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Krystyn Stacy

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Krystyn Stacy

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Jackson Ayres

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### **British Imperialism and Cultural Anxieties in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market***

The fantasy poem *Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti tells of two sisters who become involved in commerce with untrustworthy goblin men. Throughout the poem's narrative, we find out that the goblin men are not just untrustworthy, but downright malicious. Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market* presents a fairytale of dangerous commerce with goblin men, which, beneath the surface, is emblematic of Victorian Era anxieties that presided within the British Empire surrounding imperial commerce with its subjects. *Goblin Market* expresses this ambivalence over imperial commerce through the ambiguity of the origin of the fruits sold by the goblin men, the animalistic descriptions of the goblin men, and the distrust and distaste for the goblin men by the citizens of the village.

To make a long poem short, the two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, live in a village that is also inhabited by goblin men who sell fruits at a market. There are rumors within the community that advise people to steer clear of these goblins; we see this mainly through the mention of a girl named Jeanie who bought their fruits, became ostracized from her community, and withered away (Rossetti). Now is a good time to mention that this play is not limited to a reading through a British Imperialist lens, it can also be read as an allegory of sexual morality with the goblin men acting as sexual temptation for the women. According to that reading, sexual immorality leads to an ostracization from the community and, ultimately, the death of the perpetrator; however, there are many different ways to read this poem. The goblin men, though, as we see

them in the poem, are very persistent. Ultimately, Laura, who has been victim to the goblin men's incessant cry throughout the poem of "come buy, come buy," gives in, eats of their fruits, and becomes very ill (Rossetti). So ill, in fact, that if she does not eat more of the fruit, she will likely die. The problem is that she doesn't hear their cry anymore and cannot find them anywhere. This leaves her sister, Lizzie, to confront the goblin men to get fruit to save her sister, without eating it herself. This proved to be more difficult than it seemed as the goblin men were insistent that she eat the fruit and acted violent towards her. They shoved the fruit against her face "to make her eat", but she would not (Rossetti). Lizzie's encounter with the goblin men resulted in her covered in the juices of their fruits, which, because of Lizzie's sacrifice, now contain redemptive and revitalizing energies. Laura consumes these juices directly off her sister's body, an act that returns life to her. The poem ends as Laura, in the future, tells her own children the tale of the goblin men and of how her sister saved her from them.

Without an understanding of the historical context surrounding this time period, Rossetti's poem feels directly out of a children's storybook. Therefore, an awareness of the time is necessary for reading this poem through a British imperial lens. Christina Rossetti was writing this poem during the Victorian era, which happened to also be a height of British Imperialism. With this knowledge, it is safe to say that she was being influenced, knowingly or unknowingly, by the resulting cultural anxieties over Britain's imperial trade and commerce. During this time, as Patrick O'Brien explains, the British Empire relied very heavily on its colonies for "foodstuffs and raw materials and as markets for goods and services" (O'Brien). However, not all British citizens supported this economic reliance, and there were mixed feelings about this. According to O'Brien, some opponents to such a heavy reliance on imperial trade and commerce believed that "holding on to alien territory and resources was not required to ensure access to markets or to

supplies of food and raw materials imported from beyond the kingdom's borders" (O'Brien). Some people believed that imperialism was not the way to initiate trade and commerce with other countries, while others disagreed. This country's ambivalence regarding this reliance on colonies and imperial subjects created a cultural anxiety over the reliance on colonial extraction, and we can see this at play in *Goblin Market*, even if- this was not Rossetti's primary intended meaning for this poem.

The ambiguity of the origins of the fruits sold by the goblin men within *Goblin Market* suggest that the fruits are foreign goods. In one stanza, Laura outright questions the fruits' origins saying, "Who knows upon what soil they fed their hungry thirsty roots?" (Rossetti). This is the first instance where we see Laura questioning where the fruits come from. Laura is assuming that these fruits are from foreign soils. If the fruits had been common, Laura likely would not have questioned anything about their origin; this indicates that the fruits that were being sold are not from Britain. Later, when reflecting on the events of the story, Laura states regarding the fruits that "men sell not such in any town" (Rossetti). This quote provides supporting evidence to the claim that the goods that the goblin men are selling are, in fact, foreign goods. From this point, we can understand the fruits to be foreign goods, and the goblin men to be British subjects since they are the foreigners who are participating in commerce with Britain. We can read this emphasis on the unknown origin of the fruits sold by the goblin men as a reason not to purchase the goods as a demonstration of the cultural anxiety toward participating in commerce with British colonies.

Now that we can see the goblin men as being representative of British imperial subjects, we can look further into the harmful views that are present in the animalistic descriptions of them from the poem. The poem uses language such as "cat-like and rat-like, ratel- and wombat-like"

to describe the physical appearances of the goblin men (Rossetti). This rhetorical use of animal features to describe physical appearances of the goblin men, i.e., British colonial subjects, demonstrates that British citizens native to the United Kingdom view the subjects as less than human, or at least below them. These could also be metaphoric descriptions used to compare the subjects to those animals like rats and wombats, who typically are viewed as shrewd and disliked. In this case, it would be less about the physical characteristics, and more about the associations people have with the animals. Either way you look at it, descriptions of the goblin men as animalistic perpetuate a harmful narrative of British subjects. This usage of animalistic descriptions is not unique to Rossetti's poem. Vicki Tromanhauser notes how, in the Victorian cultural imaginary, animalistic and barbaric terms were used to aid "in the repression of other human subjects" (Tromanhauser). Essentially, colonizers used barbaric and animalistic descriptions to justify their poor treatment of their colonial subjects on the basis that they are less than human. This analysis can help us to see that the cultural anxieties within the British Empire regarding commerce with colonies was also about *who* they were trading and associating with, and not just about the fear of an economic reliance on Britain's colonial subjects.

In addition to the harmful physical descriptions of the goblin men, we also see negative portrayals of their non-physical characteristics. One example that is present in the poem is the use of the term "sly" to describe the goblin men (Rossetti). The term sly indicates that someone is not to be trusted. The usage of this term to describe British colonial subjects once again reflects the anxiety that was being felt during this time by British citizens. In this example, it also reflects an inherent distrust towards them. Another example of this occurs in the poem, when the goblin men are described as "the evil people" (Rossetti). Through our reading of the goblin men as imperial subjects, we can see in this example British subjects being referred to as evil. This

generalization of the British colonies as evil goes even further than cultural anxiety and more into xenophobic beliefs held against entire peoples. If we think about this in broader imperial history, this rhetoric is used to gather support from citizens to colonize and subjugate other countries; if citizens are told that people are evil by their government, they will be more likely to support colonial efforts to “save or civilize” them. Of course, the terms save and civilize in this context really only mean to bring them under British control. When we see British citizens engaging and agreeing with this rhetoric, it indicates the success of the British government in pushing imperialist propaganda. This example demonstrates how the anxiety and negative attitudes that are felt within the British Empire regarding the British subjects with whom they are doing commerce with is at least in part due to their race.

As we have seen, *Goblin Market*, which presents itself as an innocent fairytale, provides a narrative regarding cultural anxieties and attitudes toward British imperial commerce. This analysis shows that imperialistic attitudes can be found within texts from the Victorian era that have seemingly nothing to do with British imperialism. It encourages further analysis of other writings from the Victorian era under the lens of imperialism. As well, it demonstrates just how prevalent and widespread imperialistic thought was within the British citizenry. To this effect, Edward Said writes that many poets and writers “have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels” etc. (Said). We see this play out in Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* through the distinctions made between the goblin men verses the two sisters in the poem, i.e., between the East and the West. Christina Rossetti is a prime example of how imperial thought pervades the British cultural imaginary, even perhaps unintentionally. This interpretation of *Goblin Market* is just one of many because the richness of this poem by Rossetti cannot be overstated, but critics and readers need to reckon with the

poem's perpetuation of imperial tropes. *Goblin Market* is very commonly taught in British Literature courses, which is not inherently a bad thing; however, it is worth investigating how this text is taught. With ongoing efforts within the decoloniality school of thought, this text, which is full of references to British imperialism, ought to be approached through such a lens. Otherwise, there exists the risk of perpetuating harmful imperialistic stereotypes and attitudes. Further, it would be worthwhile to investigate more literature that was written during British imperial heights for perpetuation of imperial tropes; this would be beneficial to better understand the pervasiveness of imperial thought in the British cultural imaginary.

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