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Contamination and Consumption in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*: A Food Studies Perspective

*Skażenie i konsumpcja w „Goblin Market” Christiny Rossetti
w ujęciu studiów nad jedzeniem*

Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyse the work of the English poet Christina Rossetti from the perspective of Victorian gender norms directed at girls. In her poem “Goblin Market” Rossetti describes sisters Laura and Lizzie, whose idyllic existence is disturbed by the arrival of sinister goblin fruit sellers. While Lizzie maintains proper restraint, Laura greedily devours the juicy fruits, for which she is punished – she loses strength and sinks into apathy. She is saved only by the sacrifice of her sister, who risks her life to purchase more delicacies and feed them to the weakened Laura. The sisters’ fantastic adventures have been interpreted in various ways, from a story of sin and salvation, to one of food poisoning to an allegory of the creative process. All these approaches, however, see the eating of sweet fruit as a form of transgression as a result of which Laura is banished from the idyllic self-sufficiency of their small farm, where the girls are not troubled by any sorrows. However, having learned the sweet taste of the fruit, Laura does not want to milk cows, feed hens and bake cakes without a word of complaint. Using the framework of food studies enriched with the tools of conceptual metaphor theory, the article argues that the contamination Laura suffers through forbidden consumption is not presented by Rossetti as unambiguously negative. This interpretation also becomes bolstered by comparing Rossetti’s piece with how other Victorian female writers defined the role of young women in relation to food, including especially the aspect of their apprenticeship to be housewives. In this view, the goblin fruit gains a new dimension: its consumption highlights the oppressive nature of the norms to which young women were subjected in the Victorian era.

Key words: Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*, food studies, conceptual metaphor theory, femininity

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest analiza twórczości angielskiej poetki Christiny Rossetti w perspektywie wiktoriańskich norm genderowych obowiązujących dziewczęta. W swoim poemacie „Goblin Market” opisuje ona siostry Laurę i Lizzie, których sielankowe życie zakłócone zostaje przez nadejście złowrogich goblinów – sprzedawców owoców. Podczas gdy Lizzie zachowuje przepisową wstrzemięźliwość, Laura zachłannie pochłania soczyste owoce, za co spotyka ją kara – traci siły i pogrąża się w apatii. Ratuje ją tylko poświęcenie siostry, która naraża własne życie, by zdobyć więcej przysmaków i nakarmić nimi osłabioną Laurę. Fantastyczne przygody sióstr są interpretowane w przeróżnych kontekstach, od historii o grzechu i zbawieniu, przez zatrucie pokarmowe, po alegorię procesu twórczego. Wszystkie te podejścia opisują jednak zjedzenie słodkich owoców jako formę występku, w wyniku którego Laura wyrzucona zostaje poza obszar idyllicznej samowystarczalności ich małej farmy, gdzie dziewcząt nie trapiły żadne smutki. Poznawszy słodki smak, Laura nie chce już bez słowa skargi doić krow, karmić kur i piec ciast. W perspektywie studiów nad jedzeniem, wzbogaconej o narzędzia

teorii metafory pojęciowej, artykuł udowadnia, że skażenie, którego doznaje Laura poprzez zakazaną konsumpcję, nie jest przez Rossetti ukazane jako jednoznacznie negatywne. Taka interpretacja staje się możliwa dzięki porównaniu utworu Rossetti ze sposobem definiowania przez inne pisarki wiktoriańskie roli młodej kobiety w relacji do jedzenia, włączając w to szczególnie aspekt przyuczania do roli gospodyni domowej. W przywołanym ujęciu owoce goblinów zyskują nowy wymiar: ich spożycie uświadamia opresyjny charakter norm, którym podporządkowane były młode kobiety w epoce wiktoriańskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*, studia nad jedzeniem, teoria metafory pojęciowej, kobiecość

Christina Rossetti, a major Victorian female poet associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was seen by her contemporaries as an author whose instruction on proper behaviour young women should seek (D'Amico 1999, 4). This view may come as a surprise, as Rossetti remained unmarried and childless throughout her life, which stands in direct opposition to nineteenth-century standards for women as wives and mothers above all else. Yet it was the passivity and submissiveness that Victorians noticed in Rossetti's works, together with the religious devotion and selfless sacrifice she demonstrated in caring for others, which legitimised her in the position of a guiding voice for girls (D'Amico 1999, 4–6; Spaise 1997, 53). Since her own time, however, literary scholars have gone through several different phases in reading Rossetti's poetic output as well as her spinsterhood and devout faith. What used to be perceived simply as humility and conformity with Victorian models of femininity now is being re-examined in a feminist framework, where the poet's choices, in terms of both artistic creativity and lifestyle, function as signs of resistance to her era's restrictive gender norms (D'Amico 1999, Spaise 1997). One of the most popular of Rossetti's poems and a text offered as educational material to Victorian young women, *Goblin Market*, deserves reassessment in this vein.

In *Goblin Market* (composed 1859, published 1862) Laura, one of the poem's two sister-protagonists, succumbs to the temptation of gorging on luscious produce offered by goblin merchants, and, as a result, falls violently ill. In order to save Laura from torment and prevent her from wasting away, her sister Lizzie confronts the goblins to purchase more fruit. A struggle ensues, but the pulp and juice that remain on Lizzie after the goblins attack her are enough to feed and thus revive Laura. After

the incident, the two young women continue to live together on their farm. They also make it their purpose to warn other girls of the threat of the goblins lurking in the glen. The complexities of Rossetti's fantastical work have long captured the attention of critics and casual readers alike. The poem has been described as "cross-audienced" (Kooistra 1997, 181) to refer to its diverse readership, which includes children but also adults specifically interested in erotica. This range is possible because the work easily yields to interpretative efforts resulting from various sensibilities and theoretical frameworks. In fact, its readings are "as multifarious as the goblin fruits so lavishly depicted in her verse" (Grass 1996, 356). In this article, however, I am interested in an approach which emphasises that *Goblin Market* is a narrative centred on the act of eating. From the perspective of food studies, enriched with the tools of conceptual metaphor theory, I want to show that the contamination Laura suffers as a result of her forbidden consumption is not portrayed by Rossetti as unambiguously harmful.

Using an interdisciplinary framework, which merges an insistence on the centrality of food encounters for the construction of Victorian femininity with insights derived from the cognitive approach to language, makes it possible to analyse *Goblin Market* within the overall metaphorical production of the 19th century. In the view known as conceptual metaphor theory, introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), the role of metaphor is not simply to be a textual ornament or additional decorative element that may enhance the quality of a literary work. A metaphor is a form of "understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain" (Kövecses 2010, 4) or, in other words, a structured way of organising our experiences, which may then be expressed linguistically. This organised system of perception and conception stems largely from embodied cognition (Croft & Cruse 2004, 3–4), but it may be modified according to specific conditions that involve cultural, social, economic, political, and other components which define people's lives in a particular historical period (Kövecses 2005). In the process of cultural variation, metaphors and their mappings, that is, systematic correspondences between elements of the two domains, re-

spond to changing realities. In this case, food-related metaphors found in Rossetti's text may be seen in the context of food norms that defined women's lives in the Victorian period.

Even though Rossetti's contemporaries labelled her poem "a work to defy criticism" (Norton 1863, 401–402), much has been written so far about this wondrous tale. However, the extent and methodological diversity of the existing critical response to the work create more questions than answers (Connor 1984, 439). Scholars remark that the work remains baffling in both form and content, and it has been called "one of the most persistently puzzling poems of the nineteenth century" (Connor 1984, 439) and "one of the most consistently intriguing problems bequeathed us by the nineteenth century" (O'Reilly 1996, 108). Overall, the consensus among modern critics is not to treat *Goblin Market* as it was in the 19th and early 20th century, as "a fairy tale" (Elton 1920, 23), "an act of pure imaginative creation" (Stuart 1930, n.p.), "merely as a charming fairy-fantasy" (Bell 1898, 207), or a narrative reducible to biographical influences, despite Rossetti's own insistence on its insignificance (Bell 1898, 207). Apart from that unanimity, scholars cannot seem to agree on much. There have been attempts to interpret the poem's ending optimistically, in terms of a vision in which vampiric sexuality and "the fashionable vices of the world can be replaced with sisterly love and spirituality" (Morrill 1990, 13–14) and "a dream (...) of the Pre-Raphaelite world from a woman's point of view" (Mermin 1983, 108). Others read the same lines as "not triumph achieved and strength attained, but unending struggle" (Holt 1990, 65) for women's independence, in which the goblins ultimately prevail by taking away the sisters' control over language and even their storytelling authority. This is also the spirit in which Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar conclude their analysis, where they posit that Lizzie and Laura, as well as the poet herself, "must learn to suffer and renounce the self-gratifications of art and sensuality" (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, 571). Still other critics read Laura's transformation in a literal sense by attributing her symptoms to absinthe addiction and subsequent recovery from the effects of its toxicity (O'Reilly 1996). In fact, Jerome McGann's conciliatory claim that "everyone agrees that the

poem contains the story of temptation, fall, and redemption” (1980, 247) functions in *Goblin Market* criticism as an invitation to protest (Helsing 1991, 903; Pionke 2012, 898).

However, since the appearance of Herbert Tucker’s 2003 article *Rossetti’s Goblin Marketing: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye*, there has been a more or less steady tendency to consistently “put the *market* back in ‘Goblin Market’” (117). His clever pun attests the existence of a turn towards more economy-driven examinations of the poem, which have been appearing at least since the 1990s. This is exemplified by the articles of Terrence Holt and Elizabeth Campbell, who approached Rossetti’s verse with economic exchange in view. They note that “the ‘market’ of the title has received little attention” (Holt 1990, 51), and “the economic concerns of the poem have not been previously explored to any great extent” (Campbell 1990, 394). Almost a decade after Tucker’s article, Albert Pionke argued that the emphatic focus on the market has in turn “often taken out the religion” (Pionke 2012, 898) from Rossetti’s poem. Therefore, there is little likelihood that critics will settle on one particular perspective in it, although the often intertwined issues of sensuality, sisterhood, sin and salvation, artistic work, consumer capitalism, and gender inequality all play a role in elucidating its ambiguous meaning.

Critical readings that focus on consumption, and thus are most relevant to the theme of this article, tend to view Lizzie and Laura as representatives of two types of consumer behaviour. Charlotte Boyce phrases it this way: “whereas Laura is dangerously susceptible to the kind of marketplace deceptions uncovered in the Victorian press, Lizzie is portrayed as an altogether more savvy shopper” (2017, 225). She mirrors here the viewpoint adopted by Rebecca Stern (2003, 481–482), who also claims that the protagonists embody Victorian shopping strategies formulated in the face of widespread food adulteration. The two approaches share similarity with the attitudes discussed with respect to the womenfolk of Grimworth (Augustynowicz 2019), the fictional town of George Eliot’s short story *Brother Jacob*, published in 1864. In Eliot’s story, we also observe a contrast between the susceptibility of the townswomen to sweets and pastries prepared by the main protagonist,

a confectioner, and a more cautious response to the novelty his goods embody. The latter approach is obviously valued positively as “the ostensible wisdom of the period” (Stern 2003, 481). In both texts, thus, we are dealing with the same didactic pattern, witnessing the errors of inexperienced women who yield to the temptation of harmful commodities offered by merchants. Such portrayal of characters in both works underlines the important role of specifically female consumers in negotiating the perils of commercially produced food in an increasingly alienating world of consumer capitalism. Housewives’ responsibility for the health of the entire household, additionally, explains the prominent position of cookery books in the Victorian period, since they provided guidance for women forced to operate skilfully as shoppers outside of the domestic sphere. One such publication, the first edition of which appeared in 1861, was Isabella Beeton’s *The Book of Household Management*, an iconic cookbook filled not only with recipes but also all sorts of practical advice for successfully running a proper Victorian home. This famous manual stressed that every housewife requires practice and experience to learn “who are the best tradespeople to deal with, and what are the best provisions to buy” (Beeton 1861, 6). By this measure, the transgression committed by the young and still unseasoned Laura consists primarily in, to paraphrase Eliot, trusting the fruits of an untried grocer.¹ However, in *Brother Jacob* the multi-layered threat caused by grocers is, simultaneously, sugar’s rapidly increasing presence in the English diet in general, anxiety over adulterated foodstuffs, and the liberty women get by purchasing ready-made foods, which frees up their time for other pursuits. What are the conceptual mappings that structure *Goblin Market*?

Critics have suggested that the sister-protagonists risk giving up their idyllic, pre-lapsarian self-sufficiency under the influence of advertising, which introduces them into the dreaded domain of the market econo-

¹ In *Brother Jacob*, Eliot’s narrator expresses their staunch principle of proper household management as follows: “it was to be hoped that no mother of a family would trust the teas of an untried grocer” (1999, 62).

my. Their isolated home, where they “Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat” (Rossetti 2008, 110) and “churn’d butter, whipp’d up cream/ Fed their poultry, sat and sew’d” (110) is, according to Holt, “enacting on an economic level the hermeticism of their domestic scene” (1990, 53). The activities they perform on the farm suggest autonomy in which they procure wholesome, nutritious and, most importantly, unadulterated food. Then come the capitalist goblins and their iterated commercial jingle, the perfect sales pitch (Tucker 2003, 118) of “come buy, come buy!” (Rossetti 2008, 105), so uncannily evocative of the actual cries of Victorian street sellers as recorded by Henry Mayhew, chronicler of Victorian London: “Buy, buy, buy, buy, buy—bu-u-uy!” (Mayhew 1968, 9). The goblins’ “economic language and metaphors, terms of finance and commerce” (Holt 1990, 51) spread like an infection (Holt 1990, 52), which leads to “the market’s insidious infiltration of the domestic sphere” (Boyce 2017, 224) and culminates in Laura becoming “trapped in the orbit of marketing and its representations” (Tucker 2003, 125) that she digested together with the fruit. I am juxtaposing critical commentary that views the story of *Goblin Market* in terms of a treacherous and purposeful defilement of a previously pure state. At home, Lizzie and Laura cannot hear the goblins’ pitch, and they not only take care of all their resources themselves but also remain unperturbed by any creature, “Like two pigeons in one nest/ Folded in each other’s wings” (Rossetti 2008, 109). No sooner does Laura taste the goblins’ fruit, however, than she becomes restless and, “peering thro’ the dimness” (Rossetti 2008, 111) which surrounds their little bubble, yearns to meet the merchants outside again. There is no agreement as to whether the goblin produce is adulterated or poisonous per se—Tucker answers here with a clear and resounding no to any claims of contamination or toxicity (2003, 122), while Stern bases her whole argument of the aesthetics of fraud on the claim that the brightly coloured fruits are actually a serious health hazard (2003, 510). But whether the fruits contain harmful chemicals or the very idea of resorting to commercial purchase is the reason for Laura’s fall does not matter for now. These readings do emphasise how Rossetti structured the tale around the schema of a self-contained

world of innocence and pre-industrial farming that becomes infiltrated by economic exchange and the need for women to purchase goods in the market instead of making them themselves. However, critics all seem to see the result of this invasion of boundaries as entailing a deleterious effect, as in PENETRATION OF BOUNDARIES IS CONTAMINATION OF CONTAINER.² This metaphorical correspondence would suggest that any disturbance to the sisters' domestic routine is necessarily going to result in a corruption of values associated with their pre-goblin existence.

Several hints in the poem indicate that it follows the image-schema (a basic conceptual structure which can be filled in with specific details) of contamination detected also in *Brother Jacob* with respect to the demoralising effects of shopping and of women abandoning traditional household duties under the influence of a perfidious grocer. However, Rossetti's work represents the result of this process in terms that are not so pessimistic. The two maidens are portrayed as busily engaged in providing healthy food for themselves, and of kneading cakes of, emphatically, the whitest wheat. In this, they exhibit the English preference for white flour and white bread. This alimentary penchant, as Tara Moore notes, elevated white bread to the position of "a sign of Englishness" (2008, 493). Hence, it is not just any baking that the sisters are engaged in: their food preparation practices may be understood in terms of cultivating a sense of national identity. It is not only what is baked that matters but also who is doing it. The 19th-century diet reformer and minister Sylvester Graham, although he did not approve of white flour, fiercely defended home baking as a woman's primary duty to her family. According to him, only the woman "rightly perceives the relations between the dietetic habits and physical and moral condition of her loved ones, and justly appreciates the importance of good bread to their physical and moral welfare" (Graham 1837, 105). The sisterly paradise of unalienated work involves, thus, also performing proper femininity in order to secure the health and high moral standing of the nation. In fact, the characterisation of the maidens' home in *Goblin Market* resembles the

² Conceptual metaphors are conventionally written in small capitals.

blissful portrayal of a rural cottage printed as part of the front matter in Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* (1861): smiling country-folk living in harmony with equally contented cattle and poultry, surrounded by fields brimming with crops. Both the image and the poem's description exclude any consciousness of the toilsome labour involved in agricultural production. Furthermore, the picture is accompanied by a quote from Felicia Dorothea Hemans's 1827 poem *The Homes of England*, which reads "the free, fair homes of England!"³ Apart from the generally similar language of carefree happiness, the representation of domesticity in Hemans's poem has two interesting parallels with *Goblin Market*. First, the homes in both are untroubled by noise or other disturbance. In Hemans, apart from church bells, "All other sounds, in that still time,/ Of breeze and leaf are born" (1828, 170), while in Rossetti, when the girls rest, "Wind sang to them lullaby,/ Lumbering owls forbore to fly,/ Not a bat flapp'd to and fro" (2008, 109). Second, the goblin threat to the sisters' self-containment and their repetition of the cautionary tale to children at the end resemble the final patriotic proclamation in Hemans' poem: "May hearts of native proof be reared/ To guard each hallowed wall!" (1828, 171). Despite some suggestions of influence (Martinez 2003, 626), it is perhaps impossible to prove any direct link between Rossetti's and Hemans's poetry and the illustration in Beeton's manual. However, they all share the image of people in a natural state unaware of troubles and tiredness, a peaceful rural domesticity, where traditional duties and landscape protect the boundaries of personal and national identity.

Rossetti's earthly paradise, also reflected in Hemans' poem and the illustration in Beeton's manual, sounds suspiciously close to Caroline Helstone's idea of hell. Caroline, one of the two almost sister-protagonists of Charlotte Brontë's 1849 novel *Shirley*, is pining for a purpose which would let her spend her life in a meaningful way. Her uncle, ignorant of his niece's suffering, gives her a comprehensive overview

³ The image and quote constitute the frontispiece in the 1861 edition of Beeton's *The Book of Household Management*.

of what occupations are available for her: “stick to the needle—learn shirt-making and gown-making, and pie-crust-making, and you’ll be a clever woman some day. Go to bed now” (Brontë 2007, 84). This is also the range of activities on offer in Lizzie and Laura’s bubble, and that already includes sleeping. When Caroline confirms having tried all of the above, her uncle responds with a heart-piercing “that will do” (Brontë 2007, 84), which seals her fate as a woman forever destined to starve for a purpose and starve—well, literally. For Caroline, that narrow view of a woman’s options will not do, and neither will it for Laura. After consuming the fruit:

She no more swept the house,
Tended the fowls or cows,
Fetch’d honey, kneaded cakes of wheat,
Brought water from the brook:
But sat down listless in the chimney-nook
And would not eat.

(Rossetti 2008, 112)

The influence of the goblin produce destroys the routine of the maidens’ domesticity because Laura rejects the traditionally feminine, restrictive activities it includes. The enumeration of all the duties that the maidens used to perform together without a word of complaint and which now are neglected by Laura stresses the extent of her change. Consuming the fruit, apart from making her unwilling to continue with the household chores, also causes her to fall sick. However, this anguish comes together with new entailments (additional knowledge that is a consequence of metaphorical correspondences): a new awareness of more opportunities existing outside of the limited space she has been confined to by society because of her gender.

Although calling the author of *Goblin Market* a feminist is something critics may be wary of doing (see for example Spaise 1997, 54), it is also important to note that this poem is not the only work by Rossetti that hints at her deeply critical attitude towards restrictive gender roles in

the Victorian period. *From the Antique*, a four-stanza poem from 1854, offers a remarkably disheartened perspective on the challenges of Victorian femininity in which womanhood appears less desirable a state even than total disappearance. In his reading of the poem, Simon Avery emphasises this sense of despair by suggesting that Rossetti construes women's lives in terms of an "endless cycle of bleak conformity" (2014). This description bears resemblance to Laura's despondency after consuming the goblin fruit. Avery goes on to remark that themes of female confinement and limited existence are characteristic of her other works as well (2014). He is not alone in identifying these features of Rossetti's poetic matter (for example D'Amico 1999; Smulders 1992; Spaise 1997). Smulders sees meaningless emptiness to be typical of the lives of Rossetti's heroines, and points out that one of them, the female speaker in *The Lowest Room*, "mounts an insurrection against the cult of true womanhood as promulgated in feminine prescriptive literature" (571). Hence, despite her complex attitude towards gender equality and her criticism of suffrage, Rossetti's works may be discussed in terms of resistance to the era's standards of femininity.

But whereas such iconic protagonists as Caroline Helstone, Shirley Keeldar, Jane Eyre, and Lucy Snowe all struggle for more liberty, one of Charlotte Brontë's characters does not seem to have this problem. This is Polly Home, or Countess Paulina Mary de Bassompierre, from the 1853 novel *Villette*. She is "the paragon of romance—the perfect lady" (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, 428), whose existence is strongly limited by the role she assumes: that of "a little girl lost" (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, 419) constantly in need of male assistance. However, she is given a chance to abandon her childlike playfulness and enter the world of adults. The rite of passage takes the form of drinking wassail, a traditional festive hot spiced ale, from a cup shared at Christmas in the spirit of cheerful commensality. Everyone present—Lucy Snowe, Mrs. Bretton, Dr John, and Polly's father—try the beverage except for the girl, which makes her demand a sip as well. It is offered to her by the man she shyly loves, John Graham Bretton, who lets her drink straight from his cupped hand in sensual secrecy, when nobody else is looking. When Polly asks if the

ale, which she has never tasted, is sweet, he responds without hesitation: “perilously sweet” (Brontë 2006, 353). The act of drinking, highly eroticised and described as satisfying to the man, is represented in terms of a dangerous temptation, not unlike the one experienced by Laura, for whom the fruit juices tasted “sweeter than honey from the rock/ Stronger than man-rejoicing wine” (Rossetti 2008, 108). Yet while Laura continued to suck “until her lips were sore” (Rossetti 2008, 108), Polly decides to forgo the brew after having just a little taste of it:

passing into another tone and manner as soon as she had fairly assayed the beverage, just as if it had acted upon her like some disenchanting draught, undoing the work of a wizard: “I find it anything but sweet; it is bitter and hot, and takes away my breath. Your old October was only desirable while forbidden. Thank you, no more (Brontë 2006, 354).

Not much is needed for her to realise that the sweetness is only superficial, and the prevailing flavour is much less pleasant. In refusing to drink more, Polly escapes the fate of Laura, who did not restrain herself and “gorged on bitterness without a name” (Rossetti 2008, 117). I read these scenes as parallel, as they both depict young women who dare to taste what is out of bounds for them. The crucial difference lies in the girls’ reactions and their consequences. Because Polly refuses to partake further of the wassail bowl, upset by its underlying bitterness, there is no change in behaviour for her. After she leaves Dr John at the table and returns to be with her father, the narrator remarks that “the child of seven was in the girl of seventeen” (Brontë 2006, 354). This could be viewed as praise of abstemiousness towards suspicious substances. Discouraged by the unpleasant flavour, Polly does avoid potential contamination, but she also turns down a chance to mature and obtain a better awareness of her own unequal position in society.

Laura, on the contrary, completes her fruit-induced transformation. As a result, she becomes “the girl of the period,” which is how the anti-feminist journalist Eliza Lynn Linton mockingly dubbed any young woman who dared to disagree with her husband or strive for more than

being “a tender mother, an industrious housekeeper, a judicious mistress” (1883, 2). In fact, many of the descriptions provided by Linton appear to share similarities with Laura’s situation. For instance, she romanticises the unspecified past, Rossetti’s “those pleasant days long gone” (Rossetti 2008, 118), “when English girls were content to be what God and nature had made them” (Linton 1883, 2). She also depicts the old ideal woman as having “her tender little ways and pretty bashful modesties” (Linton 1883, 8); indeed, before the goblin incident, Lizzie and Laura “talk’d as modest maidens should” (Rossetti 2008, 110), while later only the former retains the quality of tenderness. According to Linton, the loss of it results in qualities that echo Laura’s symptoms: “uselessness at home, dissatisfaction with the monotony of ordinary life, horror of all useful work” (Linton 1883, 5). Finally, “the girl of the period” is accused of imitating “a negress or a maniac” (Linton 1883, 4) and other women of supposedly questionable reputation without considering “what fearful moral penalties they pay for their sensuous pleasures” (Linton 1883, 5) mirroring possibly the punishment Laura faces for consuming the deliciously sweet fruit. These are not all of the similarities, but they are enough to show that reading Laura’s change solely in terms of deterioration and fall would, in a way, put one in the same position as the Victorian conservatives who harshly criticised the New Woman for trying to upset the period’s power relations. Instead, it is necessary to see, against the majority of critical responses, Laura’s transgression as a difficult step towards liberation. In this case, PENETRATION OF BOUNDARIES IS CONTAMINATION OF CONTAINER, but the contamination does not necessarily entail corruption.

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