

Re-deeming the Female: Spirituality, Sexuality and Sub-version in 'The Lady of Shallott' and 'Goblin Market'

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Abstract

Bhattacharya in his scholarly argumentation establishes impeccably that “both ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and ‘Goblin Market’ evince a distinct thematic progression whereby issues such as the Janus-faced nature of Victorian spirituality, the limits and permits of Victorian sexuality, and women’s attempts at creating a space for themselves, negotiating the tugs and pulls of those discourses” can be ‘tackled with insight and candour’ and that both are also ‘precluded by patriarchy from participating in the active life, of which sexuality happens to be a pivotal part’.

Keywords: Sexuality, Patriarchy, Spirituality, Religion.

The location of spirituality within the ideological ambit of Victorian poetry as well as the interpellation with sexuality of the history of Victorian poetry raises a slew of questions that demand an in-depth deliberation. The mid-19th century that coincided with the high Victorianism in British life and letters was witness to an important paradigm shift. Placed crucially between the two great periods of English literary and cultural experimentations, viz., the Romantic and the Modern periods, the Victorian era showed trends of both, yet conformed to none. In fact, the Victorian age did at once use and usurp its own heritage and in so doing constructed an alternative ethos where correspondence and contradiction could easily cohere.

Sexuality and spirituality, being integral parts of human life and conditions necessary for the endorsement and perpetuation of the social power-structures, were much influenced by this changing scenario. With the gradual upsurge of a more rigid social order, candid expressions of transgression and nonconformity were substituted for ‘modesty’ and ‘codified conduct’. While society was undoubtedly the warrantor of ‘values’ and ‘manners’, ‘spirituality’ was its agency to determine and define human behaviour. Sexuality, on the other hand, became at once the manifestation of properties

that distinguished human beings on the basis of their reproductive roles and sexual orientations or directions of somebody's sexual desire toward people of the opposite or the same sex, or of both sexes.

Since, 'spirituality' was the more dominant of these two discourses, thanks to its social acceptability, this marked 'the beginning' of what Michele Foucault calls 'the monotonous night of Victorian bourgeoisie' when 'bodies' could no longer make 'a display of themselves.'¹ Except for the closely limited sphere of Christian monogamous marriage, sexuality was resisted, repressed, and, as far as possible, suppressed. In fact, the Victorian age presents us with a central paradox; for even though the sexual and marital regimes were deeply entrenched, 'Victorianism' was (and still is) synonymous with prudery and sexual repression. To a significant extent this popular understanding is a creation of the 'eminent Victorians' themselves who have bolstered this conception through a plethora of clinical discourses and literary accounts which glorified female innocence and idealized motherhood as states untainted by any sexual motives. According to the influential 19th century English physician, William Acton 'normal' women had little sexual desire.² Though the Victorian family was full of fledglings, sex remained a 'taboo'. As a result, the self-styled keepers of social morality were faced with the serious challenge of striking the right balance between the ideological austerity and the practical excesses in sexual matters. The scientific study of human sexuality too began during this time and, as Stephanie Ann Sanders has shown us, it was the German psychiatrist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who first dealt with what he considered to be the 'psychopathological' problems of sex. Similarly, Havelock Ellis, another English physician from the late Victorian period, collected a wealth of information on sexuality from case histories, medical research, and anthropological reports.³

In fact, the history of sexuality in the Victorian England was characterized not only by the rapidly increasing repression of a free biological drive, but also by a cognizant transformation of sex into a discourse. The fundamentally paternalistic Victorian society brought human sexuality into the confines of the 'home' and carefully concealed it behind the façade of social constraint and religious duty. The process was expedited in the 19th century with the Christian practice of confessing one's sins to a priest which required the expression of acts, thoughts and desires in the public medium of language. This formal declaration in its turn brought human sexuality under the panoptic gaze of society making it a matter of concern not only for the individual but also for the entire social institution. The political authorities tried to encourage steady population growth, the educational authorities worried about masturbation and

1 Michael Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, New York, Pantheon, 1978, p. 3. (Hereafter Foucault)

2 H.G. Cocks, "Religion and Spirituality", In *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, (eds.) H.G. Cocks and Houlbrook, Matt, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 157-179. (Hereafter Cocks in Cocks and Houlbrook)

3 Stephanie Ann Sanders, "Human Sexuality" Microsoft® Student 2008 [DVD], Redmond, WA, Microsoft Corporation, 2007.

children's sexuality, the medical authorities both identified and pathologized sexual 'deviance' and made fertility the most significant aspect of women's lives, whereas the religious authority started defining and regulating it in accordance with its wishes and needs, thereby, turning spirituality into its shield of culture against anarchy.

Towards the middle of the 19th century, the rapid pace of urbanization, the momentous advances made in the evolutionary sciences and the radical questions posed by a rampant materialism meant that religion, especially Christianity was fast becoming redundant. Loss of religious faith was accompanied with a coeval loss of order. It was under these circumstances that the concept of spirituality was mooted as a social anodyne. Martin S. Jaffee, in this context, has asseverated:

'Religion' is seen as a body of imposed rules and dogmas that often smothers the natural 'spirituality' of human nature. This 'spirituality' is conceived in a variety of ways that cannot be summarized easily. But it commonly appears as an inner sense of connectedness to the ultimate forces of reality that lead to psychic wholeness and other forms of inner strength.⁴

To contextualize Jaffee's remark we must lay stress on 'the inner sense of connectedness to the ultimate forces of reality' that foregrounds concepts like 'cultural identity', 'ideology' and 'hegemony' as the ultimate forces 'governing' or 'determining' reality. If spirituality's presence leads to 'psychic wholeness' and 'other forms of inner strength' then its 'absence' or 'subversion' should lead to a sense of alienation and inner weakness that are individually felt but often socially manufactured.

In the Victorian age, therefore, spirituality turned out to be still another set of norms like religion. But unlike religion, it was subtly inculcated into the society. As Steven Seidman has pointed out, 'the spiritual was introduced to mitigate sensuality. It nevertheless took its place at the centre of Christian sexuality'.⁵ If on the one hand, spirituality came to be projected as an antidote to materialism on the collective plane, then on the other hand it became a shield against the threat of raw physicality. Moreover, this glorification of spirituality by the Victorian society was sustained by a corresponding vilification of female sexuality.

Traditionally, historians posit a decisive break between these modes of knowledge and experience, but in many ways they have been more analogous than separate. If the institutionalized society appropriated spirituality for the propagation of its givens, apportioned marriage for the perpetuation of its structural unit, family, then female sexuality was subsumed under the serious functionality of reproduction. As Foucault puts it more clearly:

4 Martin S. Jaffee, 'Questions and Answers about Religion', Interview, Microsoft® Student 2008 [DVD], Redmond, WA, Microsoft Corporation, 2007.

5 Steven Seidman, "The Power of Desire and the Danger of Pleasure: Victorian Sexuality Re-considered", *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1990, p. 166.

The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law [...] A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom. The rest had to only remain vague, proper demeanour avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one's speech.⁶

In this respect, 'spirituality' as the socially sanctioned system of belief and art of living ideologically eulogized the holy wedlock and vilified each and every sexual transgression as the most damnable sin – that of fornication.

Soon, the religious terms for commanding and curbing female sexuality gave way to legal, medical and psychological models of normality and pathology. As H G Cocks points out, the history of sexuality appears to have run from 'sin' to 'crime' to 'sickness': from the religious to the legal (socio-cultural) and then to the therapeutic.⁷ Social theorists and religious practitioners differed among themselves on the actual consequences of sexual precocity. Whereas some of them thought that it led to insanity, others predicted stunted growth and still another group presaged spiritual damnation. The moral paroxysm and the apparatuses of social, medical, and legal enforcement nevertheless ushered in a long period of disintegration, struggle and subversion.

The present paper aims at re-reading the subversion of muliebrity from the vantage points of gender and power studies, and seeks to see and show how the said subversion itself gets subsumed into a sub-version of the Victorian spirituality and sexuality as it tries to redeem/re-deem the female captured therein. Since feminist literary criticism is concerned with the portrayal of women and women's issues both by male and female authors, I propose to re-read Alfred Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' and Christiana Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' with a view to showing how the 're-deeming' of the female in these poems was formed and framed by spiritual impositions, by sexual expectations, and by women's attempts at subverting the prescriptive norms of patriarchy and the effects thereof.

Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott' is a narrative poem about narratives in which sexuality and textuality as well as sexuality as textuality constitutes the fabula in the poem; for the female as a reader of text (mirror images), as a manufacturer of text (the web), and as a text herself (to be read and interpreted) closely correspond to the narrative/interpretive trajectory of the poem. Spirituality operates here in its dual role of imposition and agency. Hence, the scope for and limit of subversion. The male poet opens his account in the firmly demarcated world of Shalott whereas the Lady of the land remains dimmed out in the background. The brief yet suggestive account of the boundaries which separate Shalott from the neighbouring Camelot not only accentuate the difference in their geographical fixities but also assert the difference that exists between their inhabitants:

6 Foucault, p. 3.

7 Cocks in Cocks and Houlbrook, p. 157.

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the world and meet the sky;
And thro' the field the road runs by
To many-tower'd Camelot; ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 58)

Significantly, both the Lady and the land of Shalott are isolated from the outside world and surrounded by the edicts and injunctions of patriarchy. The river that flows 'on either side' is a traditional symbol of territorial boundaries⁸ while the 'long fields' of barley and rye signify the processes of culture and cultivation.⁹ However, unlike the sacred rivers of Jordan and Hippocrene, the river of Shalott does not promise any spiritual regeneration. It is rather a highly oppressive agent of the hegemonic patriarchy which by its abundant gush not only separates Shalott from the rest of the world but also secures a complete dominance over the feminized several plot through the agencies of sowing (agriculture) and reaping (fertility). The long fields of barley and rye which surround the world of Shalott also help perpetuate the dominance of the male as the fields are seen and shown to colour and conceal the realities of the open land and thereby constructing an alternative imaginary of a pseudo-cosmic union between the earth and the sky.

There is only one 'road' that connects the insulated world of Shalott with Camelot, the 'many-tower'd' city of options and alternatives. The travellers who go 'up and down' the road cast their gaze on the island where 'lilies blow' and which proximate to a remote place of romance and imagination:

And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
The island of Shalott. ('The Lady of halott', VP 58)

Curiously, the Lady of Shalott, in spite of her 'invisibility', is subject to a severe patriarchal surveillance; for preserving/protecting women's virginity/sexuality from many to make her ready and accessible for the one is one of the strategic ploys that patriarchy uses, and spirituality, with its emphasis on Christian marriage, tries to institutionalize the same. The 'gaze' that the passers by cast on the island may remind one of the panoptic gaze of heteropatriarchy that not only observes and judges its subject, but also discovers, records, and in a sense constructs it as an object for scrutiny and control. The patriarchal gaze, in this context, not only produces the otherness/ exteriority of the Lady and the land of Shalott as opposed to and by the selfhood/ interiority of the male Camelot but also confers upon them the dubious distinction of obscurity and enigma. As a corollary to this, the Lady of Shalott does not have a name;

8 Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007. (Hereafter Ferber)

9 Ferber, p. 73.

she is anonymous – both an alien and an Other to the male self, destined to remain crucified to and characteristic of the land.

Tennyson creates the worlds of Shalott and Camelot in terms of binary oppositions. If Camelot is the ‘many-tower’d’ centre of power and visibility to which all converge, then the antinomic Shalott is the ‘willow-veil’d’ private space situated on the margins of this male-defined world, at once enclosed with and made invisible by its dictates. The Lady of the land is similarly confined within the castle with ‘four grey walls’ and ‘four grey towers’:

Four grey walls, and four grey towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers
The Lady of Shalott. (‘The Lady of Shalott’, VP 58)

According to Isobel Armstrong, the Lady of Shalott is locked inside a tower that is a symbol of ‘rigid oppositions.’¹⁰ The tower not only conceals the Lady from public view and confines her within an organic and integrated world of pre-industrialized manual labour but also protects her from the fragmentation of the commercial world and thereby produces her invisibility which is no less cultural than real. The scope of Armstrong’s statement about the Lady’s captivity is given a logical extension by what Sharyn Udall has to say in this context:

Her [the Lady’s] existence is merely the immobile hub of a wheel around which the passing parade of people and events outside her window rotate like spokes. The centrifugal force thus generated holds the action and the reader’s attention at the poem’s centre.¹¹

If the captive Lady looks at the magic mirror and limns the sight she sees in her web, then free men from the outside not only *overlook* the ‘space of flowers’ to look more clearly at the grey towers but also *overlook* its essentialities and potentialities.

The fact that none has seen the Lady ‘wave her hand’ further contributes to her invisibility. Not only her tower is lost in obscurity (‘willow-veil’d’), but she herself is un beholden although much like Shelley’s Skylark her song keeps haunting the ears of the listeners:

But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,

10 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, London & New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 81.

11 Sharyn Udall, "Between Dream and Shadow", *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Spring-Summer, 1990, p. 34.

Hear a song that echoes cheerly.
(*'The Lady of Shalott'*, VP 58-59)

The entry of the reapers, at this stage, heralds the advent of the rural tradition to support and subvert the assumptions of the urbanized Camelot. If the patriarchal culture interprets the lady to be a prisoner of its rules who must abide by and submit to its injunctions or suffer dire consequences, the reapers take her to be 'the fairy', earthly yet mysterious, confined yet potentially destructive. The invisibility of the Lady combined with the audibility of her song does not deter the reapers from constructing her muliebrity in terms of 'waving her hands' or 'standing at the casement'.

The inability of the Lady of Shalott to appear before the public eye and the virtual stasis of the land are now pitted against the great stir that distinguishes the inside of the tower. The constant weaving of the Lady and her ability to produce complex designs and more complicated fabrics, instead of referring to her submission to the socially prescribed rules and roles, allude to the potentially subversive nature that lies dormant in her:

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot. (*'The Lady of Shalott'*, VP 59)

The Lady is certainly no Athena, spinning for the perpetuation of agriculture and arts, rather like the Fates, she weaves the eternal tapestry of life and death. While the 'gay' colours of the tapestry sharply contrast with the grey inside of the tower constructing thereby another binary of the poem between abandon and austerity, the 'magic' in her 'web' obviously results from the rich variety of male Camelot life that she can narrate from afar but cannot partake of. It is in this context that Ann Coley has remarked,

Between these abbreviated images [gleaned from the mirror and given in the web] are spaces which syncopate the continuous weaving motion - the winding of the river and the road, the coming and going of the people - that tries to hold the lines of the poem together.¹²

That a curse may befall the Lady if she looks out of her tower and looks at the male world refers to the differential treatment meted out to the male and the female. While the male passers by are free to 'gaze' at or 'overlook' the land and the lady, the object and the objective of their gaze, the Lady of Shalott is forbidden to look out. She must satisfy herself by being an object of the male desire and can never be a desiring subject:

12 Ann C. Colley, "The Quest for the 'Nameless' in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott'", *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Winter, 1985, p. 370.

She knows not what the 'curse' may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
The Lady of Shalott. ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 59)

That the Lady is unaware of the true nature of the curse and then therefore goes on weaving 'steadily' does in no way alter her situation. She remains a captive of the four grey walls that patriarchy has built for her. Bound to the great chain of crime and punishment that a woman must brave if she dares challenge the patriarchal assumptions of femininity as passive and observant, the Lady is permitted to look only at the illusory world of the mirror which reflects nothing but shadows of reality.

If the patriarchal world of normality confines the Lady inside the boundaries of the tower, then the illusory world of the mirror complicates its margins by reflecting and refracting the reality of the 'world'. Unlike the mirror of Spenser's Merlin which shows the true picture of the entire world or the mirror of Snow White's stepmother that is both a means of magic and a mundane tool of vanity, the mirror of the Lady of Shalott reveals only half truths:

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,
Goes by to tower'd Camelot;
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott. ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 59-60)

According to Michael Ferber, 'The symbolism of mirrors depends not only on what things cause the reflection – nature, God, a book, drama – but also on what one sees in them – oneself, the truth, the ideal, illusion.'¹³ The world of the mirror is largely two dimensional – a world of surfaces that by reflecting light reproduces the realities of the material world in accordance with its own routine of representation. Thus, the mirror of the Lady is not merely a site for light but also of a seat of shadows (distorted reality). The reflections that are built on its glossy surface – the highway, the village girls, the shepherd-lads and the knights coming riding 'two and two' – are all but mere illusion for her; for they do not come to her, do not come in her life, but pass her by.

¹³ Ferber, p. 126.

It is not until the appearance of the lovers on the surface of the mirror that the Lady is forced to reconceptualize her world as phantasmal and hallucinatory, but the seed of this disillusioned reconceptualization was sown at the sight of the knights and after the realization of her lack of love and lover. The sight of the 'two young lovers lately wed' reinforces the absurdity and insignificance of the mirror world she inhabits, and wrings a sigh from her heart, 'I am half-sick of shadows':

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
"I am half-sick of shadows," said
The Lady of Shalott. ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 60)

This is the first occasion when the Lady is permitted to speak for and of her own. That she is 'half sick of shadows' not only points up the monotony of her situation but also signals the emergence of an individual identity, of her female sexuality – that is self-assertive and needs no proxy for the actualization of its desires. The reference to 'sickness' here carefully brings in the problematic of female sexuality any expression of which was deemed abnormal and sick during the Victorian era. The prefix 'half' in the state-defining 'half sick of shadows' at once denotes residual habituality and connotes hapless supplementarity; for the Lady cannot conceptualize her full 'sickness' with 'shadows' and in the absence of 'substance' (means of female self-actualization) have to make do with mere 'shadows'.

If the image of the lovers disturbs the lady, it is the image of the male logos Sir Lancelot that shocks her out of her pliant passivity that is symbolized by her constant weaving. The focal figure of Sir Lancelot stands in sharp contrast to the marginalized Lady. Although he too appears in the mirror like the other unsubstantiated images or airy nothings, yet the sexuality he wields is too powerful to be a mere illusion:

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley sheaves,
The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
Of bold Sir Lancelot. ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 60)

The powerful image of the mythical Lancelot not only awakens the Lady to the sad realization of her predicament but also reinforces a sense of 'lack' and thereby forces her into immediate impulsive action. Shuli Barzilai has deftly analyzed the situation in the following words: Grown 'half-sick' of a solitary and mirror-mediated existence, of a living burial inside gray-towered walls, the Lady precipitously turns from her loom towards life and the flashing armoured figure of Sir Lancelot.¹⁴

14 Shuli Barzilai, "'Say That I Had a Lovely Face': The Grimm's 'Rapunzel', Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott', and

To put Barzilai's comment in perspective, having seen Sir Lancelot and recognized in him her ideal of a male lover, the Lady cannot remain merely 'half sick of shadows' but becomes fully enamoured of the substance:

She left the web, she left the loom;
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to Camelot. ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 61)

According to Tennyson, 'the new-born love for something, for someone in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of reality' (M, 117). Quite oblivious of the dictates of patriarchy, the Lady now looks out of the window only to find to her utter surprise the three dimensional world of flower and flux.

According to Elaine Shefer, 'When the Lady leaves the room after seeing Sir Lancelot, the connection between her actions and the Fall was understood by the Victorian audience as an act of moral disobedience.'¹⁵ Needless to say, this act of self-assertion enacts a heavy toll on the lady, and as she turns away from her world of illusions to the world of breathing human passions she cannot evade the essential mortality of it:

Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
The Lady of Shalott. ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 61)

The mirror which hangs before the Lady is far from being a mere static reflecting entity; it changes from blue to crystal, and it is really vague whether the pictures in the mirror are always reflections of externality or mere reflections of figures woven in the fabric of the Lady and then therefore the constructs of the Lady's mind. This makes the nature of the mirror self-contradictory, and the moment Lancelot appears in the scene and the Lady of Shalott looks out to find out the truth about him, the apparent stasis of the mirror is disrupted and it cracks 'from side to side'.

While critics disagree among themselves about the real nature of the curse – some suggesting it to be the original sin, and others interpreting it to be the biblical curse on labour and sexuality while still another group taking it for the myth of power, a representation which kept the Lady its subject – the result of such transgression is of course disastrous. The moment the Lady looks out of her boundary the magic web

Atwood's Lady Oracle"', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Autumn, 2000, p. 232.

15 Elaine Shefer, "Elizabeth Siddal's Lady of Shalott", *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring-Summer, 1988, p. 25.

disintegrates and the mirror, her only access to the outer world so far, 'cracks' from 'side to side'. While the disintegration of the tapestry may suggest the falling out of the heteropatriarchal order that always tries to entangle the female in its web of codes and customs and can neither expect nor accept a desiring feminine subject, the crack in the mirror may well be symbolic of the loss of virginity as deplorable in desire as in the deed itself.

Shut out from the familiarity of her fragmentary world and suspended in an unknown and alien space, the Lady now decides to undertake a journey to the city of Camelot—the world of the male:

Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round about the prow she wrote
'The Lady of Shalott.' ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 61)

The Lady of Shalott now finds a boat 'beneath a willow', which is a traditional symbol of death,¹⁶ and inscribes on the 'prow' the words 'The Lady of Shalott'. What is really instructive about such an attempt at inscribing one's name on the phallic symbol 'prow' is that it topsy-turves the male-defined and male-decided sexual norm; for this 'inscription' catapults the traditionally passive female to the active 'male' role and position.¹⁷ This is why Morse Peckham thinks that the Lady seems to be engaged in 'self-definition' and 'self-identification';¹⁸ for she has to 'define' her 'self' for 'herself' and 'identify' her 'self' in contrast to and in negotiation with the 'world'.

In a bid to free herself from the shackles of patriarchy and to represent her self as and for what she really is, what the Lady of Shalott inscribes on the prow is not her name, but an honorific. Unwittingly, she thus places herself in the given hierarchy and reaffirms what patriarchy calls her 'The Lady of Shalott' — the captive of a land and a language:

Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot;
And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott. ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 61-62)

Taking on the function of the broken mirror with her 'glassy countenance', the Lady now floats down the river to Camelot; for if the mirror had once reflected the world of

16 Ferber, p. 235.

17 Sarah Toulalan, *Imagining Sex: Pornography and Bodies in Seventeenth-Century England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 68.

18 Peckham, 1962, pp. 38-39.

normality forbidden to her, through her assertive and subversive act she has 'earned' the right and plight of reflecting the world of pathology. It is left vague whether her new song is a song of triumph or defeat, but what shines through this ideological vagueness is her progression from weaving to singing and then to writing and to singing again whereby abstract signs give way to substitutive symbols and the dissolutionment of a feminine other liberates the female in the Lady of Shalott into the freedom of ecriture and expression. Catherine B. Stevenson, in this connection, has pointed out, 'As the Lady drifts to Camelot, her death song is likened to the 'wild warblings' of dying swans as heard by sailors 'far away from home.'¹⁹ However, Stevenson is quick to remind us that unlike the swan's the lady's song has been heard before and acts as 'a charm', as it were, 'calculated to induce death.'²⁰

The Lady of Shalott is anonymous, and it is this anonymity that not only erases her name that may guarantee an identity for and of the Lady but also makes her vulnerable to the unknown and alien Camelot, a world of action and aggression, and superstition and suspicion:

Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And they cross'd themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott". ('The Lady of Shalott', VP 62-63)

In trying to come out of the traditionally defined/determined roles of normal femininity, the Lady has miserably failed. So now it is the patriarchal authority Lancelot who comes forward to help and rehabilitate her. By acknowledging her 'lovely face' and seeking for her divine mercy and grace, he seems to have requited the 'love' that the Lady had felt for him. Cutting through the psycho-linguistic booby traps, however, we may discover hidden implications in his remarks that surely contravene his apparent tenderness. The modifier 'lovely' for instance goes beyond its traditional associations with beauty to implicate attractiveness and enjoyability from the male and sexist perspective.

The love-awakened self-assertive female in the Lady decides to follow the spiritual and ethical dimensions of individual existence in relation to the social or the spiritual, over and above the discussion of the nature of the patriarchal/religious injunction or as a justification for female obedience. By using the concept of 'spirituality' within this frame of reference, women get the scope of going beyond a disembodied or non-material

19 Catherine B. Stevenson, "Tennyson's Dying Swans: Mythology and the Definition of the Poet's Role", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. 20, No. 4, *Nineteenth Century*, Autumn, 1980, p. 629 (Hereafter Stevenson)

20 Stevenson, p. 630.

realm. This different and characteristically female view of spirituality encompasses the female desire for 'emancipation' and 'transcendence' through the material and erotic realms of existence and not through their exclusion by ascetic practices or body-denying systems of value. If the sexuality of the Lady of Shalott was proscribed and circumscribed by patriarchy by putting forward the male interpretation of spirituality then the Lady tried to subvert this societal imposition by holding forth the alternative female interpretation of the same. Hemmed in by the mores and moorings of culture and language as she was the Lady failed in her bid, because her attempted subversion petered out into a mere sub-version of patriarchal norms.

If 'The Lady of Shalott' is an account of a woman's plight who dared and died, given from the vantage point of a male poet's gender 'superiority', then 'Goblin Market' is a story of women who succumbed, struggled and survived related with the concern and compassion of a female poet's empathic parity. The original title of the poem 'A Peep at the Goblins' was sanitized by D.G. Rossetti into 'Goblin Market' strategically denying both the 'poetess' and her personae the agency of 'peep'-ing. What was lost in the process was the socially proscribed act of 'peeping' that could have given the female protagonist the 'power' though potentially 'dangerous' to gaze and gauge. What, as a result, was left was the static space of market where the only principle is that of getting and spending.

Written as a bold rejoinder to the prevalent Victorian ideology of sexism, capitalism and mercantilism, Christiana Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' exposes the ideological privileging of the male as the sole driver of the market economy, and in so doing jibes at the systematic denial of the consumer status and consumer rights to women of that era. It is a brilliant critique of the hegemonic aggression and deception practised by patriarchy that not only constructs the male as the superior self but also constricts the female as its 'other' arrested and appropriated within the frames of femininity and family.

'Goblin Market' portrays the predicament of the two 'innocent' and 'immature' girls – Laura and Lizzie – who get attracted to the business cries of some seductive and hence potentially destructive Goblin men, step out of the security net called home, and fall prey to the mercenary motive of the market place. Although the world of the sisters is something of a bucolic space, situated at a far remove from the realm of commerce, the constant business cries of the goblins both disrupt and corrupt their insulated existence. The merchants who cry out 'Come buy, come buy' are goblin men whose hybrid or mutant form not only points up the disparity and deception that is inherent in them but also prefigures the potentially destructive and detrimental nature of the fruits they sell, fruits which tempted Eve and brought about the loss of innocence and the awareness of sexuality:

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:

Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;—
All ripe together
In summer weather, —
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly;
Come buy, come buy: ('Goblin Market', *VP* 115)

The world of Laura and Lizzie is a place assailed by the voices from the male world. The cries of the goblins at once point up the shrewd capitalism of the Victorian society and its impact on the lives of those who live both in its thick and on its margins. Interestingly, in this male world, only the 'maids' are endowed with human forms, while none of the male members of Laura and Lizzie's family appear in the poem and the Goblins are nothing but grotesque, bestial, and tragic miniatures of the mighty male (part cat, rat, rattle, snail, or wombat) and sad reversals of the beliefs in Victorian evolutionism ('little men' as also 'lesser men').

The poet now zooms in on the two sisters Laura and Lizzie who symbolize both affinity and complementarity:

'Lie close,' Laura said,
Pricking up her golden head:
'We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?'
'Come buy,' call the goblins
Hobbling down the glen.
'Oh,' cried Lizzie, 'Laura, Laura,
You should not peep at goblin men.' ('Goblin Market', *VP* 116)

It is at this precise moment that the sisters are confronted with a moral dilemma — whether to succumb to the attraction of Goblins or to adhere to the dictates of society. The prevalent notions of Victorian spirituality demanded their obedience to the norms of patriarchy which meant that Laura and Lizzie should not have 'peeped' at goblin men nor bought their 'fruits' but should have remained confined within the traditionally defined boundaries of feminine modesty and honour. But, their newly aroused interest in the seductive fruits pits them against the patriarchal framework of sanctions and prohibitions. The girls are not so much tempted by the goblin men as by what they sell and what these girls are deprived of; for the fruits signify something that both of them lack, although they are quite aware that these fruits are forbidden and vicious, symbolizing what the women cannot have — a place where the fruits are grown, a place in, and a piece of, the economic action of the patriarchal society.

Although Laura is the first of the sisters to identify the fruits as potentially dangerous it is she who succumbs to their temptation:

Laura stretched her gleaming neck
Like a rush-imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch
When its last restraint is gone. ('Goblin Market', VP 117)

Laura is the one who is alive to the larger possibilities, to the risks and returns of the society in which they live and are discriminated against. Her curiosity initiates her quest for the origins of the fruits, re-producing in and through Laura thereby a Victorian Eve or Pandora who braves the alien and the forbidden. Laura's tentative foray beyond the boundaries of the home and into the unknown world of the goblins may be interpreted as her attempt at gain access to and authority over the male market of arbitrary rules. On another plane, her apparently transgressive act seeks to subvert the phallogocentric norms of a male questor hero.

According to Elizabeth Helsinger, one of the major themes of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' is the symbolic representation of 'a narrative of spiritual temptation, fall and redemption.'²¹ When Laura steps out of the house, she does not merely cross the boundaries of the family and move into the public space but transgresses the traditionally demarcated boundaries of 'normative' and then therefore 'normal' femininity. In this context Helsinger further asserts, 'Victorian culture acknowledges only one figure who transgresses this boundary – the prostitute.'²² Although Rossetti avoids any such overt identification of Laura with a prostitute in her poem, but there are ample suggestions of Laura's association with the biblical fallen woman as she approaches the goblins and stares at their fruits:

[...] sweet-tooth Laura spoke in haste:
'Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather.'
(*'Goblin Market'*, VP 118)

Unlike her sister, Lizzie, who is unwilling to contradict the conventional wisdom of avoiding the goblin market, and hence stands for the protected (though restricted)

21 Elizabeth K. Helsinger, "Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", ELH, Vol. 58, No. 4, Winter, 1991, p. 903. (Hereafter Helsinger)

22 Helsinger, p. 903.

female sphere of domesticity and conformity, Laura hazards dealing with the goblins. In stepping out of her house, she has already used up her female resources; and it is not without significance that Laura when she faces the goblins is without a single coin – without the agency to get access to the world of production and commerce.

While Laura's lack of a coin – copper or silver – makes her entirely dependent on the male market economy, the same lack also underlines, what Terrence Holt calls, the feminine 'inability' to understand the 'logistics of a patriarchal marketplace.'²³ Laura's asserts that the only gold she possesses is to be found on the 'furze'. This assertion sparks off another series of negotiations during which all her attempts at alternative payments are thwarted in favour of a more personal bargain – a lock of her golden hair:

'You have much gold upon your head,'
They answered all together:
'Buy from us with a golden curl.'
She clipped a precious golden lock,
She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,
Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
She sucked until her lips were sore;
Then flung the emptied rinds away
But gathered up one kernel stone,
And knew not was it night or day
As she turned home alone. ('Goblin Market', VP 118)

What Laura agrees to pay to the Goblins is a lock of her hair which is a traditional symbol of youth and virginity. As J.E. Cirlo asserts, 'Cutting off or tearing off a portion of one's hair is a sign of grief or mourning [...] A gift or theft of a lock of a woman's hair is an obvious symbolic act, [...] a sign of humiliation, socially or sexually.'²⁴ Thus the cutting of Laura's hair – a virtual part of Laura herself – symbolizes not only her fall from feminine grace and virtue but also the loss of her virginity. Moreover, Laura's hair being golden is typically associated with monetary value the loss of which deprives her of her physical resources. This fact is pointed up by Elisabeth Gitter, 'gold in Victorian society represented innocence threatened by defilement from other elements.'²⁵ The 'single' tear that Laura sheds at once betrays her willing, though manipulated, participation in her own victimization by the male goblins and her representation of herself as a commercial member of a capitalist society.

23 Terrence Holt, "Men Sell Not Such in Any Town": Exchange in "Goblin Market" *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 28, No.1, 1990, p. 55.

24 J. E. Cirlo, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, (Trans.) Sage, Jack, 2nd Edition, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 2001, p. 134.

25 Elisabeth G. Gitter, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination", *PMLA*, Vol. 99, No. 5, 1984, p. 943.

As Laura barter away a golden curl for the forbidden fruits and sucks the 'fruit globes fair or red' she is overwhelmed by the spell thereof. One of the first influences of the fruits is the gradual fading of the golden colour from Laura's hairs. Her lips become 'sore' and she returns home 'alone' without knowing 'was it night or day'. Thenceforth, her behavior will change and she will not be able to share the bed with her sister. While Lizzie hears the goblins' business cry, Laura is unable to do so. In fact, having seduced her, the goblins seem to have lost all interest in the girl though she now pines for their cries and their wares. According to David L. Cowles, 'horrified at her inability to purchase the fruit to which she has become, in effect, addicted,'²⁶ Laura now sits up in a 'passionate yearning', gnashes 'her teeth for balked desire' and spends the nights 'weeping':

Her tree of life drooped from the root:
She said not one word in her heart's sore ache;
But peering thro' the dimness, nought discerning,
Trudged home, her pitcher dripping all the way;
So crept to bed, and lay
Silent till Lizzie slept;
Then sat up in a passionate yearning,
And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept
(*'Goblin Market'*, VP 122)

Undoubtedly, the fall of Laura bears a clear resemblance to the Biblical Fall of Eve. In Eve's case the eating results in her knowledge of good and evil, while to Laura the fruit does not bring enlightenment but a narcissistic fantasy of sensual fulfilment and an almost insatiable hunger for the same forbidden fruits. Quite unfortunately for Laura, this desire is not to be fulfilled; for as Helsinger asserts, 'having placed her body in circulation [through the act of giving away her hair for the fruits] she cannot re-enter the market as consumer or as object of exchange.'²⁷ Thus, Laura can neither see nor hear the goblins and 'must suffer the debilitating effects of her unsatisfied desire.'²⁸

Unable to turn a blind eye to Laura's suffering, Lizzie now decides to visit the goblins and her dealings with the sinister brotherhood prove her to be an intelligent operative in the marketplace. Much unlike her sister Laura who had used up her financial resources before she could reach the goblins, Lizzie puts 'a silver penny in her purse' and only then enters the marketplace as her sister's proxy:

Till Laura dwindling
Seemed knocking at Death's door:
Then Lizzie weighed no more

26 David L. Cowles, "Goblin Market", Microsoft® Student 2008 [DVD], Redmond, WA, Microsoft Corporation, 2007, "English Literature", Microsoft® Student 2008 [DVD], Redmond, WA, Microsoft Corporation, 2007.

27 Helsinger, p. 922.

28 Helsinger, p. 922.

Better and worse;
But put a silver penny in her purse,
Kissed Laura, crossed the heath with clumps of furze
At twilight, halted by the brook:
And for the first time in her life
Began to listen and look. ('Goblin Market', VP 123)

Lizzie enters the goblin market only to be a customer and not a consumer of their production. Declining the goblins' offer to 'Sit down and feast with us' and ignoring their claim that 'Such fruits as these/[n]o man can carry', Lizzie throws the silver penny at them and declares her intention to carry those fruits back home. While the goblins react violently to such proposition – they toss her money back and start scratching their pates – they fail to subjugate Lizzie; for as Helsinger puts it, 'Lizzie goes to the market doubly armed. Unlike Laura, Lizzie has money in her pocket, and she knows how to use it.'²⁹ Ever mindful of the condition of Laura and that of an earlier transgressor Jeanie who had also eaten the same goblin fruits and as a result 'dwindled and grew grey;/Then fell with the first snow' and 'fell sick and died/In her gay prime', Lizzie declines to pay for the goblin fruits with her own self. Rather she pays the goblin back with her pelf and this saves her from the folly that has been Laura's downfall.

'Worn out by Lizzie's resistance', but still unwilling to let her participate actively in the male market on her own terms, the goblins drop their mask of salesman decency. 'Alacrity' turns to 'aggression', and 'no longer wagging, purring', but 'visibly demurring, grunting and snarling', the goblins attack Lizzie and try to subjugate her forcefully:

They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her,
Clawed with their nails,
Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,
Twitched her hair out by the roots,
Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat. ('Goblin Market', VP 125-126)

Undoubtedly such violent assaults are overtly sexual in nature; for not only do the goblins claw and tear at her but shove their fruits at Lizzie's tightly shut mouth. They fail to subjugate Lizzie partly because of the fact that she possesses the agency (the silver coin) to deal with the capitalist market and partly because of her unique identity as a potent redeemer, a female Christ, who can overcome all the temptations and endure seemingly endless tortures. Thus, Lizzie's final victory over the goblins, which

²⁹ Helsinger, 1991, p 923.

is also a victory of 'sisterhood' over 'brotherhood', is as transformative for her as it is for Laura.

By denying the goblins the power they desire to wield on their consumers (the vulnerable maids like Laura and Jeanie), Lizzie breaks the first spell of the patriarchy. Her self-awareness and strong resolve wear the goblins out, force them to end their attack and drive them to disappear for good. As soon as the Goblins vanish 'into the ground' or fade 'in the air', Lizzie runs home to save her dying sister:

She cried 'Laura,' up the garden,
'Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me:
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men.' ('Goblin Market', VP 127)

Dripping with fruits juices, which Elizabeth Campbell calls 'the symbolic representation of the power she has wrenched from the goblins,'³⁰ Lizzie on returning home calls Laura to suck the juices off her body. Notwithstanding the obvious homoeroticism involved in these lines, Lizzie's powerful offering of her body as a means of redeeming the fallen Laura reinforces her image as a female Christ offering the flesh and the blood for the service of mankind.

If on the one hand, the self-sacrifice of Lizzie raises her to the stature of a potent redeemer as she stands '[l]ike a royal virgin town/ [t]opped with gilded dome and spire', then on the other hand, Laura too is released from the prison of a poisonous desire. She first kisses Lizzie out of grief and fears that her sister has poisoned herself by consuming the same sinister fruits only to realize later that it is this selfless act of Lizzie that has now provided her with the 'fiery antidote' to her desire:

Laura started from her chair,
Flung her arms up in the air,
Clutched her hair:
'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,

30 Elizabeth Campbell, "Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Spring, 1990, p. 408. (Hereafter Campbell)

Undone in mine undoing,
And ruined in my ruin,
Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden?' –
She clung about her sister,
Kissed and kissed and kissed her:
Tears once again
Refreshed her shrunken eyes,
Dropping like rain
After long sultry drouth;
Shaking with aguish fear, and pain,
She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth.
(‘Goblin Market’, *VP* 127-128)

It is Lizzie’s offering of her body that gives the sinister juices matter and meaning, and it is this meaning that offers Laura what she needs for survival. She falls again, but this time into a fortunate unconsciousness which brings her ‘Life out of death’ and really redeems her.

The ending of Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’ quite unexpectedly situates both the deviant Laura and the redeemer Lizzie within the constrictive world of heteropatriarchy. They have now grown old, have ‘become wives’ and mothers and can recount the past without the fear of repetition and with the assurance of the security net of family:

Days, weeks, months, years
Afterwards, when both were wives
With children of their own;
Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
Their lives bound up in tender lives;
Laura would call the little ones
And tell them of her early prime,
Those pleasant days long gone
Of not-returning time:
Would talk about the haunted glen,
The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,
Their fruits like honey to the throat
But poison in the blood;
(Men sell not such in any town:)
Would tell them how her sister stood
In deadly peril to do her good,
And win the fiery antidote: (‘Goblin Market’, *VP* 129-130)

While Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar considers such an ending to be anticlimactic and an overt imposition of a moralistic tag necessitated by the Victorian imagination,³¹ it is

31 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1979, p. 566.

worth noting that even at this stage both the sisters are able to retain their individuality. Their household is surprisingly free from the commanding male presence, and it is the lady of the house who initiates the young ones to the secrets of life. In this context, Campbell has further commented, 'even though the poem has already tested the sisters' 'mother-hearts', they prove themselves once again to be good mothers by re-telling their tale, thereby reiterating the poem's cyclicity.'³²

As regards the double role of spirituality in enforcing sexual norms on the female and the subversion of those norms by the female 'Goblin Market' throws up prickly issues of resignation, remorse and redemption. The difference between Jeanie's death and Laura's revival is made by the presence and intervention of Lizzie. But by choosing renunciation and sacrifice for the sake of her sister, Lizzie is herself co-opted by patriarchy into the feminine fold and the feminine mould. Moreover, the speech of Laura, at the fag end of the poem, coupled with the silence of Lizzie reinforces her co-opted and tamed status. Redeeming therefore becomes re-deeming as the female is re-written and re-captured in the pages of a gendered history.

Both 'The Lady of Shalott' and 'Goblin Market' evince a distinct thematic progression whereby issues such as the Janus-faced nature of Victorian spirituality, the limits and permits of Victorian sexuality, and women's attempts at creating a space for themselves, negotiating the tugs and pulls of those discourses have been tackled with insight and candour. Both the eponymous Lady in 'The Lady of Shalott' and Laura in 'Goblin Market' are precluded by patriarchy from participating in the active life, of which sexuality happens to be a pivotal part. The 'curse' on the Lady of Shalott and the proscription to Laura and Lizzie, as opposed to and by the entry of Sir Lancelot and the persistence of the Goblin men, are ample testimony to the fact that patriarchy plays the dubious roles of control and temptation on and against women. The fair sex is thereby confined, confused and consumed by the male hegemony on its own terms. Women may and do try to come out of this double bind but being conceived of in and through a phallogocentric language as also a paternalistic social code all their attempts are foredoomed to failure. Thus, they may try to appropriate the symbolic phallus of the boat's prow by writing their names or discard the surrogate phalluses of the Goblin fruits by licking and eating (both symbolic sex acts) one of their own (Lizzie), they are ultimately destined to court death ('The Lady of Shallot') or tell the tale of their taming ('Goblin Market').

32 Campbell, 1990, p. 410.

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