Rossetti’s Goblin Marketing:  
Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye

I

When Christina Rossetti let it fall that in “Goblin Market” she had written no parable soliciting deep exegesis but a poem to be taken just as it came, she may have meant to wave the hermeneutic white flag. In effect, she was dropping the scented handkerchief. The eldritch embroidery of “Goblin Market” has probably attracted more, and more various, commentary during the last two decades than any other poem of its time. It proves on recent examination to be a poem about communal sorority and also about patriarchal dominion; about the Christian Eucharist and also free self-actualization; about diffusive jouissance and also the therapeutic consolidation of a split soul; about anorexia nervosa, vampirism, the adulteration of foodstuffs, absinthe addiction, and the pros and cons of masturbation.

While so many critical allegories can hardly be mutually compatible, taken en masse they fortify every reader’s conviction that, whatever “Goblin Market” means, it is a work instinct with sex, drugs, rock and roll, or their Victorian equivalents. Determining what these equivalents might be is a nice task for critical brokerage; lately the smart money has been placed on economics. The readings of the poem that make the most comprehensive sense of its multiplex appeal are the ones that put the market back in “Goblin Market,” and vice versa; that ask how Rossetti’s masterpiece both critically reflects upon, and knowingly takes part in, systems of commodity exchange that during her lifetime transformed Victorian society and the terms of her calling as a writer within it. To a series of strong mercantile interpretations published by American scholars during the 1990s I propose adding what

ABSTRACT Recent criticism putting the market back in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862) makes, and leaves, space for consideration of the poem’s relation to marketing-as-advertising. Written to be read by adults in silence as if out loud to children, the poem trades in the mystique of a virtual orality that is structurally analogous to its goblin merchants’ mystification, through promotional language, of both the nature of their retail business and the origins of the produce they sell. The virtual-oral mode of the poem creates rich opportunities for local wordplay to highlight that mystification at a juncture in economic history when with new subtlety and aggressiveness a burgeoning advertising business was transforming Victorian consumerism. The miracle of a sister’s redemption from goblin taste stakes on Rossetti’s Christian belief her congruent faith as a poet: that a modern tongue may be redeemed by art, in spite of art’s collusion with the forces by which it must circulate to earn a hearing. / Representations 82. Spring 2003 © The Regents of the University of California. issn 0734-6018 pages 117–133. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.
marketing practices of the later nineteenth century most conspicuously added to the victorious technologies of capitalism, the element of advertising. The seductions in—and of—"Goblin Market" were early warnings—and exploitations—of Victorian styles of market penetration that, inasmuch as they ventured to influence behavior by reorienting desire through language, had every claim on the attention of contemporary poets. This was especially true for a poet of Christina Rossetti's age: born in 1830, and cresting the prime of life in 1862 when her Goblin Market volume was published, she was young enough to feel the new pitch of Victorian advertisement as keyed particularly to her generation's susceptibilities; yet she was old enough to know better, having grown up under a more naïve promotional dispensation.

From this historically privileged vantage the whole story of "Goblin Market" in a sense flows, and it goes like this: Laura and Lizzie, two look-alike alliterative sisters, live together alone keeping cows, chickens, and bees in a rural neighborhood that happens to be frequented byoblin men peddling domestic and imported fruit in the open air around breakfast and supper time. The sisters are of indeterminate age: young maidens, clearly; yet old enough to be independent of any parental supervision or truant officer, to know a cautionary tale or two about those goblin costermongers, and to qualify for illustration as stunners—initially by the poet's brother Dante Gabriel in the first edition of 1862 and then a century later in an unbowedlerized, cut-to-the-chase version in Playboy magazine that, in case it has not come to your attention on some former occasion, has been generously represented in a recent article by Lorraine Kooistra. One evening Laura succumbs to the goblins' mouth-watering sales pitch and, though penniless, contracts to barter a lock of her hair for all the fruit she can eat. Coming home in a nigh bulimic buzz, she brushes aside her sister Lizzie's scolding with a promise to go out again the next night and get more fruit for both of them. As that next night falls, Laura finishes up her farm chores and goes out cruising for goblin. But she can't score: frustrated at first to find no goblin on the scene, she then learns to her horror that, while Lizzie can hear the vendors as usual, she herself has gone stone-deaf to their cry.

Sick with desire, Laura wastes away to the point where Lizzie overcomes scruple and decides to act as her sister's proxy, taking a penny in her purse and letting the goblins know she's ready to deal. But—in a scene to which we shall return—when Lizzie orders a pennysworth of fruit on a takeout basis, the goblins insist that she feast on the spot like her sister. Lizzie declines and demands her money back, at which point the goblin team really gets down to business. They mount a hard sell that escalates from courtesy and advice to insult and threat, cresting at length in the apotheosis of sales force: resorting to outright personal violence, they become pushers indeed, crushing fruit against her mouth—which will not open, however, either to protest or to taste—and drizzling juice down her chin and neck. Finally the goblins take no for an answer, reject the penny, and vanish underground or into
thin air. Lizzie races home in an afterglow of ecstatic renunciation (remember, it’s a Victorian poem) and invites Laura to “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices . . . Eat me, drink me, love me” (don’t worry, it’s a Victorian poem). Aghast at Lizzie’s apparent sacrifice, yet obedient to an addict’s need, Laura ingests the pulpy juice, only to have it work as a homeopathic antidote kicking her into a high-speed delirium, from which she recovers Completely Cured. An epilogue fast-forwards to later years: both sisters now being married, Laura makes a habit of summoning her daughters and nieces—nephews, sons, and husbands somehow need not apply—to hear her tale of trespass, waste, and redemption and to learn its lesson that “there is no friend like a sister” (562).

II

Few readers have been entirely at ease with this overdetermined final scene of instruction. But a convenient back door opens into the poem when we consider the mode of that instruction, which is overwhelmingly oral: “Laura would call the little ones / And tell them,” “Would talk about the haunted glen,” and so forth (548–49, 552; my emphases). The substance of this oral transmission is manifestly the same as that of the five-hundred-line poem we have just been reading, whose antically irregular rhymes breathe a nursery air, and whose supple, frisky metrics practically have to be sounded out, in the mind’s ear if not aloud, in order to catch their distinctive, spontaneous music. To be sure, the ambiguous position of the epilogue, coming after the story it depends on yet also operatively commands, makes it impossible to equate the third-person narrative voice with Laura’s. Besides, as an oral storyteller Laura has a bardic license to tell her oft-told tale different ways at different sittings, in contrast to the fixity of the one printed text before us.

At least one hopes she tinkers a bit with her vocabulary: to imagine the circle of little ones puzzling over terms in the text like pellucid, purloin, obstreperously, and succous pasture, a thesaurus-tripper’s periphrasis for juicy food—to imagine the kids reacting to this gilt-edged diction is to shake off the spell of a naive orality. It is to recall, that is, how Rossetti, like other Victorian pioneers in children’s literature, was at work in a compromised mode that owed its charm to the ways it played reading against listening. The text as a whole invites us to imagine such a performance as publisher Alexander Macmillan staged when he read out “Goblin Market,” shortly before publication, to a skeptical yet eventually enthralled “workingman’s society,” or again, such a performance as the poet herself apparently conducted when reading aloud to fallen women at the shelter in Highgate where she volunteered. The text invites us not just to read it, but to read it to ourselves, to let it talk us into a mode of virtual orality. And virtual orality, I shall argue, has everything to do with the economic thematics of Rossetti’s story.
Much of my argument will be found implied, by the reading ear, in the poem’s opening lines:

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Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
“Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy...”
(1-4)
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The phrase “Come buy” recurs more than a dozen times in “Goblin Market” as the “iterated jingle” (253) of a straightforward sales pitch. Yet a vigilant virtual orality has to wonder how to take it. How is the imagined listener to know what the reader so plainly sees, that “buy” has a letter u in the middle of it—to know that the goblins are not freely offering something (Do come by our orchard some time) but rather selling something for a price? The listener in the poem knows what’s up, right away and beyond any doubt: the first thing said by either of the maids who hear the goblins cry is that “We must not buy their fruits” (43). That our country maids thus know just what they are hearing is as sure a sign as any in the poem that they are conscious denizens of a market economy, where the way to come by a nice piece of fruit is to come and buy it; where “Come buy” betokens not hospitality but trade. The verbal confusion here is all ours, the virtual listeners'; this happens, I submit, because Rossetti wants us to read verbal confusion as cultural confusion. Embedded (or endeared, as John Keats might say) within the reigning order of contract and purchase, she invites us to recognize an older order of invitation and gift, which mercantilism has on one hand superseded as clearly as literacy has superseded orality; yet which on the other hand mercantilism has less abolished than engrossed, for rhetorical purposes, as a hidden persuader. About this kind of subliminal promotion Rossetti’s market-wise maids seem clueless: Lizzie means to reinforce her sister’s “We must not buy” when she declares, “Their offers should not charm us, / Their evil gifts would harm us” (65–66; my emphases); but the way her declaration confounds purchase with donation, confounds the boughten with the given (via the ambiguously offered), would do a politician proud. And this confusion discloses something about the promotional strategy that underwrites the goblins’ deceptively straightforward “Come buy.”

III

That strategy, for which another name of course is advertising, entails a redescription of the commodity in terms that boost its value by deepening its mystique, a property that Victorians ordinarily associated with the exotic in space or time (with empire, that is, or history). In the mind of a customer who can be brought to fancy that a piece of fruit bears within it, somehow, the whole climate and landscape in which it grew, it becomes not fruit but what we routinely if oddly call it
where I come from: produce. Acquire a piece of produce, and you own a piece of its production, its origin and growth. This is why the goblins spin their first pitch, as the meter does not require them to do, “Come buy our orchard fruits”: for a penultimata, desire-whetted microsecond the orchard itself is on offer, as later when the goblins vend origins in hawking “grapes fresh from the vine” (20) and “Citrons from the South” (29). The goblin value-added here comes from a narrative and imaginative exploitation of the eroticized mystery about where fruit comes from. This mystery obtrudes, obliquely, on the virtual-oral reader at the goblins’ first entrance in line 2: “Maids heard the goblins cry.” To hear “the goblins’ cry” is to hesitate, for the interval of a ghostly apostrophe, between imagining the goblins that cry and the cry that goblins make. In one sense a pointless distinction, in another it problematizes just the mystified genitive relation of source to message, or of cause to effect, on which goblin sales appeal depends. It is an appeal, at all events, to which Laura rises avidly; when she asks, “Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?” (44–45), she hardly knows whether she is talking herself out of goblin business or into it. Soon the romance of origins will tempt Laura to buy the orchard, and, before the poem is out, she will very nearly buy the farm. But already here we see her buying into the terms on which goblins do business: the terms not of real-goods presence but of representation, framing, and display.

In the 1860s, when Rossetti’s poem was published, the juxtaposition of exchange value with use value was memorably articulated elsewhere in London, and not just in Karl Marx’s German jottings, over across town at the British Museum, toward what would be Das Kapital. In stirring English prose John Ruskin had just begun to expose the roots of honor and anatomize the veins of wealth in Unto this Last, which began its aborted serial run in William Makepeace Thackeray’s new high-profile and advertisement-rich Cornhill Magazine at just the time Dante Gabriel Rossetti sought through Ruskin to place his sister’s parable “Goblin Market” in that same periodical (again, alas, abortively). If, as seems likely, Christina read the first installments of Unto this Last, Ruskin’s critique of the engrossment of use value by exchange value should have interested her keenly for its insight into goblin marketing technique. For another component to her goblins’ promotional strategy is the paramount importance of selling not just the product, but the sale, by romanticizing exchange itself, above and beyond whatever useful or useless commodities change hands. In “Goblin Market” this strategy underlies an oddly piquant convergence between the rhetorics of abundance and urgency, plenty and scarcity. For twenty-five lines of verse after the first “Come buy,” the poem turns into a fruit catalogue, merely naming with the occasional tempting epithet dozens of fruits “All ripe together / In summer weather” (15–16).

All ripe together? That Rossetti’s fruits are plucked out of context and impossibly out of season is something that would have been clearer to Victorian readers in the age of free trade than to us in the age of freon, although Richard Menke’s survey of the Victorian forcing of exotic fruits provides a salutary reminder that in this, as
in so many matters, the difference between then and now is less sharp and profound than we like to suppose. What happens within the goblins’ catalogue of unreasonably deracinated produce is that the out-of-context items reciprocally contextualize each other as portions of a new whole, a fantasy cornucopia fit, as line 28 says, “to fill your mouth.” Which is part of what makes the opening two dozen lines so much fun to say. Like Rossetti’s peckaboo versification, the goblin produce is common yet “rare” (23), garden-variety yet one-of-a-kind, crated and carted at cost from afar yet pink with propinquity, neighborly, a nearby buy. The very tension of near and far forms part of the seductiveness of the commercial uncanny, which the narrator laces, twice, into the enigmatic aside “(Men sell not such in any town)” (101, 556). (Is that no town whatsoever, or not just any old town? I might not sell to just anybody, as the barbaric hawker Walt Whitman had lately intimated in the 1855 Leaves of Grass, but I’ll sell to you.) So there’s lots more where this fruit came from; yet at the same time—the intense, magical moment of the sale—the buyer needs to act now, because all this superabundance is available just here and for a limited time only. “Morns that pass by, / Fair eves that fly; / Come buy, come buy” (17–19), Rossetti’s mischievous rhyming of “by” with its homonym “buy” lets the goblin-market rhetoric put time itself up for sale—morns that pass, buy (by selling hours of dross, per Shakespeare’s sonnet 146?). It is as if to acquire the fruit is also to acquire the passing morn, whose transiency spikes its price. Fruit’s a ware that will not keep, which is why the traffic must represent itself as more perishable even than the commodity, must beat the fruit to the punch and thus preemptively forestall the Fall—by which of course so profoundly Christian a poet as Christina Rossetti portends more than just a slump in prices. The caveat emptor anxiety of shopping finds its goblin-logic outlet in the carpe diem rush of the mercantile hustle: Do come by; and when you come do buy.11

IV

Wherever the fruits originate, and whatever their inherent properties—myself, I defy alike the drug cop and adulteration whistle-blower, deeming them nothing but perfectly good samples of perfectly decent produce—what goblinizes the fruits is a strategic hype that extracts them from actual origins and recontextualizes them in fantasies of exoticism and abundance, whose unique venue is the marketplace, and whose special broadcast medium is language. The goblins’ “iterated jingle / Of sugar-baited words” (233–34) is just what that arresting last phrase says it is: not language-baited fructose, the pedestrian ad-man’s beat, but sugar-baited words. The produce has to sell the sale; the commodity, however sweet, serves as a mere pretext for the ad campaign, the jingling text, the promo patch that goblin entrepreneurs undertake to engrait into the customer’s skin.
The essence of this textual jingle is repetition. It must be broadcast widely enough and heard often enough to be recognized without effort, nay without thought; and to this end, it should structurally replicate its repeatability, in the form of internal repetitiveness. What makes a jingle jingle is its fractal epitome of the widespread iteration it is destined for. This is a professional rule programmatically expounded in Anthony Trollope's novel *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson*, which by happy coincidence ran in the *Cornhill Magazine* from August 1861 until March 1862, just one month before *Goblin Market and Other Poems* appeared, including of course the title poem which Thackeray had rejected. The narrator of this novel is George Robinson, a self-proclaimed advertising genius who is undeterred by the bankruptcy of his firm from drilling his reader in the lessons of the trade:

Credit is the polished shaft of the temple on which the new world of trade will be content to lean. That, I take it, is the one great doctrine of modern capital. Credit,—credit,—credit. Get credit, and capital will follow. . . .

Credit I take to be the belief of other people in a thing that doesn't really exist. . . . To obtain credit the only certain method is to advertise. Advertise, advertise, advertise. That is, assume, assume, assume. Go on assuming your virtue. The more you haven't got it, the more you must assume it. . . . Advertise long enough, and credit will come. 12

Even advertising doctrine, it appears, must advertise, which is what all the humorous repetition in Trollope's prose is for. Sheer insistence will do much; but, as Robinson is well aware, nowadays more is exacted of the advertiser than that: "there must be a system, and there must be some wit in your system. . . . There must be some finish about your advertisements, something new in your style, something that will startle in your manner."13 There must be, in a word (and a word that Trollope's Robinson uses often) some *poetry*. Hence the high proportion in advertising slogans of devices such as rhyme, meter, alliteration, and assonance. The various repetitive devices whereby poetry in the modern world keeps a kind of faith with its mnemonic, oral origins are structurally the same as those the advertiser uses to gain access to the memory of a potential customer.

So it is that the varied rhythms of recurrent meter and sound in the opening lines of "Goblin Market" stick with most readers as the poem's most memorable feature. The adhesive memorability of these lines is the most important thing about them. Their seductive merger of gustatory with verbal orality is complete by the time the goblins wind up their sales pitch at line 30: "Sweet to tongue and sound to eye."14 What makes this line good enough to eat is the syntactic redoubling of each of its phrases, which parse equally well whether their first terms are read as adjectives or nouns, their second terms as infinitives or prepositional phrases. Tonguing them is sweet, as they are sweets made for the tongue; taken as edibles, they look sound to the eye that beams them into synaesthetic earshot as phantom vocables. These co-present, mutually reinforcing constructions let the language be
fruitful and multiply, in a thickening of sense that entangles, just as goblin advertising aims to do, the merchandising with the merchandise, in one take-it-or-leave-it offer.

At the same time, the construal of “sound” as a noun exceeds that goblin aim, since in effect it snaps the virtual-oral reader out of shopperly entrenchment into critical attention, precisely naming as it does the bifocal, intersensory complex of reading with listening that underlies the entire process Rossetti here metapoetically salutes. Advertising works a lot like poetry, and again we have Trollope’s word for it. “The groundwork of advertising is romance,” avers George Robinson, and then closes in for the generic kill: “It is poetry in its very essence.” Pointedly advertising to this cultural juncture between poetry and advertisement as modes of realization, of fantasmatic embodiment within the sensuous properties of language, Rossetti’s brilliant proem forewarns the reader to rehearse the arts of consumer protection that Lizzie will later practice when she, too, warily begins at line 328 “to listen and look.”

V

Lizzie’s dealings with the goblins will reveal her as a studied reader and tough customer into the bargain, but the poem must first retail the cautionary history of that impulse buyer she lives with, her seducible sister. Caught hook, line, and sinker by the goblins’ sugar-baited words, “sweet-tooth Laura” (115) “rear[s] her glossy head” (52)—she’s all tongue, we might say, thanks to Rossetti’s finding that lingual adjective “glossy” in a manuscript revision. And what our omniglot patsy does is start to mouth goblingspeak:

How fair the vine must grow  
Whose grapes are so luscious;  
How warm the wind must blow  
Thro’ those fruit bushes.

(60–63)

This technically prelapsarian sweet-talk shows that Laura has bought into the goblin-market fantasies of origin and plenty well before she tenders her golden curl. Even then she will still sauce her banquet, mid-binge, with the mystique of produce: “She sucked and sucked and sucked the more / Fruits which that unknown orchard bore; / She sucked until her lips were sore; / Then flung the emptied rings away” (134–37). I suspect Laura tears like this into her purchases, and wastes so much packaging, because the focal point of her lip-sore gluttony is the verbal wrap that they came with, and still smack of. Feasting on phonemes, she remains just what P. T. Barnum might have dubbed her. She typifies the sucker who will never get an even break because no actual commodity can match the consuming appetite that
her susceptibility to strong marketing has awakened. This is why Laura’s attempt to sell Lizzie on the promise of tomorrow’s fruitfest sounds like a cheesy-genteel echo of the goblins’ delight sales job today, something wafted out of Alfred Tennyson’s 1830 “Hesperides”: “Odorous indeed must be the mead / Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink” (180–81).16

Indeed, indeed, indeed. That a nice girl like Laura should talk like this indicates in the clearest way that to take in goblin fruit is to be taken in by goblin hype and mistake the word for the deed. Gobbling merchandise and gabbling merchandising are all one, “a voice like voice of doves / Cooing all together” (77–78). For Laura has accepted the goblins’ terms, and in a double sense. Penniless in a seller’s market, she has been reduced to paying the steep price they fix, “a precious golden lock” (126) of her hair. Furthermore, in consuming at the goblins’ set rate she has embraced, as by prescription, their recipe as a substitute for the experience of her own senses; as we just saw, the only account of that experience Laura can produce is a regurgitated digest of the slogans and captions she has picked up in the market. Here then is another way to understand Laura’s goblin traffic and its symbolic freight of exploitative seduction or prostitution. By paying with a piece of her body—the negotiation enacts, incidentally, the cut-rate etymology behind the shop terms coupon and retail—she affirms in form the substance of what is already a done deal, the goblin marketers’ capture of her very imagination, and thereby of her purchase on reality.

This may explain one of the abiding enigmas of Rossetti’s canny fable: why henceforth Laura can no longer hear or see the goblin vendors. Having entered the market headlong and been saturated by it, she has become its creature and can therefore no longer perceive what it is in distinction to what she is, or rather what it has made of her. Laura now has goblin eyes and ears: trapped in the orbit of marketing and its representations, she has lost access to any set of values from whose standpoint she might perceive goblin sales as exterior to herself. She can only loiter “listless” (297)—a pun associating her affect with her inability to listen to the goblin hawkers’ catalogue or list of fruits. Her state is one that she herself labels “goblin-ridden” (484): rid of the goblins only in the sense that she is ridden or driven by a goblin mastery that is irresistible in precise proportion to its imperceptibility. Rossetti clusters puns around this particular issue in order to illustrate Laura’s diction addiction.17 Laura is habituated to what Colin Campbell has named “modern autonomous imaginative hedonism” and is better known in cultural-historical shorthand as Romantic insatiability.18 She is hooked not on the juice but on an ideology of pumped-up abundance that marketing and advertising developments at midcentury were fast making familiar to every household in the land—familiar, I mean in the uncanny sense of the term at which Sigmund Freud meets Marshall McLuhan and Vance Packard: buried on the premises, hidden from view because in the air all over the place.
After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Enter “Tender Lizzie” (299), legal-tender Lizzie, that is, with her silver penny, which Lizzie has to venture but never in the event has to spend. The penny functions instead as a touchstone to expose the goblin traffic for what it is—a market—by flushing out the bad faith with which the market represents itself as something else, something more on the order of generous hospitality or public benefit. Sensing no doubt that Lizzie will call for a harder sell than her sister, the goblins approach with an invitation not to buy but to bite, bypassing commercial mediation altogether: “Bite at our peaches, / Citrons and dates, / Grapes for the asking” (355–57). Undeterred by this baloney, Lizzie states her business and puts her money down, but the goblins labor again to recast the transaction by disguising its terms. They welcome her to have a seat, feast and rest not as a customer but as a “guest” of “Honour” instead (368, 382); they also confide that theirs is fruit such as:

No man can carry;
Half their bloom would fly,
Half their dew would dry,
Half their flavour would pass by.

(376–79)

There it is again: “Pass by.” Once more the goblins’ byword spins its subliminal hustle through transience-anxiety toward instant gratification. Here is fast food with a vengeance, and no carry-out allowed. To put it in more general commercial terms: the goblins run a strictly retail business, and the payment in kind that they mean to exact of Lizzie, just as they exacted it of her sister, focuses the dialectic of consumption to which the ailing Laura has fallen victim.

This time, however, the goblins mistake their girl. Lizzie has come not to consume but to transact; for her, shopping, far from the experiential end-in-itself that nineteenth-century marketers were busily confecting, is a necessary means to an extramercantile end. Not market-driven but driving her own bargain, Lizzie points again to the money and calls it a “fee” (389), thus in effect calling the bluff of the goblins’ feudal or precapitalist representation of the economy they work within. That representation is of a piece with modern medievalism, whose vogue since the eighteenth century coincides with the maturation and cultural majority of mercantile capitalism. The hospitality of the goblins belongs with a plethora of other faux-chivalric or Gothic-Revivalist charades in which Victorians hid the monetarized form of their economic relations, putting up for sale the very same superseded cultural forms it put on for disguise. It is Lizzie’s tender of money, not Laura’s previous tender of herself, that actually constitutes an in-kind equivalent to what the goblins sell. For what the goblins sell is less fruit than it is what D. H. Lawrence would have
denounced as fruit-in-the-head, a sublated abstraction from sense and use such as characterizes the money form of value.

No wonder the goblins call Lizzie’s cash-and-carry stubbornness “uncivil” (395): it is a restraint on trade that bids fair to gut their whole business. By rendering unto goblins the things that are goblins’, her preferred coin deflates the supplementary value that their advertising has coined out of jingling air. It asserts the customer’s option to control the transfer of goods—and with it the transfer of meanings that is known by the Greek word for transfer, metaphor, and is responsible for the sort of operation that represents customers as “patrons” or prates of brand “loyalty.” At several junctures in the narrative Rossetti turns out batteries of similes (81–86, 184–91, 408–21, 500–520), which put this metaphorical power on dazzling exhibit, and on which Rossetti critics often remark. It is also remarkable that the goblins, for all their linguistic address, never once work the confessedly rhetorical vein of metaphor and simile. That is because the power they wield over the likes of Laura cannot brook the imagination of alternatives to their one consistently “iterated cry.” The notion they vend is, after all, that of phenomaneity, immediacy, presence, to which the overt analogical mediation of metaphor or simile must be wormwood.

Lizzie does not make metaphors either; her way of asserting control within the fable is to let money talk. Affirming the sovereign power of her penny to declare equivalence, she reestablishes a buyer’s market that draws out into the open what has been a part of the goblins’ seductiveness all along: their urgent need to make a sale. And not just make the sale but witness the instant gratification that follows: it is as if the gorging they love to watch, but do not share, confirms that nonce faith in the fantastmatic virtue of the product which keeps the glands of salesgoblinunction churning. Thomas Richards, our best literary historian of Victorian advertising to date, remarks that “The most crucial, and the least appreciated, of advertising’s ideological functions in the late nineteenth century was quite simply its ability to persuade people that it actually worked.” Rossetti’s suggestion here is that those people (or, as the case may be, goblins) most in need of persuasion were the sales force themselves—a circumstance attested more than once in the experience of Trollope’s George Robinson as well. Lizzie’s exposure of the goblins’ naked need to believe their own fictions exposes her in turn to some rough handling, but at the end she walks away from the table having gotten something for nothing, free samples of fruit juice and pulp to take back home.

With this transfer Lizzie beats the goblins at their own game of recontextual merchandising. Where they occluded the origin of the fruit with the erotic and zesty mystique of the market—even to the point of denying that any “man can carry” (376) to the enchanted zone of the sale the commodities they have just conspicuously hauled thither—Lizzie now supplants their entrepreneurship by bearing fruit to her sister, on her own, and indeed on her own person as middelwoman conveyancer. Lizzie’s express delivery of expressed fruit now expresses sisterly love, not commer-

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cialized appetite, in a new context where the essence of fruit may appear in itself, shorn of the pulp fiction of all those insubstantial verbal goblin extras. And that is how Laura instantly receives it, in an access of disgusted revulsion. Eagerly lapping the fruity residue from her sister’s skin, she tastes “bitterness without a name” (510)—which I take to signify the bitter realization that goblin fruit minus goblin nomenclature is just fruit after all. Plain fruit, take away verbal hyperfruit, leaves you with no-name generic bitterness, a bad taste in the mouth. The “detumescent imagery” that one critic has identified in the similes of lines 514–20 presents a rhetorically symptomatic deflation of advertisement puffery. Or, to concur with Dorothy Mermin’s pithy statement of the case, Laura discovers that “what she pined for is not worth it.”

According to the account of the poem I have been presenting, the wonder is that Laura should be able to make this discovery at all: first, that she should have access to sense data disproving her goblinized apprehension of a commodity-totalized world; second, that she should be psychologically capable of accepting the disproof she empirically senses. The odds are steep against this second step, Colin Campbell assures us: “Attaining an object of desire is likely to eliminate the pleasures associated with anticipatory day-dreaming, replacing them with those arising out of the stimulatory nature of the ‘real’ experience. Such actual pleasures are unlikely to compare favourably, however, with those encountered in the dream.” How well we know it, knowing too that the modern hedonist’s response to this disillusionment with the real is, and has been since the advent of Romanticism, to reinstall the daydream in a mode of permanently unrequited “longing.” So if a miracle transpires in “Goblin Market,” it is this: that real love borne on a real body should suffice to reframe Laura’s consumerist take on the world, which has grown so “customary” (231)—another commercial pun—as to become her second nature. It is little short of miraculous that a sister’s nursing care should wean Laura from the totalizing spell of goblin perception and desire, should let her see with other eyes, taste and speak with another tongue even when that tongue is, when all is said, rightfully and anciently her own.

VII

Miraculous, of course, is not a bad word in Christina Rossetti’s book. Nobody who has read her religious poetry or her prose manuals of devotional practice will doubt that in “Goblin Market” she meant to propose just such a miracle as this, in faithful if brilliantly idiosyncratic imitation of that fundamental Christian idol of the marketplace, the promise of sin’s redemption through sacrificial love. This doctrinal intention would—even if it were not more than doctrinal—retain an impressive oppositional cultural force today. It certainly earns a fresh hearing from me when I gather from a right-of-center colleague in economic history that
fundamentalists are the only students we teach who do not at bottom, whether they know it or not, place their real faith in the market and get their real values there. I refuse to agree with him altogether about these students of ours; still, by their fruits we shall know them, and much of the harvest has lately tilted his way. I mention this contemporary anecdotal diagnosis because Rosetti in her devotional severity would have welcomed it, as an advance tremor of the last battle, the ultimate contest between the divine spirit and that fleshly world whose devil presented in her lifetime an increasingly mercantile face, of which “Goblin Market” was her fullest portrayal.

As a poet, though, Rossetti knew with her admired Keats that convictions, no matter how dogmatic, need to be proven in verse, on the pulses of a language and the trusses of a structure that do not indicate or even illustrate beliefs so much as produce and reproduce them, by the shapings and reshapings of perception-enforcing form. She accordingly made her goblins adept in these poetic arts of mind- and heart-control, arts whose baleful power the tale of two sisters declares at some length. Furthermore, the Pre-Raphaelite principle of art’s immunity to doctrinal or ideological conscription meant that art, by the same token, could not in hard times expect doctrine or ideology to come to its rescue. Rossetti was obliged to resist the arts of the Victorian goblin market, then, not with indignant protest or mute renunciation, but with counter-arts. She had to fight fire with fire, by contriving her own “fiery antidote” (559) in words.

This she equivocally accomplished with the lines that narrate, not the penitential cold-turkey purging of Laura’s goblin desire, which everybody notices, but the understated poetic renewal of the world she breaks through to on the day after detox:

But when the first birds chirped about their eaves,
And early reapers plodded to the place
Of golden sheaves,
And dew-wet grass
Bowed in the morning winds so brisk to pass,
And new buds with new day
Opened of cup-like lilies on the stream,
Laura awoke as from a dream,
Laughed in the innocent old way.

(530-38)

These lines are like nothing else in “Goblin Market,” but they do resemble a good deal of the best verse Rossetti went on to write. The chastity of diction, the easy rightness of iambic pace within a very liberal handling of the line, the only slightly heightened density of verbal texture, and at last the lung-cleansing gambade of “new buds with new day / Opened of cup-like lilies”—a bold art syntax that Victorians were no likelier than you and I to use in speech, ever; a crisp farewell in itself to naïve orality—all these mark a poem that has grown up, converted to a simplicity
no longer childish. The enjambment with which lines 533 and 535 seem to end, but don't, offers at first blush goblinesque delights of a commodified Ding an sich, but then it subjects these delights to the narrative dilation of predication and kinetic process. The effect is child-like, maybe, if that term will let us observe the difference that "cup-like" observes from an ostensibly more natural but actually more metaphorically figurative (less scrupulous) alternative phrasing like "lily-cups upon the stream."

The grace of these lines is deeply, candidly, a matter of literary performance rather than oral feigning. The temptation is strong to read "the innocent old way" from the final line as the passage's advertisement for itself; and we probably ought to yield to that temptation, if only to let what is paradoxical about an old innocence keep us wise to the market conditions that a modern poetry may and should comment on, yet can scarcely dispense with. Rossetti indeed dares us to suspect as much in the distinctly less than miraculous lines that end the narrative proper: "Her breath was sweet as May / And light danced in her eyes" (541–42). With the transparently common simile of the first line and unprepossessing metaphor of the second, such a description would not be out of place on a greeting card, or in the right chapter of a bestseller by Trollope, or for that matter one of the ads for ladies' beauty products that were to be found among the endpapers of the first numbers of the Cornhill Magazine. That the immediately ensuing passage introduces Rossetti's framing scene of familial instruction reminds us that such ordinariness as these lines relapse to was instrumental in bringing her extraordinary fable home and finding it a place in the Victorian circle of reading hearers.

Why not credit the poet with knowing this as well as we do? We would extend such credit in a heartbeat to a poem by her brother, or by their common heir Oscar Wilde, and would expect an aestheticist dividend to boot. Why not let the cool light they shed dance here, and by publication date first, in Christina Rossetti's goblin-marketing eyes? Why not take up her invitation, through and despite the modern commodification of art, to reclaim the simplicity of language from its goblin exploitation and invoke a blessing on, and in, the words of every day? In the innocent old way of verse—the innocent-told way, virtually oral, the only way that poetry as poetry knew in the print-beglutted nineteenth century—Rossetti's fresh passage witnesses to the miracle that her narrative here culminates: the redemption of sound taste, the sweet redress of the tongue.
Notes


7. To Menke’s observation, in “Political Economy of Fruit,” 119, that “the occluded origins of the goblin men and their goblin fruit are part of the puzzle, and part of the danger, they present,” we should add that they are therefore also part of the draw. On strategies of calendrical and locative disorientation within the complementary institution of the restaurant menu, see Rebecca L. Spang, The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 189–90. The typographic and architectural layout adopted by nineteenth-century restaurants developed—like...
the distance the goblin market keeps from both orchard and home—out of the establishment of the modern shop a century earlier. See Elizabeth Kowalski-Wallace, Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century (New York, 1997), 81.

8. Marsh, Christina Rossetti, 267–68. The Cornhill was an exceptionally prominent instance of the periodicals that proliferated after 1853, when Britain lifted the so-called “tax on knowledge” that had discouraged not only newspapers and magazines but also the printed advertisements that circulated codependently with them. Publications aimed at women were a salient development at this time: see Margaret Beetham, A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman’s Magazine, 1800–1914 (London, 1996).

9. Menke, “Political Economy of Fruit,” 113–15. Conceding the banality of the phenomenon in our time, I nevertheless beg the reader’s indulgence for one transcript of a shop placard in that most disorienting of environments, an international airport (San Francisco, 30 December 1998): “Fresh from the vine, bursting from bushes, buried like secret treasure in the earth . . . at Jamba Juice we travel the world searching for fruits, vegetables, and natural foods of the highest quality.”


15. Trollope, Struggles, 75.


17. More work is needed on Rossetti’s puns, as on her prosody and indeed every aspect of her effortless finesse with the translucent poetic signifier. Sharon Smulders attends to wordplay in Christina Rossetti Revisited (New York, 1996), 34–35. To the direct puns from “Goblin Market” that my text highlights might be added many collateral associations—say, “furez” (120) and “upbraiding” (142) on either side of Laura’s crucial ex-
change of hair for fruit—but suffice it here to affirm that the whole poem sparkles with “glazing rime” (319).


19. Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London, 1993), 97. On a related point, let Trollope’s George Robinson be heard once more: “To force a sale must be the first duty of a man in trade, and a man’s first duty should be all in all to him. . . . The world of purchasers will have their ears tickled, and the world of commerce must tickle them”; *Struggles*, 186.


23. See Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, 1990). Menke, hailing in Rossetti a sophisticated awareness of aestheticism’s commodity-critique, finds her in flight from its corruptions, exercising a will to purity that “finally threatens to renounce even aesthetics” (130). If this implies an adverse judgment on Rossetti’s art, it is a judgment refuted by the best of her later poetry, which undertakes not a defense of purity but an inquiry into purity’s terms: why it matters, what it costs.