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**"FOR THERE IS NO FRIEND LIKE A
SISTER": FEMALE SEXUALITY AND
SAME-SEX ATTRACTION IN CHRISTINA
ROSSETTI'S "GOBLIN MARKET"**

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ABSTRACT

Anni Tammenlarva: **“For There Is No Friend Like a Sister”**: Female Sexuality and Same-Sex Attraction in Christina Rossetti’s **“Goblin Market”**

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This thesis argues that the relationship between Laura and Lizzie in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” is not merely platonic but both erotic and romantic and that the story suggests the women as being bisexual. The poem explores the themes of sisterhood, temptation and female sexuality, and portrays an image of women’s lives in Victorian England. This thesis will explore these themes by utilizing theory, historical context and symbolism to prove that Laura’s and Lizzie’s relationship was not platonic but both romantic and sexual. The research questions are as follows: When considering the historical and societal context in the poem, how is sisterhood portrayed? In what ways does it go beyond biological and platonic sisterhood? How are the sexual and romantic undertones visible in the poem? How do the cultural and historical facts influence this reading?

The passion and desire between the women are highly symbolized, and the history of female relationships in Victorian England suggests that the relationship between Laura and Lizzie goes beyond platonic sisterhood. Parts of the poem include vividly described sexual relations between the women themselves and with the evil goblin men. The themes of female sexuality and homosexuality in the poem are understudied, and there is little existing research on these topics, highlighting the originality and significance of this study.

Keywords: Christina Rossetti, Goblin market, Sisterhood, Bisexuality, Sexual symbolism, Goblins, Victorian England

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Anni Tammenlarva: **“For There Is No Friend Like a Sister”**: Naisten Seksuaalisuus ja Homoseksuaalisuuden Kuvaus Christina Rossettin runossa **“Goblin Market”**

Kandidaatintutkielma

Tampereen yliopisto

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Tutkielman aiheena on Christina Rossettin vuonna 1862 kirjoittama runo ”Goblin Market”, jossa päähenkilöt Laura ja Lizzie uhmaavat patriarkaalista yhteiskuntaa kuvastavia pahoja peikkoja tukeutumalla toisiinsa pahuuden ja houkutuksen edessä. Naisten suhdetta toisiinsa kuvataan usein yksinomaan sisarellisena, jopa biologisena, mutta syvempi analyysi tuo esiin runon homoeroottisen puolen: teos sisältää selviä kuvauksia naisten välisistä seksuaalisista ja romanttisista kohtaamisista. Tutkielma keskittyy tutkimaan naisten välisen suhteen kuvausta runossa: se ei ole pelkästään platoninen, ja naisissa on biseksuaalisia piirteitä, joita ajan historian tutkiminen ja sen suhteuttaminen suhteen kuvaukseen Rossetin ajan Englannissa tukee. Naisten väliset läheiset suhteet olivat laajalti hyväksytyjä viktoriaanisessa Englannissa, ja rajat platonisen, romanttisen ja seksuaalisen rakkauden välillä olivat väljiä. Naisia rohkaistiin esimerkiksi seksualisoimaan toisia naisia.

Tutkin, miten naisten välinen suhde kuvataan runossa ja millä tavoin sen voidaan todistaa olevan seksuaalinen ja romanttinen. Hyödynnän tutkimuksessa historian tutkimusta, etymologiaa ja esimerkiksi Hélène Cixousin teoriaa biseksuaalisuudesta. Tutkin termin ”sisaruus” eri muotoja ja sitä, miten se käsitettiin Rossetin ajan Englannissa. Runo sisältää paljon symbolismia, jossa nämä piirteet korostuvat. Mainitsen tutkimuksessa myös runon uskonnolliset piirteet ja sen, miten ne vaikuttavat tulkintaan. Myös teoriapohjan kautta luotu kuva osoittaa suhteen olevan muuta kuin sisaruksellinen myös aikaansa suhteutettuna. Aihetta ei ole juurikaan tutkittu aikaisemmin, vaikka teemoista on mainintoja yksittäisissä runoa tutkineissa tutkimuksissa.

Avainsanat: Christina Rossetti, Goblin Market, Sisaruus, Biseksuaalisuus, Seksuaalinen symbolismi, peikot, Viktoriaaninen Englanti

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1. Introduction

Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market", published in 1862 but first composed in April 1859, is affirmatively one of her most read and cherished poems. It has been a target of frequent research and continues to interest audiences at home and in academia. The poem is originally illustrated by Rossetti's brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti but has since been re-illustrated in numerous publications and magazines by different artists. "Goblin Market" grabs its reader's interest with its many layers and uncertainty: being first published as a children's fairy tale, then appearing as a strictly religious poem about two sisters, and lastly suggesting both a romantic and sexual relationship between the two female protagonists surely means that the poem has lived many lives.

Many aspects of the poem have been researched over the years, but there is little existing scholarship that reads the poem's symbolism in full historical context in addition to exploring the relationship between the women with a more sapphic approach. My research questions are the following:

1. When considering the historical and societal context in the poem, how is sisterhood portrayed? In what ways does it go beyond biological and platonic sisterhood?
2. How are the sexual and romantic undertones visible in the poem? How do the cultural and historical facts influence this reading?

In my thesis, I will argue that "Goblin Market" contains many implicit sexual features and taking into account the history of Victorian England and symbolism used in Rossetti's work, one can argue that Laura's and Lizzie's portrayed friendship has both sexual and romantic undertones in addition to their platonic relationship. In my analysis, I will utilize the known history of female

friendships in Victorian England, the history of sexuality in the same period with a focus on female sexuality, symbolism, and Hélène Cixous' theory of bisexuality and otherness.

The poem itself is a narrative poem about two young women, Laura and Lizzie, who encounter a group of evil goblin merchants. The goblins are attempting to sell alluring fruits to the women who are referred to as "sisters", and they grow curious with temptation as the fruits are rich in sexual symbolism. Laura then tells Lizzie the cautionary tale of Jeanie, a woman who succumbed to temptation and perished. Laura is reminded by Lizzie that even grass does not grow on Jeanie's grave and that flowers planted there will not bloom. Her lecture ends with her cautioning her sister not to roam alone after nightfall, for there are ugly temptations awaiting.

The physical encounters between the sisters in "Goblin Market" are at the center of my thesis' attention. Rossetti pictured the two women sleeping together in the same bed, "like two pigeons in one nest" (l. 185), breast to breast, and even birds are described as letting them rest peacefully by not flying too near. The nearing death of Laura is an important turning point in the poem's narrative: her hair turns grey, and the approaching death feels inescapable. Lizzie loathes seeing her sister die, and she then goes through a traumatic encounter to save her fallen sister.

The poem gets increasingly more intense as the goblins start touching her: "Hugg'd her and kiss'd her: / Squeez'd and caress'd her: / Stretch'd up their dishes, / Panniers, and plates:" (ll. 348-351). They also suggest Lizzie taste the fruit by telling her to "pluck them and suck them" (l. 361). Lizzie does not want to engage with the goblins, so they get aggravated and sexually violent: they "tore her gown and soil'd her stocking, / twitch'd her hair out by the roots" (ll. 403-404) and "held her hands and squeez'd their fruits / against her mouth to make her eat." (ll. 406-407). Lizzie does not let the goblins win and refuses to consent: "Lizzie utter'd not a word; / Would not open lip from lip / Lest they should cram a mouthful in: / But laugh'd in heart to feel the drip / Of juice that syrapp'd all her face" (ll. 430-434). The goblins fail to break Lizzie's resistance, and they give up.

After, the poem reaches one of its most interesting parts regarding sexual symbolism. Lizzie returns home to Laura and tells her to lick the goblin juice off her body: “Did you miss me? / Come and kiss me. / Never mind my bruises, / Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices / Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you, / Goblin pulp and goblin dew. / Eat me, drink me, love me; / Laura, make much of me” (ll. 465-472). This stanza represents a sexual encounter between the women; Laura cannot believe Lizzie braved the goblins for her sake and hugs and kisses her repeatedly. The next morning Laura is again able to laugh “in the innocent old way” (l. 538) and her hair is blonde once more.

At the end of the poem, the sisters are “wives / with children of their own” (ll. 544-545) and tell their kids about their experiences. The poem ends with Laura telling the kids that “For there is no friend like a sister / In calm or stormy weather;” (ll. 562-563). The importance of this sisterhood, a bond between women, is highly cherished throughout the poem. I will analyze the theoretical aspect of Victorian-era female friendships and relationships and apply the theory to the relationship between Laura and Lizzie.

2. Constructing Desire: Theoretical Foundations for Examining Female Sexuality in Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”

First, I will present the theory surrounding the symbolism found in the poem. As previously mentioned, it is highly rich in symbolism and allegory, which is why only the symbolism relevant to my research is studied. The analysis of these themes will provide insight into how the relationship between Laura and Lizzie can be considered sexual rather than platonic.

Secondly, I will present background about the history of Victorian England. The focus is placed on the theory about female friendships and female sexuality, but also male sexuality is mentioned. As will be explained in greater detail, it was common for women to have strong friendships with each other, and occasionally the lines between romantic, sexual, and platonic relationships were historically blurred. Subsequently, theories on these relationships between women at the time will

be presented and applied. The last theory utilized in my thesis is H elen  Cixous' theory of bisexuality and the other.

2.1. Beyond Words: Symbolism and Metaphors in the Poem

Goblin Market is charged with both rich symbolism and allegory. On the surface the poem seems as a children's fairytale, yet it is clear that the modern reader rarely treats nor analyses it as one. The poem consists of multiple layers of meaning: at the narrative level, it is a harmless and captivating fairy tale to be told to children for their amusement. On a deeper symbolic level, the poem offers many interesting viewpoints that reflect on both Victorian history and, for example, sexuality and its position in society at the time. The language use on a surface level also steadily points towards a religious reading: the theological undertones are plentiful. However, there is an even deeper level of symbolism which consists of the personal experiences of Laura and Lizzie as women in 19th century England.

The key themes of "Goblin Market" are temptation, lust, sisterhood, female unity, and love in its many forms. To analyze the symbolism of temptation in the poem, it is crucial to first briefly address the religious allegory found in the poem. The element at its very core is temptation, which is symbolized by the fruit the goblins offer. Fruit is a known symbol of both temptation and sin in the Bible, and the unavoidable fruit offered is effortlessly in comparison with the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The forbidden nature of the fruit is even mentioned in the poem as Laura asks Lizzie whether she has tasted "the fruit forbidden" (l. 479), possibly suggesting a sexual encounter. The part of the poem where Lizzie returns home to Laura after being with the goblin men is one of the best-known parts of the poem and is often, and occasionally only, interpreted with Christian allegory in mind. Lizzie can be portrayed as a female Christ figure, willingly undergoing misery and suffering to redeem Laura's sins and then offering her body for the other woman to eat and drink. The sexual nature of the occurrence is, in this interpretation, completely dismissed. (Brownley 183) Rossetti herself was deeply religious and held Protestant beliefs throughout her life: however,

to simply analyze Rossetti's poem and the symbolism it carries from a religious viewpoint would be unambiguous and miss some key elements found in the narrative. While religions have boundaries between physically inappropriate and appropriate, many also celebrate sex and sexuality as providing one's partner with pleasure (Page 2). Religious allegory has also been regularly used in history in describing strong feelings of love for audiences that understood biblical references competently. Rossetti herself was religious and "participated in the movement to reclaim and retrain penitent prostitutes and fallen women" (Rogers).

When Laura first tastes the goblin fruit, she offers the goblins a lock of her hair: a symbol often associated with sexuality and virginity whereas violation of hair was seen as "a violation of the woman's honor" (Pergament 42). Virginity was a highly important aspect of womanhood in the Victorian era, and it was believed that "the virgin girl will seamlessly transition into the chaste wife and bear her husband's legitimate heirs" (Corrinne). The only realistic possibilities for women in the Victorian era were virginity or marriage, and the women in between – those who had had premarital sex – were often called "fallen women". Jeanie, the woman in "Goblin Market" who dies after engaging with the goblins, undoubtedly falls victim to premarital physical relations: "But who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died" (ll. 314-315). Syphilis was a growing concern in the Victorian period, and doctors started to acknowledge it as a serious health concern. It was also assumed that it frequently spread through sexual contact with prostitutes (Walkowitz). Jeanie might have been perceived as falling victim to a sexually transmitted disease, for example syphilis, or her perishing may be symbolic of her losing her purity and not being able to marry or bear children for this reason.

2.2. Importance of Sisterhood in Victorian Britain

The term *sisterhood* carries various connotations from a sisterly bond between two biological siblings to a group of nuns in habits. To the modern reader, it can mean a close relationship with women who cherish the same values in a world that sees marriage as the endpoint of women's lives.

(Stone) There is no set meaning for the term in the modern world, and things were somewhat comparable in the Victorian era.

At first glance, it is most described as simply the relationship between two female siblings. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary also defines the term as “the solidarity of women based on shared conditions, experiences, or concerns”. As Janet Casey argues in her essay on the potential of sisterhood, the term *sisterhood* in Rossetti’s poem hides an underlying concept of both female and male roles applying to everyone; them being gender-neutral. This is exemplified by using the idea of Lizzie saving Laura as a Christ figure, which means that both the savior, a role traditionally reserved for males, and the saved, are female.

The term *sisterhood* in *Goblin Market* does not refer to Laura and Lizzie being biological sisters as many interpret at first glance, but simply translates to a bond between the women. Similarly, the goblins are referred to as “brothers” multiple times despite not being biologically related. The term *friend* included two categories of relationships between women at the time, containing sexual and non-sexual intimacy (Marcus 26). All forms of female friendships were highly praised in Victorian culture, as it was believed that women uniting and spending time together meant they became better wives and better helpers around the house. As Sharon Marcus points out in her book *Between Women*, “As friends, women could comport themselves with one another in ways forbidden with men, without compromising the respectability so prized by the middle class” (26). Friendship was so highly valued that some women even preferred their female friendships as an alternative to marriage (28). These friendships were often very intimate, meaningful, and deep, which arguably caused the blurring of the lines between platonic, romantic, and sexual relationships. One could argue that as homosexuality was not accepted or properly recognized at the time, the appreciation shown towards female friendships offered an effortless way to have a lesbian relationship without arousing too much scrutiny. It has been studied that both men and women in the Victorian era enjoyed objectifying and sexualizing women, and there was an “erotic appetite for femininity in

women, framed spectacular images of women for a female gaze, and prompted women's fantasies about dominating a woman or submitting to one" (Marcus 103). In 1975, Professor Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argued that the physical and romantic aspects of friendships between women were widely accepted as "elements of family life" (10). Women were even encouraged to embrace and kiss each other. Both close friendships and sexual, romantic relationships between women were seen as a way for them to "subvert gender norms and rebel against the strictures marriage placed on women" (Stone 10) and as a part of appreciating femininity and female sexuality. Homophobia, as we understand it today, mostly existed towards homosexual men. This is not to say that those women who openly loved or had sexual relationships with other women were not oppressed in Victorian society, but to simply underline that life was much easier for lesbians than it was for homosexual men. This might also stem from the fact that relations between women went largely unnoticed as it was ordinary for all women to embrace and kiss each other. As women were thought of as asexual beings, many did not even think about the possibility of women having sexual or romantic relationships with each other. Lesbian relationships have been a part of history in the Victorian era as well, and the idea that kinship is exclusively heterosexual and that female couples are only categorized as their rejection of traditional marriage. Many lesbian couples were seen as a "variation of a married couple" (Sharon 20), not necessarily as challenging the boundaries of a traditional marriage. Victorian society "accepted female homoeroticism as a component of respectable womanhood and encouraged women and girls to desire, scrutinize, and handle simulacra of alluring femininity" (103). It was also widely accepted that women who had sexual desire towards women were able to live with their partners in marriage-like unions and admired their female friends' physical appearance. Society did not recognize lesbianism as something opposite to heterosexuality but did not see it as a deviant matter either (103).

In "Goblin Market", men are not the focal point of the narrative, contrary to their place in the patriarchal society in Rossetti's England. The only men mentioned in the poem are the threatening

goblins, and men do not seem to exist outside the forest where the goblins prey. Men are portrayed as aggressive, evil, and almost solely sexual beings who are predominantly feared and doubted by women: “We must not buy their fruits: / Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?” (ll. 43-45) and who act without consent as studied in Chapter 1. The poem also starts with a description of these men calling for women, which is comparable to modern-day catcalling. The goblins portray the idea of toxic masculinity, where men are ill-willed and distinctly sexualize women. This shifts focus on the importance of female relationships, as women depend on each other to survive and warn each other about the dangers they face. At the end of the poem, Laura and Lizzie even lecture their children, who are apparently all girls, about the importance of sisterhood.

In the modern world, heterosexuality and lesbianism are considered two exclusive forms of sexuality. The two, however, greatly overlapped for Victorians and they were “thus able to see relationships between women as central to lives also organized around men” (19). Women’s friendships with other women were placed on a continuum with lesbian relationships, and the lines between the two were indistinct. There are many published writings from the Victorian era that confirm the existence of marital relationships between women called friendships, and the women in these relationships enjoyed both the privileges of marriage and the disguise of female friendship (51).

2.3. Sexuality and Sexual Orientation in Victorian England

When talking about 19th century England and the attitude towards sexuality, one might automatically assume that Victorians were sexually repressed, placed importance on strict gender roles, and that Victorian women had little say in their marriages (Vicinus). The mental restrictions around sexual and reproductive matters were visible in the language of the time, for example a pregnant woman was not thought of as being pregnant but as being in “an interesting condition” instead (183). Sexuality was most certainly a taboo, but many of its aspects were beginning to become topics of discussion. The focus was still heavily set on reproduction, and women were often

considered asexual beings, “more concerned with moral and spiritual purity than with sexual desire and fulfillment” (Stone 37). Men and women were thought to exist in female and male spheres, although this was mostly a cultural moral widely rejected by women. Men were inherently seen as highly sexual beings and it was expected that they gained some sexual experience before marriage, and this was not publicly condemned. On the other hand, women who had sexual relations before marriage were considered “fallen women”, ruined, and spoiled for marriage. Yet, many academics and researchers have agreed that the modern compulsion with sexuality indeed originally stems from the Victorian era (5). The beginning of the 1880s was the turning point of sexual history since it saw the shift from depicting marriage as purely a spiritual union “to a reproductive one that depended on heterosexual fertility” (6). During this period, ideology surrounding different sexual orientations gradually started to form and heterosexuality became the opposite of homosexuality. Male homosexuality was widely considered wrong and illegal, and it was also practically impossible for lesbians to openly express their sexual orientation. However, for example Marcus (1966), Foucault (1976) and Sedgwick (1985) all argue that Victorians “embraced a wide range of gendered and sexual identities, acts, and practices that contradict the popular perception of Victorian culture as prudish, repressed, and sexually inactive”. (qtd. in Stone 40)

The phenomenon of the “New Woman” shaped the discussion around nineteenth-century gender norms, as it was a figure of an educated and empowered young woman who rebelled by for example smoking and challenging men’s dominance in multiple ways. This opened new ways for the public to picture notions of femininity and gender and shaped people’s understanding of the female body (42).

Hélène Cixous, a well-known French feminist theoretician, first introduced her ideas of bisexuality and otherness in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” in 1975. The core idea of her publication is to encourage women to write despite their repressed status in a society filled with male writers. She discusses women’s internalized fear of speaking about sexuality and uses

patriarchy as the “colonizer” of female erotica: “their own bodies, which they haven’t dared enjoy, have been colonized” (Blyth 26).

According to Cixous, women are more fluctuating as sexual beings compared to men. She discusses women as being in a way more innately bisexual and open to otherness than men, who are fundamentally conditioned towards “phallic monosexuality” (Culler). Maleness is seen as a resisting force towards otherness while bisexuality can be viewed as the openness towards the otherness within oneself. Whereas male sexuality is more “static and singular” (Blyth), bisexuality is “the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes” (Cixous 85) and described as “the unfixed space of fluidity, mobility, inviting and accepting the other in oneself” (148). For her, bisexuality means defying the binaries of opposites in both gender and sexuality. There is no pure homosexuality or heterosexuality, they can overlap. This view on bisexuality “not only undermines the traditional category of closure in women, men, language, and writing but also celebrates the inclusion of difference” (Marciniak 8). As stated by Cixous, bisexuality is a natural state that is affected by social norms, such as sexuality being tied to binary gender and labeled as binary.

3. Sapphic Sisterhood: A Critical Examination of Homosexual Themes and Female Sexuality in “Goblin Market”

To tie together the complex theoretical background in a sensible manner to both demonstrate the same-sex attraction between Laura and Lizzie and explain the issues of female sexuality in the poem, I will utilize historical context, sexual history and Cixous’ theory of bisexuality and otherness to illustrate my point. The poem is replete with allegory and symbolism that work in favor of this interpretation. Initially, the historical views of the times mirrored in the poem will be explained. Then, the theoretical background offered by Cixous and the etymology of certain symbols will be applied to further analyze the relationship and its nature between the women.

3.1. Exploring the Complex Representation of Sisterhood in “Goblin Market”

The term *sister* occurs nine times in “Goblin Market”, and the concept of sisterhood is a central part of the narrative. When discussing the term in the poem, various other synonyms can be used in describing the relationship between Laura and Lizzie. As shown above in Chapter 2.2, Victorians saw a sisterly bond as something more than strictly a relationship between two biological sisters. It was a bond of high importance; a deeply nurtured friendship, or in some cases, more than that.

Sisterhood is highly cherished in the poem, as best visible in the last stanza of the poem: “For there is no friend like a sister / In calm or stormy weather; / To cheer one on the tedious way, / To fetch one if one goes astray, / To lift one if one totters down, / To strengthen whilst one stands” (ll. 562-567). The first line of the quotation summarizes the whole piece of poetry in one sentence, as the deepest message of “Goblin Market” is to highlight the importance of a woman to another woman. Even when the well-being of Laura and Lizzie is being compromised by the goblins or the patriarchy they might be symbolic of, the bond between the women saves them from harm and misery. The bond of sisterhood acts as a means of protecting the women from submitting to evil temptation, which is personified by goblins.

Lines 184-190, where Laura and Lizzie are evoked as embracing each other peacefully, are presented as platonic: it was not unusual for friends to embrace and caress each other, and this has previously been analyzed as a scene with sexual connotations. The description of the women being “Like two pigeons in one nest / Folded in each other’s wings, / They lay down in their curtain’d bed: / Like two blossoms on one stem, / Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow, / Like two wands of ivory” (ll. 185-190) paints a picture of a soft, romantic encounter between the two.

3.2. Representation of Gendered Sexuality in the Poem

As discussed, many of the symbols in the poem carry sexual meanings. One of the morals of the story being sexual temptation, Laura cannot get enough of the “goblin juice” and Lizzie must save

her from the grip of the evil goblin merchants. The goblins are mentioned as selling their goblin juice, a metaphor for offering both sexual favors and androcentric heterosexuality. The juice offered is described as different fruits, each carrying a distinct set of sexual symbolism.

The poem also contains mentions of physical sexual arousal, as the sisters gaze at the goblins with “tingling cheeks and finger tips” (l. 39). After observing the men from a distance, they remind each other of the dangers of carnal pleasures and wonder “What soil they fed / their hungry thirsty roots?” (ll. 44-45). Men in the Victorian era had lower inhibitions regarding sex than women as studied above, and prostitution was flourishing, so the possibility of contracting a disease due to sexual relations with a man was a key worry to the women at the time.

Upon offering her body to the goblins, Laura gave them a lock of her hair in exchange for the pleasures she lusted after. As discussed, hair carries plenty of sexual symbolism, and therefore Laura giving up a lock of her hair translates to her giving up her sexual purity to the goblin men. This echoes the idea that persists in our society today: that upon a woman losing her virginity, she loses a part of herself to the man and patriarchy.

When Lizzie is assaulted by the goblins, she braves them and does not let the men overcome her; Rossetti describes her as standing up for herself “like a lily in a flood, --” (l. 409). Lilies are symbols of both purity and beauty, as well as virginity. For example, in Shakespeare’s *The Life of King Henry the Eighth*, Cranmer says that Elizabeth will live and die “a virgin, / A most unspotted lily” (Ferber).

In the same verse, Lizzie is described as “sending up a golden fire,--” (l. 414) as she stands against the goblin men in her quest for integrity. Gold is the first metal and has been known through the times for its purity and divine status. The term “golden” is applied to “whatever is best or most excellent, such as the golden rule, the golden verses of Pythagoras, or the golden mean” (Ferber).

However, one of the most interesting symbols in the poem is fire. The symbolism of fire in “Goblin Market” has not been previously studied, and I argue that it carries crucial meaning in the

form of symbolism in demonstrating the sexual and romantic nature of the relationship between Laura and Lizzie. The fire inside Laura is described as follows: “Swift fire spread through her veins, / knock'd at her heart, / Met the fire smouldering there”. (ll. 507-508) This happens after Lizzie returns home from the encounter she had with the goblins to save Laura. Fire is essential to human life and is symbolic of passion, love, and lust. It is also found in connection with hell, as best known in Dante’s “Inferno”. The earliest appearance of the symbolic fire is found in a fragment by Sappho, where she says that “a subtle fire has crept beneath my flesh” upon seeing the woman she loved with a man (Ferber). This symbolizes Laura’s feelings of strong romantic love and lust towards Lizzie.

As Lizzie stands before the goblins while being assaulted, she is described as standing tall, proud, and “sending upon a golden fire” (l. 414). Before this line, she is “like a lily in the flood” (l. 409) among other positive connotations for resisting the assault of the goblins, lilies symbolizing virginity and purity. Keeping her dignity before the violent goblin men, she feels pride in herself for being capable of resisting their temptation. The “golden fire” within her burned as she, by suffering herself, saved the dying Laura. Fire often represents passion, lust, and feelings of love (Ferber 73-74). As one of the most widely spread symbols across literature, the fire burning inside Lizzie portrays the feelings of both love and lust she feels towards Laura. This turning point in the story could include the moment of realization where Lizzie becomes aware of her feelings towards Laura being deeper than platonic. The golden hue of the fire can be considered as her realizing that her deeper feelings for the other woman are dishonorable, as fire is also often used in context of hell, but that it also is the one form of love that feels right in her heart: gold symbolizes that what is best, most true (Ferber 74).

One of the scenes holding sexual references begins as Lizzie returns home after being assaulted by the goblins, saving the other woman: “Did you miss me? / Come and kiss me. / Never mind my bruises” (ll. 466-467). Kissing was a relatively unsurprising occurrence between women, but the

verb *suck* carries heavy sexual and passionate connotations. The verb comes from the Latin word *fellatio*, noun of action from *fellatus*. However, there are no recordings of the words being used in describing sexual matters before the late 19th century. I argue that these sexual implications were present even in Rossetti's times, even though they were not used in, for example, medical language and thus widely recorded. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes the word *connotation* as follows: "the suggesting of a meaning by a word apart from the thing it explicitly names or describes". Sexual implications with the verb *suck* arise from the action itself, as it is associated with intimate activities.

Subsequently, grateful Laura sprints to Lizzie, and "she kiss'd and kiss'd her with a hungry mouth" (l. 492). Hunger is a powerful feeling symbolic of sexual desire, and the passionate nature of their kisses crosses the traditional line of a platonic, heterosexual bond. As they embrace, a fire sets inside Laura: "Swift fire spread through her veins, knock'd at her heart, / Met the fire smouldering there / And overbore its lesser flame; / She gorged on bitterness without a name:" (ll. 507-510). The lesser flame showcases Lizzie's lust and will for a heterosexual relationship in her encounter with the goblins, which is overthrown by the fire – stronger feelings of lust and love – that Laura causes in her heart. In a similar fashion in which Lizzie realized her intense feelings for Laura, Laura now feels the lust, love, and passion towards the other woman as she realizes that Lizzie defended her from an unavoidable death or an unwanted life with a male partner. Sexuality between the women is depicted as distinct from heterosexuality, and the nature of the possible relations with the goblins – men – is portrayed as aggressive, damaging, animalistic, and purely sexual. In the bond between the women, the narrative consists of elements outside sexual relations: gratefulness, romantic love, nurture, and hope.

According to Cixous' theory, bisexuality is a "natural state" and exists beyond the binary boundaries traditionally set for sexuality. She argues that the "otherness" in non-heterosexuality is to be cherished, not feared, and that it exists on a continuum. Much like the Victorians, she does not

see homosexuality and heterosexuality as attributes that override each other's existence within oneself.

In "Goblin Market", Lizzie is portrayed in such a way that emphasizes her femininity as she does housework, is wary of the goblin men and simultaneously desires them as lines 48 and 49 suggest: "Laura, Laura, / You should not peep at goblin men" while also being protective over the other woman, a trait often associated with femininity: "Dear, you should not stay so late, / Twilight is not good for maidens; / Should not loiter in the glen / In the haunts of goblin men." (ll. 143-146). However, her attitude towards the goblins suggesting sexual favors can be analyzed as masculine, as she is reasoned and cautious towards the power the men hold. She remains unprejudiced in her decision, a trait surely associated with men in the Victorian era. She is portrayed as having traits from both genders, despite being the other in two ways – being a woman in a patriarchal society and feeling same-sex attraction in a society that does not recognize female homosexuality as a legitimate, existing form of love. Similarly, Laura sees herself as having both feminine and masculine characteristics: she talks "as modest maidens should" (l. 209), desires the goblin men, and cannot resist the temptation of the goblin fruit. In the poem, girls are taught of the dangers of the goblins and the cautionary tale of Jeanie poses as a warning for those who decide to go with the goblin men. In the narrative, however, Laura lives, as men would after such an occurrence. As mentioned, Lizzie saving Laura can also be seen as a masculine element and even in comparison to the redemption of Christ.

4. Conclusion

In "Goblin Market", the depicted sexuality follows the norms of Victorian England: sisterhood has a central and appreciated role in society, and a transparent message is the importance of sisterhood and female bonds. Male sexuality is portrayed as simply animalistic and carnal, whereas the physical and mental possibilities between women are clearly described as somewhat

deeper: the love between Laura and Lizzie consists of romantic, sexual, and friendly aspects, and cannot be tied to only one of these categories.

The rich symbolism in the poem showcases the appreciation of female obedience and virginity, but simultaneously does not limit women to only homo- or heterosexual beings. It depicts the lust and passion between the women through the symbolism of fire, and the moment Laura realizes her feelings for Lizzie and vice versa are clear turning points in the narrative. Female sexuality in “Goblin Market” does not exist binarily, but rather on a continuum: both women show physical attraction towards both men and women and traits typically associated with both femininity and masculinity, and the boundaries between a female friendship and a romance between women are realistically blurred as typical for the society at the Victorian times. The symbolism and the nature of the narrative point to a romantic and physical relationship between Laura and Lizzie, and this reading should be considered before merely categorizing their relationship as biological or even incestuous.

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