchanges” (Chapman, paragraph 30). The combination of this allegorical analysis with some of Robin J. Sowards’s economically focused arguments in “*Goblin Market’s* Localism” seeks to achieve an interpretation of Rossetti’s most famous poem that transcends the limitations of previous scholarship preoccupied with more overt religious or sexual analyses.

Rossetti was the youngest, London born child of a politically exiled Italian citizen, and grew up in a “provocative and unconventional environment” fostered by the frequent visits of Italian revolutionaries-in-exile (Black et al. 807). Despite the geographical distance from her country of origin, the political exile of Rossetti’s father and maternal grandfather<sup>2</sup> due to nationalist leanings would have given Rossetti an understanding of the ongoing struggle for Italian independence. The region of Italy was “renowned for a beauty that was conventionally signified as feminine”, yet it also evokes the “long Western rhetorical tradition of Italy as a tragic fallen woman”, as a result of the frequent conquest and oppression of Italian states by foreign countries and the repeated failed attempts for revolution and

independence by these nation states (Chapman, paragraph 24). Rossetti's displacement as a political refugee in England is analogous to the displacement of the Italian "nation" as whole, since both are displaced by various foreign imperial occupations. Alison Chapman suggests in "European Exchanges", that Victorian female writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning – a contemporary of Rossetti's – advocated for Italian unification and used poetry or prose as a way to express pro-Risorgimento sentiments. Rossetti's family history is undoubtedly tied to this Italian nationalist movement, and her connection and exposure to this political upheaval as well as to the British literary tradition of allegorical writing as an expression of political platforms, signifies the relevance of associating Rossetti's writing with Risorgimento views or politics.

Reading *Goblin Market* as an allegory for the Risorgimento becomes clearer through the identification of Rossetti's distinctly feminine protagonists Laura and Lizzie in *Goblin Market* as the region of Italy as a whole – in both the conventionally feminine landscape as well as in its local inhabitants – who suffers when foreigners attempt to occupy the land. The origins and significance of Laura's name further strengthen her association with the Italian landscape, since "Laura" was a major subject of the celebrated fourteenth century Italian poet Petrarch's romantic poetry. As foreign imperialist occupants, the goblin men are eager for Laura and Lizzie to consume and internalize their fruit, much the way Spain, France, and Austria continuously infiltrated the Italian states. As Sowards points out, "The problem with the fruit is that its origins are remote rather than local", and that this underlying problem is why Laura questions, "Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?" (Rossetti 44-45, Sowards 118). Sowards also remarks upon the implausibility of finding "fruits normally harvested in different seasons" as being "All ripe together / In summer weather", and this unnatural occurrence betrays the foreign quality of the goblin fruit (Rossetti 15-16, Sowards 119).

Elaine Freedgood's "Souvenirs of Sadism: Mahogany Furniture, Deforestation, and Slavery in *Jane Eyre*" helps expand on this idea of problematic foreignness, or foreign fruit, in its historical summary of colonial deforestation and cash crops planted on warm, tropical islands to the south, such as Madeira, Jamaica, or the West Indies. "Sugar cane came from Sicily, and it thrived...in Madeira's mild climate...Grapes were also imported, from Crete and Cyprus", and

these particular agricultural, climatic, and geographic markers can be located in *Goblin Market* (Freedgood 40). Laura's consumption of "Fruits which that unknown orchard bore" (Rossetti 135) is suggestive of cash crops on a faraway island, while the goblins' cry of "Come buy, come buy: Our grapes fresh from the vine" is echoed by Laura's wondering, "How fair the vine must grow / Whose grapes are so luscious / How warm the wind must blow", both of which can allude to the "Grapes...imported, from Crete and Cyprus" (Rossetti 19-20, 60-62, Freedgood 40). Laura's recognition that these grapes can only be grown where "warm the wind must blow" and Lizzie's allusion to the fact that the fruit are "Plucked from bowers / Where summer ripens at all hours" is another climatic/geographic indication of the fruits' colonial cash crop origins (Rossetti 62, 151-152). Freedgood adds, "Charlotte Sussman has argued that colonial products like tea and sugar made consumers anxious because they threatened to bring home the violence that attended their production", and this implies that the consumption of colonial imports threatened the morality of the individual as well as of the nation (Freedgood 35). This close reading reveals then that goblin fruits are not only foreign, they are also representative of "the violent [colonial] histories of deforestation, slavery, and the ecologically and socially devastating cultivation of cash crops in Madeira and Jamaica", which, when consumed, will rot the morality of Laura/Italy (Freedgood 35).

Other colonialist connotations in *Goblin Market* are evident in a comparison of Rossetti's goblin men with the brutish character of Bonaparte Blenkins in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of An African Farm*. As Hannah Freeman recounts in "Dissolution and Landscape in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of An African Farm*", Schreiner "recognized her position as a product of colonial expansion" but she was at the same time, an advocate for the dissolution of "abusive, hierarchical, colonial structures put in place by nineteenth-century Victorian empire" (Freeman 19). Freeman describes Schreiner's Bonaparte Blenkins as "a product and an agent of patriarchy and empire, [who] is driven by an insatiable desire for money and power, his infiltration [on the farm] serving as an allegory for colonial exploitation" (Freeman 24). This depiction of Blenkins recalls Sowards's delineation of the capitalist market economy and greed of the "wicked quaint fruit-merchant men" in *Goblin Market*, and the goblins can be analogously read as "an allegory for colonial exploitation" (Rossetti 553, Freeman

24). “Like the imperial administrator, Blenkins appears on the farm, disguised as a friend,” and the goblins are likewise “cooing all together: ...sound[ing] kind and full of loves / In the pleasant weather” while “The cat-faced purr’d / The rat-paced spoke a word / Of welcome [to Laura]” in an echo of this faux friendship (Freeman 25, Rossetti 78-80, 109-111). Rossetti’s pro-Risorgimento views in support of the oppressed as conceived in this reading, and Sowards’s supposition of Rossetti’s aim to “redeem social life through universal sisterhood”, would align her political views with those of Schreiner’s (Sowards 137). If Rossetti similarly “recognized her position as a product of colonial expansion”, she would likewise advocate for the eradication of colonial hegemony through *Goblin Market* by portraying the goblins as figures like Blenkins, who “models the physical abuse perpetrated against the disenfranchised and disempowered colonized subject (Freeman 19, 25).

Possession, reception, or consumption of goblin fruit then signifies the submission to foreign imperialist forces as well as the culpable participation in the destructive influence of colonialism. Indeed, when Laura consumes the fruit, “Her hair grew thin and grey; / She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn / To swift decay and burn / Her fire away” (Rossetti 277-280). Laura’s physical description echoes that of a “tragic fallen woman”; thus, she is suggestive of the metaphorical figure of Italy under foreign occupation. The Italian landscape and the people, unable to gain independence, can “[dwindle]...to swift decay and burn her fire away” under foreign rule and the bloodshed of multiple revolutions and wars. A sense of displacement also overwhelms Laura, as “with sunk eyes and faded mouth / She dreamed of melons, as a traveller sees / False waves in desert drouth / ...sat down listless in the chimney-nook / And would not eat” (Rossetti 288-290, 297-298). The domestic space that Laura and Lizzie share is no longer a home that physically and emotionally provides Laura with nourishment. Her dismal state is a continued reminder of the displacement experienced by Italian citizens, whether through exile like Rossetti’s family, or through oppression under foreign occupation. Moreover, in the context of a critique against colonialism, *Goblin Market*’s political situation demonstrates that even the native inhabitant of Britain cannot feel nourished or at ease at home, due to the metaphorical consumption of violence through the physical consumption of foreign fruit and/or imported colonial products. It is unmistakable that Rossetti’s poem challenges the colonial

hegemony of her adopted homeland at the same time that it protests the oppression of Italian nation states.

References to Rossetti's adopted homeland are also decipherable in Lizzie's sisterly role. From this perspective, Lizzie represents Britain, who "saw itself as the prototype of other nations' emerging and struggling identity" (Chapman, paragraph 4). Like Laura's name, Lizzie's name holds symbolic significance: it is an abbreviated form of Elizabeth. This politically charged name is clearly an allusion to Elizabeth I, one of the longest reigning British monarchs in history. In "European Exchange", Chapman declares that "Britain was invested politically, culturally and aesthetically in some European countries over others...[forming a] legacy of prioritizing France and Italy." This historical fact is poetically manifest in *Goblin Market*, when Britain and Italy are seen as being symbolically linked through sisterhood in their respective allegorical counterparts Lizzie and Laura (Chapman, paragraph 6). In this interpretation, Lizzie as a "royal virgin town" also reinforces the political connection to Elizabeth I, who was known as the Virgin Queen (Rossetti 418). Rossetti's depiction of Lizzie as the sister who must come to Laura's aid by overcoming the goblin men implies the notion that as a politically and economically powerful nation with a predilection for aestheticizing Italy, Britain should strive to support Italy through its struggles for independent nationhood. In this sense, *Goblin Market* reflects Barrett Browning's Preface to "Poems before Congress" which "argues for an expanded notion of patriotism to include investment in countries beyond the interests of one's homeland" and this shared ideal underscores the potential of reading Rossetti's poem as a political platform (Chapman, paragraph 30).

However, if Laura is the part of Italy under foreign occupation, Lizzie can be correspondingly read as an embodiment of revolutionary Italian nationalist forces, in addition to her symbolic role as Britain. When she first sets out to confront the goblin men, Lizzie "put[s] a silver penny in her purse", which Sowards proposes "give[s] Lizzie the capacity to move between the gift economy and the market economy" (Rossetti 324, Sowards 128). If the silver penny is symbolic of Lizzie's economic power in Sowards's reading, she likewise wields a similar power within the allegorical context of the poem, the silver penny feasibly denoting Britain's economic supremacy. Yet, construed as Italy, Lizzie's silver penny draws attention to Italy's struggles to gain or maintain economic

independence in the same way that Lizzie tries to gain the upper hand with the goblin men. Later in her dialogue with the goblins, Lizzie also evokes the language of warfare, when she disdains to continue any “further parleying” (Rossetti 385). Sowards emphasizes the significance of the semantics of this word as well, recognizing “parleying” as an act that takes place between enemies (Sowards 130). But Lizzie’s most obvious exemplification as Italy’s resistance is in her description as being “close beleaguered by a fleet / mad to tug her standard down” (Rossetti 418-421). She is described as a literal landmark resisting a fleet, and she upholds a “standard”, a military device used in leading battle. Rossetti’s detail of Lizzie as a “royal *virgin* town” is again noteworthy in this analysis because it addresses the “virgin” value of the land at stake, as the situation poses the risk of Lizzie becoming a “tragic fallen woman” like Laura/Italy.

When Lizzie restores Laura to life,

“[Laura’s] locks streamed like the torch  
 Born by a racer at full speed  
 Or like the mane of horses in their flight,  
 Or like an eagle when she stems the light  
 Straight toward the sun,  
 Or like a caged thing freed,  
 Or like a flying flag when armies run” (Rossetti 500-506).

Laura’s restoration is evocative of victory in battle, from the “mane of horses in their flight” to the “flying flag when armies run.” The freedom of the Italian landscape from oppression is clear in Laura’s ability to behave as a “caged thing freed” (Rossetti 501-506). Lizzie’s ability to draw “Life out of death” is also a clear “resurrectionist motif”, usually employed in a Biblical sense, but in this case, also a symbolic manifestation of the name given to the Italian struggle for independence, Risorgimento, or Italian for “resurrection” (Rossetti, 524, Chapman paragraph 39). In both symbolic roles as Britain and as Italian resistance, Lizzie is the one who resurrects Laura, or Italy.

Resurrection for Laura, and thus for Italy, is ideally in the unification of Italy. The joining together of ‘sister’ states of the Italian peninsula would allow them to gain independence and strength as its own nation, which would then be

capable of forming sisterly relationships with other nations. Sowards's economic reading establishes that Rossetti's alternative to what he identifies as the evils of the market economy in *Goblin Market* is a "self-sufficient community...that remains entirely within the domestic sphere" (Sowards 134-135). While Sowards confines the idea of the domestic in *Goblin Market* to "a single household", his suggestion that Rossetti's poem expresses a "need for, and the birth of, such a [domestic/local] community", can be still applied on the allegorical level of the Risorgimento (Sowards 135). If Italy is viewed as a local community on a global scale, it is first and foremost in need of sisterly or neighbourly solidarity amongst its nation states, and then of solidarity from neighbouring European nations, to maintain its autonomy. Sowards's economic reading furthers the allegorical reading of *Goblin Market* in its ability to identify symbolically significant economic objects or communities and to imply the need for an entire nation's economic autonomy. As a political allegory, *Goblin Market* reveals an argument for Rossetti's support of Risorgimento, as well as uncovering a critique of colonialism and imperialism. Through tracing the symbolic roles of Laura, Lizzie, and the goblin men, it is possible to conclude that Rossetti's aim is to propose that Britain can redeem itself from the sadistic horrors of imperialism and colonialism and therefore "redeem social life through universal sisterhood" and through the "investment in countries [such as Italy] beyond the interests of one's homeland" (Sowards 137, Chapman, paragraph 30).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the early 1800s, Italy was not yet a unified country. Instead, it was a peninsula that was divided into approximately 20 regions, with five major states: Milan, Florence, Venice, Rome, and Naples. Around the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the region around Milan was occupied by Spain. Then, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Austrian Empire dominated what is now "North Italy". 1789 was the year of the French Revolution, and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the Napoleonic period and French occupation in "Italy". Due to the influence of the French Revolution, a sense of Italian nationalism emerged, and Italians from different regions formed an Italian army in an attempt to gain independence as a separate national entity. Post-Napoleon, around 1815, Austria dominated Italy again, and the period of time



between 1815 until Italian unification in 1871 was marked by several Italian Revolutions (in the 1820s, 1830s, and in 1848), and by three Italian Wars of Independence. The struggle for Italian independence and nationalism is known as “Risorgimento”, “that derives from the Italian for ‘resurgence’ or ‘resurrection’” (Chapman, paragraph 18). (English 330 Seminar, “Italian Political History”, Spring 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Gabriele Rossetti escaped to London in 1824 because he had been forced into exile for his support of the revolutionary Italian nationalist movement. Rossetti incurred a death sentence for being a part of an Italian revolutionary society, which he joined when Ferdinand I, King of the Two Sicilies and Naples, overthrew the constitutional government of Naples under the influence of Austrian rule. Rossetti’s maternal grandfather was also an Italian exile in London.

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