

Rising from the Fall: Experience and Grace in *Goblin Market* and *Comus*

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Stories regarding the Fall of humanity can be found in almost every culture. In general, such stories depict three major characters: the fallen, the tempter, and the savior. There are, however, nearly as many interpretations as to the significance of each character as there are accounts of the story itself. Likewise, there is a well-documented disagreement in classic thought as to whether the Fall was, in fact, a bane to human existence, or perhaps the only path to obtaining Grace. Here, I analyze manifestations of the three characters in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and John Milton's *Comus* by presenting the two poems in dialogue to illustrate competing interpretations regarding the significance of the Fall.

A fall it might seem, just as a vicious man sometimes seems degraded below the beasts, but in promise and potency, a rise it really was.

~Sir Oliver Lodge, "Life and Matter"

Humanity's fall is one of the most commonly reconstructed themes in literature. Even before the incident of the apple in the Garden of Eden, there were ancient myths of Prometheus the Bringer of Fire, Pandora's Box, and Cupid and Psyche, stories wherein the attainment of forbidden knowledge leads to pain and tribulations for mankind. The Biblical Fall especially has been interpreted and reinterpreted, with both members of engrained hierarchies and social agitators twisting it to substantiate their own world views.

One such point of controversy is Eve's acceptance of the apple from Satan. To misogynists and patriarchal cultures, this act is held indicative of women's corruptibility, and is used to justify that they "be regarded as the 'inferior' sex, [not] on the basis of physiology, but according to a mental, divine, otherworldly value judgment" (Monajem). On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas' interpretation of the *Felix Culpa*—the Happy Fall—lends itself to a more gracious interpretation: that Eve's supposed transgression, though causing humanity's estrangement from Eden, allowed for the greater experience of divine Love and salvation through Christ (Aquinas III.1.iii). However,

Aquinas does not address whether the experience of bastardizations of love—carnal desire, envy, greed, the knowledge and rejection of which may eventually lead on to the discovery of proper Love—are equally beneficial to a person's developing self-awareness. And so, philosophers and authors have argued the merits of such experiences in order to establish at what point knowledge transforms from bane to boon.

In Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and John Milton's *Comus*, two separate cases are proposed. Both depict near-Fall experiences; however, Milton's heroine is rescued before transgressing, while Rossetti's tastes of the forbidden fruit, requiring salvation through another's self-sacrifice. Though both accounts discuss sexuality, only Rossetti's characters engage with it. Subsequently, these stories assume drastically different attitudes towards the theme: *Comus* is a tongue-in-cheek commentary on female chastity while *Goblin Market* is distinctly pro-feminine and delves deeper into the nuanced goods and evils of sexuality.

Goblin Market: Sexuality and Salvation

Rossetti's narrative follows the standard pattern of the Biblical Fall—"temptation, fall, redemption, and restoration" (Christensen). However, she does not simply restate the Biblical account. Rather, Rossetti converts the story into a feminist commentary through the gendering of her characters. Making the primary characters sisters serves two purposes. First, it sidesteps the Biblical hang-up between humanity and divinity—i.e. that only because Christ was the son of God was his sacrifice sufficient to save humanity—reducing the requirements to be a sinner or savior to simply whether one is pure in spirit. Perhaps more important to the feminist perspective, though, is the fact that presenting sisters as both sinner and savior subverts the traditional dichotomy between a female sinner and a male savior, which, at least for Victorian audiences, would have elevated the true message out of the confusion of gender roles and hierarchies of the time (Harrison).

Goblin Market is rife with sexual connotations and imagery. At the most superficial interpretation, Rossetti associates the Fall with knowledge of sexual pleasures (Harrison). Laura plays the role of the

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fallen woman. Although the origin of this name is unspecified, it is quite possible Rossetti is taking a shot at Petrarch's courtly ideal (Scholl)—the unattainable woman—asserting her own belief that even the purest of women may be tempted. Regardless, that Laura is a “maid” emphasizes the fact that she is “not only virginal but also young” (Christensen). That is to say, even the innocent—or perhaps especially the innocent—are susceptible to temptation. The sexual nature of the temptation is reinforced by the fact that the tempters of maids are goblin men: “Eve is no longer tempted by a [neutered] serpent, but by men, goblins” (Belsey). Thus the conflict between the sexes is established.

Because men are the tempters, however, in order for the feminist message to function, Rossetti realizes she must not let it appear that the men have simply deceived Laura, as Eve was deceived by Satan. To allow Laura to be deceived would portray her as gullible and incompetent, reaffirming the very mindsets feminism seeks to reform. To this end, Rossetti portrays Laura as an active participant in her own Fall: “*She* clipped a precious golden lock” (Rossetti 126, emphasis added). Moreover, as hair is something physically cut from herself, the act highlights that Laura has been defiled, in contrast to Lizzie's later encounter with the goblins.

In addition to attacking gender roles in society, Rossetti's vivid language implicates the reader in her moral questions (Christensen). In fact, the reader does not really have a choice whether or not to engage with the poem: twenty-eight of the first thirty-one lines form a sumptuous description of the goblins' wares, effusive imagery which serves to draw the reader in before the narrative has even begun. And later, whenever the fruit or a scene is described, it recommits the reader, “increasing the momentum of the poem even as the narrative action has halted” (Newman). The imagery is so forceful that some critics have recommended *Goblin Market* as “purely and completely a work of art” (Review 230). And yet, the message cannot be denied.

Lizzie is unmistakably a Christ-figure. She is not prepackaged perfection, however, but must discover her own sexuality before she can rescue her sister. Although Lizzie has intuitive knowledge enough to avoid the goblin fruits (Harrison), she is nonetheless naïve regarding the actual experience they confer, citing Jeanie's death as reason enough to renounce them (Christensen). She does not understand the nature of the pleasures the goblins offer—“Who knows upon

what soil they fed their hungry thirsty roots?” (Rossetti 44-5)—and her naiveté manifests itself as fear: “She thrust a dimpled finger in each ear, shut eyes and ran” (Rossetti 67-8). To counter this fear, the sisters have created a pretense of domesticity. Their daily activities mimic those of a normal household but for one exception: it is devoid of men (Christensen). Thus, Lizzie has created for herself a world in black and white, where domesticity is good because it is familiar, and sexuality is evil simply because it is unknown. But when Laura abandons the domestic sphere and experiences sexuality, her successive conflicting moods of passion and lethargy casts shades of grey on Lizzie's flawed perception, and she must decide between her own innocence and Laura's life.

Ultimately, “Laura's physical deterioration and near-death state make up the impetus that forces Lizzie out of the safety of a childish fantasy—an eternal state of domestic and sororal existence—and into the world” (Christensen). It is very possible Lizzie would have remained forever within her domestic cage were it not for Laura's Fall, but Laura's involvement in Lizzie's transformation is not to be taken as a second salvation. Lizzie is not Fallen, so she does not need to be saved. Just the opposite, her decision to experience sexuality is a statement of self-imposed disillusionment: her fear for her sister has grown to such a point as to outweigh her fear of sexuality, so she “weighed no more better and worse, but put a silver penny in her purse” (Rossetti 322-3). Only now that *she has brought herself* to accept sexuality is Lizzie prepared to assume responsibility for Laura's salvation.

The process by which Laura is saved is crucial to the message of the poem. Reminiscent of the Biblical account of Christ's mortal sacrifice and transcendence to a higher state of being, Lizzie sacrifices her irrational mindset in favor of a true understanding of sexuality (Christensen). However, she does not seek to know sexuality by tasting the fruits as Laura did, but to feel the empowerment gained by rejecting the goblins' wares, frustrating their attempts to defile her, and driving them away. In fact, she garners pleasure from their failure to make her eat (Rossetti 433). Symbolically, she experiences sexuality and gains the knowledge by which to help Laura, but without letting it consume her as it has the others. Or viewed with a feminist slant: she is strong enough to resist men's crude sexual advances, and in so doing is able to explore her own sexuality

while still maintaining control of her body and desires. Armed with this experience, she can now confront Laura.

In the redemption, Rossetti portrays an almost erotic rendition of the Eucharist: “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” (471-4). Harkening back to the entreaties of the goblins, this invitation to again taste the goblin fruits contrasts the covetous lusts of goblin sexuality with Lizzie’s love-inspired charity. Although it is easy to associate Laura’s subsequent revival with a sense of return to proper sexuality, this is not Rossetti’s complete message. If one recalls that Lizzie, too, was a social outcast before encountering the goblins, the message of social redemption takes on dual significance (Scholl): not only should you moderate your own sexuality, but those who have learned to should protect and empower those who have not. “The message of the poem therefore becomes just as much for the ‘Lizzies’ in Rossetti’s society as the ‘Lauras’” (Scholl).

Comus: Experience the Bane, Experience the Boon

Unlike Rossetti, Milton does not present a strong, independent woman in *Comus*. To the contrary, the Lady is shown to be weak in both body and mind. The plot is initiated when “my brothers, when they saw me wearied out...stepped as they said to the next thicket side to bring me berries, or such cooling fruit” (Milton 182, 185-6). By the Lady’s own admittance, she could not match her brothers’ endurance, and was even to be waited upon. Likewise, intellectually, she lacks the ability to discern Comus’ ploy, being instead immediately taken in by his peasant disguise, even vouching on his behalf that “honest-offered courtesy, [oft] is sooner found in lowly sheds...than in tap’stry halls” (322-4).

She believes she “compensates” for these shortcomings with an insuppressible sense of personal morality:

These thoughts may startle well, but not astound
The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended
By a strong siding champion, Conscience.
O welcome, pure-eyed Faith, white-handed Hope,
Thou hovering angel girt with golden wings,
And thou unblemished form of Chastity. (210-215)

And yet, the audience, expecting the motive of the Fall, should realize something is amiss. That the Lady is summarily duped by Comus calls into question her ability to assess reality. Milton extends this doubt to her brothers, who likewise mistakenly assure themselves that her scruples will protect her (366-7). The only character that acknowledges their susceptibility is the Spirit, noting from the very beginning that “their tender age might suffer peril” (40). This statement strikes at the root of the problem: the siblings are young. They, like Laura and Lizzie, have not experienced the world. Moreover, the Lady’s pride in her chastity is but another instance of a young woman refusing to experience sexuality. Unlike in Rossetti’s poem, however, Milton shields his heroine from ever gaining this experience. But in light of the treatment of experience as a boon in *Goblin Market*, this authorial intervention begs the question: has Milton actually spared her or, in denying her the opportunity for experience, hurt her?

Heinrich von Kleist explores this question in his narrative “On the Marionette Theatre,” in which he relates a discussion he had with a dancer on the natural grace of puppets. The dancer explains that “affectation is seen, as you know, when the soul, or moving force, appears at some point other than the centre of gravity of the movement” (Kleist), such as when one dancer presents an apple to another and, “his soul is in fact located (and it is a frightful thing to see) in his elbow” (Kleist). Puppets, on the other hand, “are just what they should be...lifeless, pure pendulums, governed only by the law of gravity” (Kleist). Von Kleist attributes this dichotomy in the grace of movement to consciousness:

As thought grows dimmer and weaker, grace emerges more brilliantly and decisively...

But he continues:

Grace itself returns when knowledge has as it were gone through an infinity. Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god. (Kleist)

To Kleist, the dancer with just enough knowledge to perceive her own flaws and mistakes is significantly worse off than a soulless puppet; this is Laura after her Fall. However, as more and more experiences are

attained, beyond a certain threshold a person will begin to climb again towards grace—a moment exemplified by Lizzie’s “inward laughter” (Rossetti 463). And though she will never obtain the omniscience of godhood, with each incremental increase in knowledge, it would follow that the person will be some degree better off.

In the case of *Comus*, then, it would appear Milton has spared the Lady. As it stands, she is convinced of her morality, and as her brother notes, “she that has that is clad in complete steel” (Milton 421). *Comus*’ suggestive terminology—“Can any mortal mixture of earth’s mold breath such divine enchanting ravishment” (244-5)—leaves no question that his intentions are as sexually-charged as the goblins’. However, unlike Laura, who is already intrigued by the prospects of experience and sexuality before her Fall (Scholl), Milton’s heroine is utterly disinterested in *Comus*’ arguments, complaining “I hate when vice can bolt her arguments, and virtue has no tongue to check her pride” (Milton 760-1). In as far as she is deaf to *Comus*’ ploys, any sense of temptation is lost on the Lady: she is in no real danger of Falling. Thus, were Milton to have continued with the theme as he had initially suggested it, the Lady would not have been so much a fallen woman as a tragic victim of a devilish sprite. So, rather than destroy her moral construct, *deus ex machina* intervenes, the brothers arrive at the critical moment (813), and the Fall is averted.

The implications of this ending are quite convoluted. By removing the element of Free Will that is so crucial to Rossetti’s conception of the Fall, Milton disengages his audience from any sense of responsibility for setting things right. Instead, humanity’s salvation depends fully on Grace from God, who “would send a glist’ring guardian if need were to keep [one’s] life and honor unassailed” (219-20). This presents a paradox in that, though Milton sets the story in anticipation of a Fall, it is as if part way through he decides against the theme, and is quick to place the blame elsewhere. However, because the setup is blatantly present, the story lends itself to another interpretation of the proper use of Free Will that subsequently reinstates humanity’s responsibility towards its own salvation.

The agent of Grace in *Comus* is the Spirit, an omniscient messenger from Heaven “dispatched for [the lady’s] defense and guard” (42). Alexander Pope also discusses such beings, known in mythology as

Sylphs, in his poem *The Rape of the Lock*:

Know further yet; Whoever fair and chaste
Rejects Mankind, is by some *Sylph* embrac’d:
For Spirits, freed from mortal Laws, with ease
Assume what Sexes and what Shapes they please.
What guards the Purity of melting Maids,
In Courtly Balls, and Midnight Masquerades,
Safe from the treach’rous Friend, the daring Spark,
The Glance by Day, the Whisper in the Dark;
When kind Occasion prompts their warm Desires,
When Music softens, and when Dancing fires?
‘Tis but their *Sylph*, the wise Celestials know,
Tho’ *Honour* is the Word with Men below. (Pope
I.67-78)

The key idea, as with *Goblin Market*, is the rejection of physical advances. The difference between Pope, Milton, and Rossetti, however, is that while Pope attributes the rejection to intervention by a divine protector, Milton’s Spirit only rescues the Lady physically—she herself must reject *Comus*’ advances through a series of logical arguments (“Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind with all they charms although this corporal rind thou hast immanacled” (Milton 663-5))—and Rossetti removes the role of protector altogether, having Lizzie face the goblins alone. For Milton, then, while Grace is the ultimate means of salvation, it is also a process; Grace will only intervene once temptation has been rejected. Humanity’s responsibility, then, is to meet Grace half-way:

Love Virtue, she alone is free;
She can teach ye how to climb
Higher than the sphery chime;
Or if Virtue feeble were,
Heav’n itself would stoop to her. (Milton 1019-23)

On Conclusions

Goblin Market and *Comus* draw two drastically different conclusions to the story of the Fall. Rossetti portrays the traditional triumvirate of tempter, sinner, and redeemer. Milton, remarkably, manages to omit a true sinner. Rossetti advocates acceptance of sexuality as a necessary experience for social salvation. Milton’s characters live in a bubble of Grace. However, when we recognize that Milton’s characters are in fact ideals rather than true people, we can no longer

take the message in *Comus* at face value. Truly, the bubble burst long ago; humanity was tempted and fell. Experience already permeates our existence, and all we can do now is to resist temptations that would lead to a second, more personal Fall. Thus, it would appear best to follow Rossetti's example: to live for the pursuit of knowledge until we exit from the other side of infinity and once again approach complete Grace.

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