
Body as Commodity: Gendered Markets in Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

Thomas Richards, in his 1990 critical exposition, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*, states: "In the mid-nineteenth century the commodity became the living letter of the law of supply and demand. It literally came alive." (Richards, 2) The "commodity" adopts a corporeal cling to Victorian society in the form of the female body, as proposed in Christina Rossetti's 1862 poem, *Goblin Market*. The story of Lizzie and Laura's venture into goblin territory, or rather, male-dominated economic territory, marks a feminine intervention into the capitalist system; similarly, Rossetti's female authorship attempts to venture into the masculine field of literary economy. The economy of writing in the height of the Victorian era, as explored in Richards's text, misrepresented female writers severely and instead subjugated women to literary commodities.

This subjugation is visible in the poem, as Laura and Lizzie possess little agency in the marketplace of the goblins. In consultation with Helen Cixous's 1975 essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, the women, both Rossetti and her fictitious counterparts, can be examined as early examples of women 'writing' themselves into the social sphere in order to acquire agency. Cixous presents the issue of female entrapment in their own bodies by a language that does not allow them to express themselves, and the possibility of utilizing their bodies as a means to communicate. Though feminine psychoanalytic theory did not exist yet in Rossetti's time, her poem still exemplifies the issues that the theory aims to resolve: to infuse female activity in both the marketplace and the literary sphere with authority, through bodily communication unique to women, or as Cixous indicates, "écriture féminine".

Goblin Market is in essence, an analogy drawn between the commodity/bodily exchange, which the sisters apply fastidiously to their experience in the goblin market, and the grand narratives of Christianity and Capitalism, which are rigorously applied to our own. Each is a manner of giving form and significance to existence in the same way as narrative itself tends towards a similar 'fictitious' ordering of experience. Rossetti positions herself in this analogy through the act of 'writing' herself into the literary economy and giving agency to the underrated female voice in that economy. Thus, Rossetti alludes to a conceivable reality but at the same time contests the validity of the forms we use to give shape to it.

Helene Cixous aimed at rendering literal the figures of femininity in the theory of critique and exploring the consequences of that lateralization. She did not simply privilege the "female" half of an existing binary opposition between "male" and "female"; like other theorists of critique, she questioned the very adequacy of logics to name the complexity of cultural realities. She acknowledges that the female body has been repressed in writing, much like Rossetti's protagonists assume an inferior position in the presence of the goblins and their marketplace. Lizzie, perhaps the more logical sister, is aware of this inferiority: "No," said Lizzie, "No, no, no;/Their offers should not charm us,/Their evil gifts would harm us." (Rossetti, lines 64-66) The fear of bodily harm is inherent in Lizzie, for she does not realize the potential of bodily communication until Laura's downfall. Cixous opens her essay with the following passage:

"Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which

they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.”(Cixous, 1942)

The act of a woman “writing” herself is applicable in both a fictional sense and an authorial sense; Rossetti accomplishes communicative authority in her characters as well as for herself. In order to comprehend the body as a mode of communication, the sisters must be contextualized in economic terms associated with the capitalist system of the late 19th century; their bodies must be characterized as “commodities”.

The issue of human agency, particularly that of the female gender, is discussed in Richards’s text. In accordance with the rise of capitalism, Richards relays the conflict between agency and the capitalist structure:

“The problem of attributing human agency to advertised commodities becomes much more pronounced whenever anyone attempts to write about them. The very conditions of language function to invest commodities with many of the attributes of the human agents of history.”(Richards, 10)

Essentially, Richards is concerned about the state of language when it is housed in the capitalist space. Rossetti litters her poem with mercantile language, “Come buy, come buy,” the repetitive cry of the “merchant men” that is interspersed throughout the poem indicates a transition to a language that is economically motivated. Though the genre of the poem is often debated, Rossetti’s rhetoric is influenced by the rise of capitalism and the politics that were associated with it during her literary age; the “mercantile language” serves to create a platform for the female, both the heroines and Rossetti herself, to interact with the market.

Richards also references the importance of Karl Marx’s text, *Capital*, with particular emphasis on the first volume, which includes the fetishism of the commodity; fetishism, or the process whereby the society that originally generated an idea, eventually, through the distance of time, forgets that the idea is actually a social and therefore all-too-human product. Richards appears to be critical of the concept since language and “fetishism” are not entirely compatible:

“He highlighted manifest metaphors like “fetishism” while ignoring the latent anthropocentrism that characterizes everyday speech. Because language has a maddening way of transforming the means of description into a high drama of human agency and intention, a study of the barest facts of commodity culture always turn out to be an exploration of a fantastic realm in which things think, act, speak, rise, fall, fly, evolve.”(Richards, 11)

According to Richards, the language used to convey “commodity culture” is steeped in human agency. The goblin men, for example, promise to Laura that their goods are unique to their particular market; “One began to weave a crown/Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown/(Men sell not such in any town)”(Rossetti, lines 99-101) The goblins are careful in saying that “men sell not such in any town”, both informing and insisting to Laura that she purchase the crown due to it’s rarity and masculine manufacturing. Cixous’s theory is conscious of male-female economic exchanges also:

“...Sexual opposition, which has always worked for man’s profit to the point of reducing writing, too, to his laws, is only a historico-cultural limit. There is, there will be more and more rapidly

pervasive now, a fiction that produces irreducible effects of femininity.”(Cixous, 1949)

Rossetti illustrates a similar sexual opposition in Laura’s initial meeting with the goblins by gendering the advertisement in masculine terms; however, as Cixous proclaims, the emergence of female writing will establish a mode of communication unique to women. This mode will pertain to the body, and in examining the crossing of economical and gendered boundaries and corporal exchanges, Laura and Lizzie, and ultimately Rossetti, acquire agency.

Laura and Lizzie become physical icons for commodity culture when they venture into the marketplace and actively bargain and barter with the goblins, especially so when their bodies are economized. Richards defines the effects of advertising on the Victorian body, when he states that, “...by then the quacks had already dug the pincers of the marketplace deeply into the flesh of the consumer. The body had become the prevailing icon of commodity culture, and there was no turning back.”(Richards, 205) In the case of Rossetti, the “prevailing icon” was that of the female body and the “pincers” belong to the goblin men, and their tempting fruit in particular. “Eat me, drink me, love me,” Lizzie begs Laura, “Laura, make much of me;/For your sake I have braved the glen/And had to do with goblin merchant men.”(Rossetti, lines 471-474) Lizzie resists the offers made by the goblins, but more importantly, the “merchant men”; this label encompasses the capitalist system and male control within it. Cixous, similarly to Lizzie, begs women to write and reject submission to men and “capitalist machinery” of which they are the engineers:

“Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you; not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs ; and not yourself.”(Cixous, 1944)

Cixous’s message is devoted to female authors like Rossetti; she is a woman “writing” about women, engaging in the development of an intrinsically feminine mode of writing and communicating that is fundamentally based in the body. Lizzie utilizes her body to absorb the juices of the goblins’ commodities, and through this immersion, her body becomes a commodity itself to heal her sister. Thus, for the females of the poem, the body regulates as a mode of movement in the capitalist space and as a means of survival in that space. Rossetti’s participation in the authorial economy is analogous to this, as she “writes” herself into the system for literary survival.

The grand narratives that dictated to Victorian society a set of values and morals that were rapidly changing, were also becoming more interwoven, as the rhetoric to relay the values and morals looked increasingly similar. These grand narratives, Christianity and Capitalism, pervaded Rossetti’s life, and as Mary Wilson Carpenter outlines in her criticism of the poem, ““Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me”: The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market,"” religious context was highly significant:

“I would propose that the foundation of Anglican Sisterhoods associated directly with the two churches which Rossetti is known to have attended, and the work of those Sisterhoods with homeless, destitute, and fallen women, gave the poet access to a uniquely feminocentric view of women's sexuality and simultaneously opened her eyes to its problematic position in Victorian culture.”(Carpenter, 417)

Carpenter labels Rossetti's view of female sexuality as "uniquely feminocentric", and since capitalism dictates the importance of multiplicity and mass production, a "unique" outlook on female sexuality seems very singular. Richards explains the blurring of Christianity and Capitalism, in regards to economy within the church:

"...The quacks were men who sought out a large and diverse audience of women. Like male ministers in nineteenth century churches who tailored their sermons to a female clientele and propounded a gendered vision of Christianity, the quacks adapted their message to a female audience and advanced a gendered vision of consumption."(Richards, 206)

Richards's exposition of economy in the church compliments Carpenter's argument for the religious discourse that shaped Rossetti's authorial intention. Evidently, glimpses of said discourse occur in the poem: "'Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted/ For my sake the fruit forbidden?/ Must your light like mine be hidden,/ Your young life like mine be wasted,'".(Rossetti, lines 478-481) The "fruit forbidden" can be interpreted as an allusion to the forbidden fruit of Eden; this, in effect, is Richards's conception of "a gendered vision of Christianity" and more significantly, "a gendered vision of consumption".

In terms of religious connotations, and the biographical data that Carpenter provides, perhaps Laura and Lizzie are authorial projections of Rossetti's own body. Laura, ignorant for a moment of the dangers she faced in indulging in the goblins' products, asks Lizzie whether she engaged in mercantile activity. Though she does not participate in consuming the merchandise, her external absorption of the juices is enough to assert her, or rather, her body's position in the marketplace. Carpenter expands on this idea when she states conclusively, "The sisters represent women's double plight in the Victorian sexual economy: either risk becoming a commodity yourself, or risk never tasting desire, never letting yourself "peep"."(Carpenter, 428) The ultimatum that Carpenter presents is reminiscent of Cixous's implications of females "writing" themselves into economic and sexual existence. She warns, similarly, that the feminine voice will be lost entirely in a body that cannot express itself, unless females utilize their bodies for distinctly feminine communication.

The protagonists most closely resemble commodities in a bodily sense when the exchange goes beyond advertisements and recurring jingles; Lizzie literally embodies consumer desire while obeying the terms established by the goblin men:

"'You have much gold upon your head,"/They answer'd all together:/"Buy from us with a golden curl./She clipp'd a precious golden lock,/She dropp'd a tear more rare than pearl,"(Rossetti, lines 124-127)

The male figure is in control of manufacturing the merchandise, as well as distributing, circulating, and pricing it; the entire economic structure of the market is male-dominated, leaving little room for female activity, unless it takes on the form of merchandise as well. Richards comments on the relationship between consumption of commodities and feminine elements: "...the woman does not consume commodities in her own right; she operates as an extension of the male. Clearly advertisers saw women as go-betweens between men and their commodities."(Richards, 206) Cixous's theory is compatible with the space between, as "feminine *écriture*" capitalizes on the void as a platform for female speech as expressed by the body:

“Because the “economy” of her drives is prodigious, she cannot fail, in seizing the occasion to speak, to transform directly and indirectly all systems of exchange based on masculine thrift. Her libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think.”(Cixous, 1949)

Laura’s act of cutting her hair for monetary exchange seems to occur under male instruction; however, the act is highly erotic and occupies a justification in the capitalist space in accordance with the passage from Cixous’s essay. This is analogous to Rossetti’s act of writing the poem; the subject matter is erotic, the language insinuates sexual temptation, repression and desire, and it manages to be situated marginally between children’s folklore and adult prose fiction. Richards returns again to the “gendering of consumption” when he states:

“The female labor of consumption remains bracketed within male production and consumption as women become the go-betweens mediating men and their particular desires. The gendering of consumption thus works exclusively to masculine advantage, freezing women in postures prescribed by the watchful gaze of the male.”(Richards, 247)

It is important to consider the conclusion of the poem in regards to Richards’s passage; the domestic desires of women are examined as dramas of competitive buying and selling in which women are always at risk as objects to be purchased yet also implicated as agents of consumption.

The sisters retain a peaceful home life after their venture into capitalist territory, but the domestic sphere still prescribed them with the assigned lives of mothers and house-wives. Cixous prescribes “writing” as a means to express, that which transcends beyond market values and economic exchanges:

“I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy.”(Cixous, 1945)

Marked writing refers to the “écriture féminine”, the inherent feminine voice in women’s writing. Cixous continues on the next page: “By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display...”(Cixous, 1946) The story of Lizzie and Laura represents a specifically female experience of Victorian political economy; Rossetti’s fable of female consumption is inherently suspicious of a world of unrestricted buying and selling associated primarily with men. But Rossetti assumes that women are already implicated as both agents and objects in an economics of consumption. Likewise, Rossetti herself, as an author, expels an innately female voice, one that is inconspicuously inserted into the literary market in order to critique the values and concealed suppositions of capitalism.

Helene Cixous’s final lines in her essay demonstrate the function of “écriture féminine” as a mode of inclusion in male-dominated spaces, such as the capitalist sphere, but also as a mechanism for escape and female individuality: “This is an “economy” that can no longer be put in economic terms. Wherever she loves, all the old concepts of management are left behind. At the end of a more or less conscious computation, she finds not her sum but her difference.”(Cixous, 1959) Rossetti’s poetic fantasy challenges the prevailing ideology of production and consumption by relocating human value in female sexuality and sisterhood. In

doing so, she offers cognition of female economics that could serve as a prototype for twentieth-century feminists, such as Helen Cixous. *Goblin Market* is in essence, an analogy drawn between the bodily mercantile exchanges, which the sisters apply fastidiously to their experience, and the grand narratives of Christianity and Capitalism, which are rigorously applied to our own. Each is a manner of giving form and significance to existence in the same way as narrative itself lends towards a similar 'fictitious' ordering of experience. Rossetti also positions herself in this analogy by "writing" herself into the literary economy.

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