

Of Fairy Tales: The Reparative Fantasy in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

Cassie Jun Lin

University of Macau, mb84026@um.edu.mo, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7749-1491

Abstract

With the heated debate on the utility of the humanities as a context, this paper reads Rossetti's "Goblin Market" as an attempt to reconcile the emerging functional attitude towards the humanities and the susceptibility of the humanities to the neo-liberal condition. This paper traces connections between the "reparative" or the "post-critical" turn and fairy tales or fantasies in order to argue that Christina Rossetti's much debated poem, "Goblin Market," could be framed in a fantastic framework that substantiates a reparative orientation that is "additive and accretive" (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 149). A stubborn insistence on the hermeneutics of suspicion has informed much of the readings of the "Goblin Market," especially the haunted market, as "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" (Sedgwick, *Queer Performativity* 15). I aim to provide a different approach given that recent scholarship on "Goblin Market" ignores the possibility of reparation. In this paper, I attempt to withhold suspicion in order to hone caring eyes to uncritical materials that are often deemed untenable to politicized life. I reparatively read the female participation in the market that resuscitates a full female identity and the "muted" ending that is often subjected to paranoid readings. Locating "Goblin Market" in a fantastic framework, I argue, helps us to see the actual world and it helps us visualize a fantastic world that brings out an ethical efflorescence that entertains human experience in its plenitude. This essay also argues that "Goblin Market," partakes in "a new wave of innovative fairy tales" (Zipes 98) that gained ascendancy in the latter half of the nineteenth century and this serves as an affective archive to document long marginalized figures and feelings. I also argue that Rossetti's poem invites thoughts on how aesthetic devices sustain and reproduce selves that ripple off from real-life experiences in a fantastic interruption of spatiality and temporality.

Keywords: reparative and paranoid readings, and fairy tales

An insistence on the hermeneutics of suspicion has informed much of professionalized *critical* readings that evaluate texts as "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" (Sedgwick, 1993, p.15). Not surprisingly, contemporary scholarship of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" has sought to ascertain and universalize performative insights¹ that are highly productive, tendentious, and subjective. These readings are generally iterations of apparently impersonal and objective theories. A tradition of market-oriented readings has been influentially set up since early 1990s with contributions of critics such as Elizabeth Campbell, Terence Holt, and Richard Menke. The market in Rossetti's poem, whether real or imagined, subversive or complicit, has been a critical commonplace with theoretical tributaries that highlight Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic and theological influences. Within this peculiar market that this poetic fantasy has, as it were, created, critics have strained eyes to diagnose and debunk the insidious values and hidden assumptions which the targeted text is cloaking. This market, as many critics have explicitly or implicitly recognized, surely is a marketplace of *paranoidly* unresolvable differences. With this in mind, in this paper I aim to offer a glimpse of the paranoid market and to resuscitate its robust reparative

potentials despite being stubbornly ignored. I take Eve Sedgwick's reparative readings as a starting point for a new account of Rossetti's market. Both acknowledging and challenging the founding critique that now might seem "a site of coercive practices and a symbol of gendered trade" (Rappoport, 2010, p. 853), I propose that it might be fruitful to think of such a controversial fantasy reparatively in extending more rooms for more possibilities that sometimes go stubbornly, if not deliberately, unnoticed. Also, Reparative attempts as such suppose a way to look for a new lease of life in the Humanities though it might not redound to the credit of the neo-liberal Humanities.

Locating "Goblin Market" in a sexual and economic complex, Holt (1990) places a premium on the economic force that undergirds the suggestive text with other relational elements. Reading the poem as a failed mutiny for female autonomy, Holt, however, argues that "Goblin Market" does not so much attempt to resolve the conflicting differences, nor subvert a masculinist system of power, as paradoxically enforce the differences within a gendered and monied system of exchange – a self-defeating strategy in which "what we seem to set aside is actually not separate from, but centrally involved in, the discourse it interrupts" (p. 54). Resonant with Holt's vexed logic of exchange, especially with how desires are (re)oriented through language, Tucker (2003) famously claims that the readings that bring out the most of the poem's irreducible appeal are those that "put the *market* back in "Goblin Market," and vice versa" (p. 117). A most notable Marxist critique on this market is Victor Roman Mendoza (2006). The tradition of reading "Goblin Market" as an allegory that anatomizes Victorian social codes and maladies prompts Mendoza to locate such a simplistic relegation in the industrial process of commodity fetishization which is ironically what the poet (if she intends), the poem and the critics seek to identify and criticize. Along with the critical practices that demand a heightened alertness to the secrets the texts withhold, Campbell (1990) arrives at a revolutionary claim that the publication of "Goblin Market" is "an aesthetic, historical, and economic coup," (p. 393), a strong revelation of the anticipatory yet still-not-demystified (or not enough) capitalist values. Drawing from Julia Kristeva, she associates fantasy with the unseen, undifferentiated, and unnamable space of the *chora* that is yet nourishing and maternal to "women and children resided as politically insignificant, nonspeaking subjects, and where the fairy tale gained ascendancy as a popular literary mode" (p. 396). Seeing the irreconcilable antagonism of sexual binarism within a society that valorizes phallic projectile of progress, she goes so far as to suggest that every woman (at home) is relegated to the unredeemed role of 'fallen woman' according to such a socioeconomic configuration.

Despite a politicized critique of paranoia, what I do appreciate and want to further explore is the reparative fantasy by which and for which the story of "Goblin Market" is best imbricated in a paranoid narrative of sexual and political struggles. Under a framework of paranoia, Campbell distills the art of subversion in the genre of fairy tales, establishes productive intensities and at the same time intimates accompanying distinctive paradoxes that can lead to the attrition of the very thriving critical potency. However, it is also Campbell's locating the oneness of the two mirroring sisters and the restorative potentiality of female cycle in a fantastic framework that substantiates an reparative orientation that is, in Sedgwick's phrase, "additive and accretive" (2003, p. 149), a reparative tendency that I want to follow in my readings of "Goblin Market."

In her seminal essay entitled "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," Sedgwick (2003) argues that a hermeneutics of suspicion, now nearly a shorthand for academic criticism, has become "by now

nearly synonymous with criticism itself...[so that] to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant" (pp. 124-126). She distinguishes between two orientations of readings; one is paranoid, the other reparative. A paranoid orientation, in Heather Love's gloss on Sedgwick's polemic, "works to anticipate and to ward off negative feeling" (2010, p. 237). Motivated by a faith in exposure and demystification, paranoia-oriented critical practices, too often taken for granted as *inevitability* rather than *positionality*, are a fundamentally aggressive defensive mechanism that assumes hidden secrets underneath the peaceful appearance of a text, "encrypted in what the literary work cannot or will not say, in its eloquent stuttering and recalcitrant silences" (Felski, 2009, p. 28). Indeed, a suspicious reading hones a sharp eye on problematic social configurations of values that literary work so well incorporates with ingenious methods of explanation and evolution developed over time. However, such hypervigilant suspicion might owe more to mundane pleasures, those uncritical materials that are often deemed untenable to politicalized life. Not only does suspicion perpetuate itself "in a reflexive distrust of common knowledge and an emphasis on the chasm that separates scholarly and lay interpretation" (Felski, 2009, p. 29), but it also forecloses possibilities to empathize shared (or not) cultural, affective and cognitive parameters, entertaining an ever-receding rather than an enriching horizon of understanding. In contrast, a reparatively-positioned reading is "on the side of *multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity, and love*" (Love, 2010, p. 237). This practice – patient, descriptive, and respectful of "the irreducible complexity of everyday structures of experience" (Felski, 2009, p. 31) – does *not* in itself entail a denial of everyday struggles; instead it is hospitable to an "uncritical, but equally organized and methodized ... ethical project" (Mi. Warner, 2004, p. 18) that leaves open possibilities to viscerally engage in other modes of life that we have or haven't been able to feel.

Fairy tales or fantasy seem to be candidates par excellence for paranoid readings as self-manifested in book titles such as *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* by Jack Zipes and *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* by Rosemary Jackson. An excellent receptacle of culture germane to dominant orders, the genre *per se* is often evaluated as either complicit escapism from real-life uncomfartables or subversive break from a phallogocentric structure. A refreshing picture of the overlapping of the critical and uncritical subjects can be glimpsed in Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. Rather than a facile escape from reality, the wondrous tales instead enable readers to escape without leaving the reality: "It helps us to see the actual world to visualize a fantastic one" (1996, p. xx). Her analysis of "the double vision of the tales, on the one hand charting perennial drives and terrors, both conscious and unconscious, and on the other mapping actual, volatile experience" (p. xxi) foregrounds cultural and historical mediation that welcomes readiness to "be patient rather than impatient, to describe rather than prescribe, to look carefully at rather than through appearances, to respect rather than to reject what is in plain view" (Felski, 2009, p. 31). This is important in that different technical methods of object-processing and attitudes towards objects to be examined aside, Warner highlights a different kind of subject to which work of art is oriented. As a feminist and cultural critic, she shows that, despite the systematically sweeping overdetermination of self-autonomy as the one and only legitimate form of female subjectivity, there exists a particular human condition when "fairy tales give women a place from which to speak, but they sometimes speak of speechlessness as a weapon of last resort" (1996, p. 25). This choice of silence, *not* recalcitrant, could not be seen as an uncritical complaisance, or the prevalence of patriarchal values, nor passive conformity; however, it should be taken as an ethical efflorescence that entertains human experience in its plenitude. Thus, in this essay, I attempt to withhold suspicion in order to "to open unexpected possibilities, ways of thinking, gestures and tones" (Love, 2010, p. 235). This essay also argues that

“Goblin Market,” which partake of “a new wave of innovative fairy tales” (Zipes, 1983, p. 98) that gained ascendancy in the latter half of the nineteenth century, serves as an affective archive to document long marginalized figures and feelings. It invites thoughts on how aesthetic devices sustain and reproduce selves that ripple off of real-life experience in a fantastic interruption of spatiality and temporality.

“Goblin Market” appears to be materialization of a misogynist market despite saturated with female activities. The goblin men, apparently the central presence of the market, command the show in stark contrast with the two sisters’ less and colorless speech. Paranoid readings of such female “silence” would tend to either locate subversive moments or castigate the poem as complicity. After all, as the poem “both critically reflects upon, and knowingly takes part in” (Tucker, 2003, p. 117) a system of commodity exchange, it is tempting to designate the poem as shamelessly acquiescent to the authority of a masculinist capitalism. However, this self-aware manner of participation calls not for condemnation or complacency but rather a sincere reflection on “the strangeness of the self-evident” (Felski, 2009, p. 32). Being a somewhat pessimistic representation of female subjectivity, this approach invites critique to be “supplemented by generosity, pessimism by hope, negative aesthetics by a sustained reckoning with the communicative, expressive, and world-disclosing aspects of art” (Felski, 2009, p. 33). In this sense, it is *not* enough to do a critical reading that risks parochializing the irreducible complexity of subjectivity in everyday encounter. This complexity as such is most cogently manifested in the androgynous characteristics of the mirroring sisters.

While traditionally deemed the victim of a female-oriented market that is animated in a masculinist narrative of capitalism, Laura is from the beginning “the more daring of the two while Lizzie is the more cautious” (Casey, 1991, p. 67). At the goblin’s seductive costermongering cries, Laura “bow[s] her head to hear/ Lizzie veil[s] her blushes” (ll. 34-35). While Lizzie “cover[s] up her eyes/ Cover[s] close lest they should look,” Laura “peep[s] at goblin men” (ll. 50-51, l. 49), returning the voyeuristic gaze that has been exclusively male as Laura Mulvey would put it. Therefore, in this fantastical temporality of suspended social conventions, she masculinizes herself and treats the grotesque market as an ideal site to enjoy the amorous sounds, scents, and flavor. A manifestation of sexual and economic freedom, her irrisistance to the marketing temptation as well as her returning to the traditional ‘angel of the house’ discloses that real emancipation for women remains tantalizing out of reach. Nonetheless, Laura takes her medicine due to her masculinity as she is relegated to the role of a ‘fallen woman’ in need of salvation.

Such retaliatory diminution of the female as articulated by the sexual dichotomy of male redeemer/female redeemed, however, is upended by the more radical engagement and transformations Lizzie takes on as she is gradually forced to take part in the salvation. At first, she dares not to look and keeps admonishing Laura, “Laura, Laura/ You should not peep at goblin men” (ll. 48-49) in stark contrast to Laura’s narcotic request, “Look, Lizzie, Look, Lizzie” (l. 54); as to gaze is to wish and want, at this stage Lizzie remains a passive spectacle with, to use Laura Mulvey’s famous phrase, “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Later, as Laura is crucified for her transgressive actions, Lizzie still “dare not look” (l. 243), docile in doing everyday household routines but this time also nurses her fallen sister; to this point the two sisters are portrayed as “both active subject, and fetishised object of the gaze and the machinations of the goblins” (Garlick, 1991, p. 144). Climax comes when Lizzie finally decides to buy the intoxicative fruit for Laura’s sake; the unruly Laura thus bridges femininity and masculinity that are orthodoxically mutually separated and achieves the sublimation of Lizzie as the ‘female Christ’. Lizzie, assigned the redemptive power,

reverses the gender binarism in that this time Lizzie becomes the saviour of the fallen sister which progressively connotes that "the female ... may potentially act as redeemer and redeemed, as nurturer and nurtured, as lover and beloved" (Casey, 1991, p. 65).

More than just galvanizing moral and carnal rebirth inside Laura — and ultimately, moral guide for the next generation, the heroic salvation also plays an integral role in the bonding of sisterhood. The bonding is not merely restricted to the redemptive relationship which inevitably embodies a hierarchical subtext as Rossetti painstakingly constructs the two sisters as each other's double:

Golden head by golden head,
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
Tipp'd with gold for awful kings. (ll. 184-191)

The doubling in "Goblin Market" does not convey a traditional good/evil dichotomy. The bonding of the two separated doubles is the reclaiming of a whole self, a full feminine identity reconstructed as an active agent of actions through suffering and salvation both of and between the two girls. The interdependence of women without the interventions of men foregrounds the *heroic* proportions in femininity and connects them with the *weaker* part of the feminine; this joyful union or reunion (to be more radical) questions the often passive myth of women's role in society, especially in the Victorian Period.

If to take from Garlick's view, the ending, however, arrives at a banal retelling that has "muted" (1991, p. 143) the girls' eventful journey from an adventurous maidenhood to a mundane housewife life. The feeble retelling, to her, instead belittles the kinetic energy that the girls' encounters with the goblin men revived. The fantastic adventure is compressed into a simple reference as "not-returning time" (l. 551); the hypnotic allure of the goblin market together with the girls' active involvements now takes a twilight glow which intimates that the tableau vivant of agency females embody within the market zone might never be recaptured. In this way, the poem rushes to a disappointing ending that rectifies the *upside-down* world and again sanctions the traditional patriarchal system. However, the special framework – fairy tales – where this story is located, according to Marina Warner (1996), "typically use[s] the story of something in the remote past to look towards the future, their conclusions, their 'happy endings' do not always bring about total closure, but make promises, prophecies" (p. xx). In other words, the retelling of the fantastic experience via the mother figure, instead of being a disappointing self-repression, allows the listeners/readers to feel backwards, live in the moment, and look forwards – to/for a more embracing and emancipating future.

Note

ⁱ In her 1993 critique on the reactionary iteration of Judith Butler's formation of "queer performativity," Sedgwick criticizes the "half understanding" and a peculiar performance of theoretical diagnosing, deciphering, and debunking the drag performance as either parodic and subversive or upholding the status quo. This tendentious performance as Sedgwick points out has prematurely domesticated a conceptual tool that has barely yet begun to explore (till then).

References

- Campbell, E. (1990). Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." *Victorian Studies*, 33(3), 393-410.
- Casey, J. G. (1991). The Potential of Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." *Victorian Poetry*, 29(1), 63-78.
- Felski, R. (2009). After Suspicion. *Profession*, 8(1), 28-35.
- Garlick, B. (1991). Christina Rossetti and the Gender Politics of Fantasy. In Kath Filmer (Ed.), *The Victorian Fantasists*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 133-152.
- Holt, T. (1990). "Men Sell Not Such in Any Town": Exchange in "Goblin Market." *Victorian Poetry*, 28(1), 51-67.
- Love, H. (2010). Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading. *Criticism*, 52(2), 235-241.
- Mendoza, V. R. (2006). "Come Buy": The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." *ELH*, 73(4), 913-947.
- Rappoport, J. (2010). The Price of Redemption in "Goblin Market." *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 50(4), 853-875.
- Rossetti, C. (2008). Goblin Market (1862). In Simon Humphries (Ed.), *Christina Rossetti: Poems and Prose*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 105-118. All references are to line numbers.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). Queer Performativity: Henry James's the Art of the Novel. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1(1), 1-16.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press. 123-152.
- Tucker, H. F. (2003). Rossetti's Goblin Marketing: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye. *Representations*, 82(1), 117-133.
- Warner, M. (1996). *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Warner, M. (2004). Uncritical Reading. In Jane Gallop (Ed.), *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*. Routledge. 13-38.
- Zipes, J. (1983). *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. Wildman Press.

Cassie Jun Lin is currently taking up her M.A. in English Studies at the University of Macau. Her research interests are Asian American Literature, Cultural Studies and Affect Theory, and she is currently writing her thesis on Ocean Vuong and his poetics through lens of affect theory.
