

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 11.3 (WINTER 2015)

Special Issue:

Relations: Literary Marketplaces, Affects, and Bodies of 18th- and 19th-Century Women Writers

Guest Edited by Julia Fuller, Meechal Hoffman, and Livia Arndal Woods

Edible Women and Milk Markets: The Linguistic and Lactational Exchanges of “Goblin Market”

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<1> The period spanning from the late 1850s to the mid-1860s frames a historical moment in Victorian England when lactation and breastfeeding came under intense public scrutiny in both medical and creative writing. While popular domestic author Isabella Beeton wrote on the dangers an unwary mother’s milk represented for her child and herself in her serial publication, *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (Beeton 489), prominent physicians C.H.F. Routh and William Acton launched a public dispute in the *Lancet* contesting the physiological and moral dangers the fallen wet-nurse posed for the middle-class household.⁽¹⁾ All the while, the medical community was cataloging the bizarre long-term physical and behavioral side-effects of an infant’s consumption of “bad milk”—among them, syphilis, swearing, sexual immorality, and death (Matus 161-162). But it is not only medical writers who were *latching on* to the breastfeeding debate as a means of voicing social and political concerns of the day; recent literary critics have gestured towards mid-century novelists’ troubling portrayals of lactation in popular novels as entry points into Victorian anxieties pertaining to classed and gendered embodiment. Not to be overlooked, at the center of every one of these controversies was an expressive woman. This article stipulates that the mid-nineteenth-century preoccupation with managing women’s breastmilk represents an intersection of two ongoing cultural paradigms pertaining to female expression: a cultural devaluation of female physiological expression as threatening leakage,⁽²⁾ and a depreciation of female poetic expression within a male-authored literary heritage. In “Goblin Market,” Rossetti employs the female, *liquid* expression vested in lactation imagery to signify the female *linguistic* expression of an emerging women’s poetry.

<2> Written in 1859 and published in 1862, the poem recounts the story of two young sisters, Lizzie and Laura, living on a farm apart from the goblin market and its men. Speaking in elaborate verses, the goblins daily try to tempt the girls to consume their assorted fruit. Laura succumbs and trades a lock of her hair to “[suck] their fruit globes” (Rossetti 128). As a result she becomes poisoned, refusing to eat anything except the goblin produce. Wanting to help her, Lizzie subjects herself to the goblins’ pelting of

fruit and brings back the juice on her own body and mouth, offering herself to her ailing sister in those now infamous lines, “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices [...] Eat me, drink me, love me” (468, 471). Laura does, and is miraculously cured by imbibing the fluid. These two pivotal “sucking” scenes have provided ample fodder for critics who, like Laura, have “sucked and sucked and sucked the more” (134) at Rossetti’s food imagery, coming away with a range of insightful interpretations which rival the variety of fruits in the goblin market. That said, these interpretations of the consumption roughly fall under two categories that appear as incompatible as apples and oranges—either reading the fluids in symbolic terms as sexual or in literal terms as nonsexual. Religious readings capitalize on Rossetti’s devoutly Christian heritage, especially her charitable work with fallen women as informing an allegorical tale of temptation and redemption.(3) These readings cast the “curious” Laura (69) as Eve who succumbs to the “fruit forbidden” (479), and who is only redeemed by Lizzie’s Eucharistic bodily offering.(4) More recently, there has been an emerging trend to read the fairy tale food imagery literally by firmly implanting it in very real Victorian consumerism—criticism which, in Herbert F. Tucker’s words, “[puts] the ‘market’ back in ‘Goblin Market’” (117). These critics speculate that the goblins’ poison is emblematic of the dangers presented by unchecked capitalist culture, and figure the goblin market as the microcosm for a real encroaching marketplace, Laura and Lizzie as actual consumers.(5)

<3> In this article, I bridge the gap between these often disparate literal and symbolic readings of Rossetti’s food imagery. The sucking scenes evoke another food source—breastmilk—that was as real to the mid-century Victorian imagination as market fruits but was simultaneously laden with symbolic meaning. Breastmilk becomes a signifier of a uniquely female expression, equally caught between sexual and nonsexual fluid, saleable and sacred commodity.(6) I consider a previously unexplored interpretive possibility that the poem’s preoccupation with symbolic fluid circuits speaks to very real mid-century anxieties about female physiological and poetic expression entering economic marketplaces, from the mid-century anxieties of the wet nurse’s expressions of diseased breastmilk, to the denunciation of female sex workers as contaminating the body politic with their diseased secretions, all the way to the disparaging construction of popular female authors as prostitutes who offer expressions of “moral contagion” to their ravenous readers (Gilbert, *Disease*, 26). By tracing an undisclosed intersection between female bodily and verbal emissions, this reading updates and advances criticism that has linked female expressions in “Goblin Market” to female literary production in a male-dominated marketplace, where Laura and Lizzie struggle to find their own voice alongside what Catherine Maxwell terms the “male texts” (goblin fruits) of a male-dominated poetic tradition (the titular goblin market).(7) Such criticism relies on a potentially limiting reading of the goblin fruit/text in terms of the seminal ink of a male poetic heritage, what Raymond Stephanson terms the “pen-penis/ink-semen trope” (Stephanson 140) or Pamela Gilbert calls the “spermatic economy of inspiration” (Gilbert 27), while it overlooks an analogous terminology for an emergent feminine-embodied poetics that Rossetti locates in lactation.

<4> To this end, it is significant that Laura and Lizzie’s female community is immersed in processes of lactational production. Rossetti’s poem opens with an image of two separate spheres with their own gendered liquid and linguistic economies: the milk “maids” of the girls’ rural dairy and the “goblin men” of Goblin Market (2, 42). I refer to Laura and Lizzie as milk maids on their rural homestead farm because, although they are occupied with a number of tasks, their most frequently mentioned function is that of

dairy production. They are shown early on to “[milk] the cows,” “[churn] butter,” and “[whip] cream” (203, 207) while they talk together “as modest maidens should” (207-208)—never pausing to speak to, or engage with, the seductive goblin men. It is noteworthy that at this point in the poem, the separate, gendered circuits of expression map seamlessly onto either the private, domestic realm or a public, sexualized, economic sphere. Laura and Lizzie’s “modest,” dairy-like female expressions seem to have no place in the male, symbolic realm that is epitomized in the goblin market with its goblin men and their strange fruits and words—ever aligned with penetrative, seminal fluids. We might understand the girls’ homosocial behavior here as a manifestation of what Alicia Carroll calls the “cult of the dairy,” a popular Romantic English trope depicting women “enclos[ed...] with female family members” in processes of dairy production as an extension of their biological function in lactation, while “cheeses and butters were made according to closely guarded recipes” passed inter-generationally from mother to daughter (Carroll 168). Carroll’s affiliation of the milk products, female expressions, and recipes “enclosed” within these dairies points to a deep-seated imagined correlation between women’s bodily and linguistic production that would solidify in troubling ways in mid-nineteenth-century England.

<5> During this time, breastfeeding represented not merely a liquid transmission but a psychical transmission of ideas. Valerie Fildes relates how the breastfeeding mother was “thought to transmit to the child” her “physical, mental and emotional qualities [...] along with her ideas, beliefs, intelligence, intellect, diet, and *speech*” (189, emphasis added). Interestingly, the debasement of speech represented a central area for concern, and it was commonly believed among those in the medical community that the milk of a fallen wet nurse would produce swearing in the nursling (Matus 161-162). Somehow, something in the very liquid passing from this economic woman carried the propensity for coarse language, meaning that this physiological expression was, in some way, intrinsically connected to verbal expression in the years that Rossetti penned her famous poem, worked with fallen women, and perhaps herself partook in conversations about fallen wet nurses.⁽⁸⁾ Like Laura and Lizzie’s lactational/linguistic production, the safety of the breastfeeding process was incumbent upon an idyllic, closed circulation between mother and infant that fancifully denied any outside infringement upon the nursing dyad, a construction that stemmed as much from an anxiety of uncontained female expression as from a fear of tainted milk.

<6> Alongside images of the swear-inducing wet nurse surfaced analogous constructions of the “prostituting” female author motivated by commercial success and whose works were increasingly aligned with the harlot’s tainted expressions.⁽⁹⁾ Characterizations of Rossetti as a reclusive maid downplayed the extent to which she herself, like Lizzie, “braved the glen” of a literary marketplace and “had to do with [its] goblin merchant men” (473-474) while publishing.⁽¹⁰⁾ Unmarried middle-class Victorian women like Rossetti, her sister, and her mother also participated in their own female literary networks composed of diaries, life-writing, and commonplace books, but only recently have scholars recognized first, the validity of such writing in a distinct, female literary history and, second, its deep, intertextual links to male-authored expressions of canonical literature.⁽¹¹⁾ Be it milk or words, then, female expressions were always already implicated in larger monetary and linguistic economies, and Rossetti dramatizes this convergence in her poem. While first Laura and Lizzie do not engage with the male circuit because they know “Their offers should not charm us/ [Since] Their evil gifts would harm

us" (66), they are nonetheless tempted by the goblins' literal and linguistic offerings much as popular female authors like Christina Rossetti were drawn to the works of male contemporaries, who, like the goblins, call out to their female auditors in elaborate verses. Rossetti, then, sets up a picture of a closed feminine circuit of expression, hermetically sealed from a male (linguistic) economy, only to reveal the boundary as fundamentally illusory.

<7> "Sweet-tooth Laura" (115) imbibes both the goblin fruit and the goblin words, engaging in monetary and verbal intercourse with them to incorporate this dual liquid and linguistic feast into her own person:

...sucked their fruit globes fair or red: Sweeter than honey from the rock,
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
Clearer than water flowed that juice;
She never tasted such before [...]
She sucked until her lips were sore. (128-132, 134)

The allusion to oral intercourse here is hard to overlook, and serves as a fitting metaphor for this one-way consumption of male literary sources. Laura's impression of the fruit as being better than anything she has ever tasted discloses the girl's new preference for this seminal expression over those feminized drinks of the dairy, consisting of cow's milk, honey, and stream water. That Laura finds the goblin juice to be "sweeter than honey from the rock" (129) foreshadows her rejection of the honey that is "fetched in" from the dairy (203), while her description of the juice as being "clearer than water" (131) reveals her impression that the brook's "gurgling water" (219) is no longer a match for this new, masculine juice. Laura's complete consumption of the goblin fruit necessitates a complete rejection of the feminine mode of creative production that the dairy represents—both food and language production, so that Laura abandons the women's food which she "would not eat" any longer (298), wanting only goblin fruit, and correspondingly regresses to a state of "sullen silence" (271). Significantly, in the few instances that Laura does speak after she consumes the fruit, her speech no longer resembles her previous communication with Laura but the verbose diction of the goblin men. As Maxwell points out, Laura's speech not only "now directly imitates the goblin men's persuasive cries," but also uses "Romantic poeticisms" like "pellucid," "odorous," "mead," and "velvet," recalling the diction of the male Petrarchan sonnet speaker (Maxwell 82). Laura, then, has internalized this masculine liquid and linguistic expression at the cost of her own feminine expression, and she seems to have the same fate as Jeanie, the girl of Lizzie's warning tale who "should have been a bride" but succumbed to the juice, "fell sick and died" (315). At this point, Laura and Jeanie's stories reproduce familiar mid-century narratives of female fallenness that stress the corruptibility of female bodily fluids (in the case of prostitutes and fallen wet nurses) and embodied words (in the case of women authors) on the market. However, Rossetti reimagines lactation as an ameliorated model for processes of literary production and dissemination that originate from female bodies and, correspondingly, demand embodied metaphors of female, not male, physiological expressions.

<8> While Laura's wholehearted internalization of these male texts—coupled with her rejection of the feminine language vested in the dairy farm—represents a woman's unsuccessful bid at female authorship, Lizzie's interaction with the goblin men stands for a female poet's productive negotiation

with a male poetic heritage. Despite having enclosed herself from the goblin market and fleeing from the goblin men (67), “Tender Lizzie” (299) comes to realize that if she is going to redeem her sister from certain death, then she will have to enter this phallogocentric market herself. When she does, the goblins’ bodily offering is much the same as it was with Laura, but unlike Laura, the goblins cannot put their fruit or their words in her mouth. Lizzie’s refusal to embody the men’s words mirrors her refusal to consume their fruit; even when the goblins pelt their fruits at Lizzie and literally inscribe their words onto her body by “[pinching] her black as ink” (427), she “would not open lip from lip” and “utter[s] not a word” (430-431). Though critics have likened Lizzie’s silence here to Laura’s and Jeanie’s, as representing the inevitable fate of all women who enter into a male-dominated market and accompanying literary tradition,⁽¹²⁾ I read Lizzie’s negotiation with these men and their male fruits/texts as being entirely different from the women before her. Granted, Lizzie does not speak to the goblins, but she nevertheless responds:

[She] laughed in heart to feel the drip
Of juice that syrugged all her face,
And lodged in dimples of her chin,
And streaked her neck which quaked like curd. (433-436)

Lizzie’s laughter holds a twofold meaning as it signifies first, her “resistance” (438) against thoughtlessly imbibing the juice and, second, her reluctance to give up her own mode of female expression. Springing from her “heart,” Lizzie’s internal laughter represents a kind of lactational utterance recalling the hidden language of her communicative circuit with Laura. It is significant, then, that in the act of laughing, Lizzie’s own body, not the goblin juice on it, “[quakes] like curd” (436), for this subtle evocation of dairy production suggests that Lizzie is re-enacting an overtly feminized linguistic production even within this oppressive marketplace. Not only does she refuse to internalize these male fluids, she renegotiates them for her own purposes by carrying them on, rather than in, her body—alongside that feminine expression of her “inward laughter,” which she transports with the juice all the way home to her starving sister (463). Unlike Laura, who initially rejects those feminine expressions manifest in the liquid and linguistic circuits of the dairy, Lizzie retains an element of this milk within the market, and I believe that this remnant of feminine expression is a central component of the new fluid that she brings back to Laura to nurse her back to health, in both senses of the word.

<9> Although Rossetti does not explicitly depict human lactation in the poem, the scene of Lizzie offering her bodily fluids for Laura to consume certainly positions breastfeeding as a fitting interpretation, one that infuses new life into criticism that reads Lizzie as a maternal figure to the infantile Laura⁽¹³⁾ and a recent trend of reading the poem’s consumable fluids in light of actual food and its frequent adulteration mid-century—perhaps the most notorious of those being cow’s milk (Hassall 205).⁽¹⁴⁾ Reading a larger commentary on issues of literary maternity and female expression within Rossetti’s response to dangerous fluids allows us to expand and complicate these critical lenses by positioning Lizzie as not only mother, but restorative breast feeder to Laura, the starving babe who awaits Lizzie’s liquid and linguistic offering:

Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices [...]
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me. (466-468, 471-472)

Lizzie's new food takes on poetic proportions as her own feminine expression, evinced in her bid for Laura to "suck *my* juices" (468, emphasis added) that derive in part from male sources but now contain a distinctly female element.⁽¹⁵⁾ Her new bodily fluid contains a figurative milk capable of turning Laura's "sullen silence" into a restored female expression as the silent girl awakens to "[laugh] in the innocent old way" (538). But now the girls' expressions derive from, and speak to, a more comprehensive readership. Laura's internalization of Lizzie's "white ink"⁽¹⁶⁾ enables her to eventually become a poet in her own right as the storyteller in the final scene, transmitting this new, feminine poetry to the generations to come, those products of literal heterosexual intercourse—the "little ones" who hear her tale, and who we can presume to be boys as well as girls. This breastfeeding model for the transmission of literature forges a place for female expression within larger linguistic circulations by stressing how female physiological processes not only replicate but expand upon phallogentric metaphors of literary production, dissemination and communication.

<10> In "Goblin Market," Rossetti engages in an elaborate rhetorical strategy which traces the source of a new, feminine poetic expression to the feminine, physiological expression of breastmilk. Laura and Lizzie's figurative nursing dyad serves as a sophisticated metaphor for the kind of communication between women that a female literary mode offers, while Rossetti's final scene reveals the successful integration of male and female textual sources into an emergent feminine poetic tradition.⁽¹⁷⁾ And by opening up the possibility that female expression can actually benefit from—and not be ruined by—its exposure to masculine economies, Rossetti fundamentally undermines a mid-nineteenth-century anxiety that a woman's expression, be it breastmilk or literature, has no place in markets—goblin or otherwise.

Endnotes

(1)Physician C.H.F. Routh believed that the milk of fallen wet nurses could have severe psychological repercussions, maintaining that within the feeding process, "It is possible to sow a seed in the infant which shall contaminate the life of the man, taint his whole constitution, and influence his psychical powers" (581). Routh's emphasis on the milk's "psychical powers" testifies to the popular correlation between the transmission of tainted breastmilk and corrupted mental states, present in Beeton's bizarre stipulation that the "sluggish" milk of a mother who slept while nursing could turn the infant into a "baby vampire" suffering from "functional derangement" (Beeton 489).^(△)

(2)Gail Paster's and Margrit Shildrick's feminist works on the "leaky body" demonstrate a longstanding tradition in English literature of associating female physiological processes with shame, along with bodily and psychological uncontrol. Deborah Vlock relates how, during the suffrage movement, Victorian

satirists employed images of female physiological leakage, such as menstruation, to negatively codify female speech as “verbal excess” (Vlock 168).^(^)

(3) Rossetti volunteered at St. Mary Magdalene “house of charity” in Highgate from 1859-1870 (Packer 155).^(^)

(4) See Arseneau, Peterson, Pionke, and Rappoport, among others.^(^)

(5) See Grass, Mendoza, Norcia, Sowards, Stern, and Thompson.^(^)

(6) A breastfeeding reading of the poem offers a means of reconciling these conflicting interpretations by gesturing towards a process that was beset with both latently sexual and openly religious connotations; Mary Anne Baines underlines the erotic ties to nursing when she warns that a new mother who hires herself out to nurse another child effectively “wean[s]” her husband as well since his sexual “comforts are not [being] attended to” (Baines, cited in Matus, 160). Meanwhile the image of the nursing Madonna retained its cultural significance in nineteenth-century religious iconography as a symbol of ideal and pious motherhood.^(^)

(7) Both Gilbert and Maxwell link the goblins’ literal offering of the fruit to both male physiological expressions (semen) and male poetic expressions (words).^(^)

(8) Given her work with fallen women, Rossetti may have been particularly sensitized to the concurrent wet nursing debates. Although Highgate records offer few details of the individual women’s personal histories, it is conceivable that some of these histories might have included the birth of an illegitimate child and a turn to wet nursing for income (though neither of these would have been permitted to take place while a fallen woman resided at Highgate).^(^)

(9) Conversely, female sex workers were regarded as dangerously expressive and their bodily emissions were associated with verbal ones; for instance, physician William Acton repeatedly refers the female prostitute’s vaginal cavity as a “throat” emitting contagious discharge (34).^(^)

(10) This included Christina’s editor-brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, prominent critics and publishers like Ruskin and MacMillan, and an overwhelmingly male set of reviewers. In *Recovering Christina Rossetti*, Arseneau persuasively argues that the literary associations and contributions of the Rossetti women have been markedly neglected, with the majority of critical attention directed at Christina’s father and brothers.^(^)

(11) Sharon Marcus maintains that the correspondence between middle-class women in life writing and letters constitutes a subset of literature made up of language that was “as romantic and gushing as that in any novel or poem” (16). Middle-class women participated actively in all aspects of print culture, and commonplace books reveal women’s familiarity and interaction with even the most scandalous male-authored literature (Leighton 19).^(^)

(12)For instance, Susan Gilbert argues that Lizzie’s silence is representative of Rossetti’s message of “ensorious morality” for women (575), while Margaret Homans interprets the scene as Lizzie transforming into “the silent and merely resistant body in a male economy” (588).[\(△\)](#)

(13)See Arseneau, Peterson, and Pionke. Pionke reads Lizzie as a figurative mother while Arseneau and Peterson look at how she resembles the Virgin Mother in “Incarnation and Interpretation” and “Restoring the Book,” respectively.[\(△\)](#)

(14)See Stern and Norcia. Also, in his 1857 book, chemist Arthur Hassall devoted an entire chapter explaining to his readers how to detect adulterations in cow’s milk, concluding that “there are few articles of food more liable to adulteration” (207). For this reason, there is no shortage of mid-century authors like Charles Dickens telling stories of dairymen adding mashed calves’ brains and snail slime to make diluted milk frothier (Law 12).[\(△\)](#)

(15)A breastfeeding reading of “Goblin Market” offers a strategy for navigating Laura and Lizzie’s simultaneously familial and sexual intimacy. Marcus references the uncontroversial reception of the sucking scene as a testament to the way that Victorian society promoted “openly homoerotic” relationships between women, especially amongst mothers, daughters, and sisters (16).[\(△\)](#)

(16)I am borrowing theorist Hélène Cixous’s term for a mode of women’s embodied writing or *Écriture féminine* which she first coined in “The Laugh of the Medusa.”[\(△\)](#)

(17)Debra Cumberland refers to the final scene as a “female community based on the trope of reading and creating together” (208), but I interpret the implicit gender mixing as a central component of Rossetti’s new, comprehensive, feminist poetics.[\(△\)](#)

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