THE SOURCES OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S
'GOBLIN MARKET'

Goblin Market and other Poems (1862) by Christina Rossetti is a volume of importance in the history of later Victorian romanticism, for it was here that the poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates first gained any considerable attention. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work, apart from his translations The Early Italian Poets, 1861, had seen obscure periodical publication in The Germ (1850), and in 1854 in The Düsseldorf Album\(^1\) and elsewhere, but his gesture of throwing the manuscript of his poems into his wife's coffin delayed the publication of his original poems until 1870. Swinburne's Queen Mother and Rosamond (1860) had passed unnoticed, except for a few condemnatory reviews, while even William Morris's The Defence of Guenevere (1858) failed to awaken the critical consciousness to the new poetry that was developing. Christina Rossetti's volume of 1862 attracted immediate notice and it has continued to obtain wide recognition. Yet the title poem, Goblin Market, though admittedly the most original of Christina's compositions, remains one of the most unexplored poems in the period. The same problems are raised as by The Ancient Mariner; a theme and movement, suggesting many things and not assignable to one source, a concluding moral acting as an anti-climax to the glamour and magic which precede it. Further, Goblin Market differs as widely from Christina Rossetti's later work as The Ancient Mariner does from Coleridge's later compositions. Whatever impulses and intuitions she gathered into this poem were never to be handled by her in such a manner again.

No attempt has been made to isolate the sources or experiences from which this poem arose. W. M. Rossetti, the pedestrian Boswell of the Pre-Raphaelites, in his various memoirs of the Rossetti family, and equally Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in their letters, refer to the poem itself but never to the way in which it came into being. Critical literature following this tradition has praised the poem without exploring its origins. Dr Oliver Elton was summarising this view when he described Goblin Market: 'a fairy tale.... It is pure invention, and not of the popular stock\(^2\).' Christina Rossetti's latest biographer makes the same implication when she describes the poem as 'an act of pure imaginative

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\(^1\) See Festschrift des Leipziger Bibliophilien-Abends, Leipzig, 1929.
creation. While much in the poem may arise from suggestions too personal to unravel, I believe that certain features become clearly visible when they are studied in relationship to books that Christina Rossetti is known to have read, and experiences through which she is known to have passed.

Among the books read by Christina Rossetti and the other Rossetti children was The Fairy Mythology of Thomas Keightley. The author was a friend of the household and the book was a favourite with the children. In his sometimes inaccurate but genially entertaining volumes Keightley has gathered fairy stories of many countries of dwarfs, elves, nisses and goblins. None of these stories contains the plot of Goblin Market, for Christina Rossetti’s invention is obviously not based on simple derivation from one source. The whole décor of Goblin Market is, however, already present in Keightley. The volumes have numerous illustrations in which dwarfs and goblins are portrayed, in very much the same way as they are portrayed in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s second illustration to Christina Rossetti’s poem. Out of this general similarity there emerges one passage which may hold within it the idée génératrice of Goblin Market. In his section on Great Britain, Keightley gathered together all the references to fairies in Shakespeare’s plays. He found in A Midsummer Night’s Dream his richest source, and among the passages which he extracted is the following: ‘And when enamoured of Bottom, she [Titania] directs her Elves that they should

Hop in his walks, and gambol in his eyes,
Feed him with apricocks, and dewberries,
With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries.’

This passage is charmingly illustrated with an etching of the ‘little men’ who are bearing the tempting fruit to Bottom. It will be remembered that in Christina Rossetti’s poem the main motive is of two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, who are tempted by the fruit proffered by goblin men, and among the fruit which they offer are

Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;—
All ripe together.

3 W. M. Rossetti, Family Letters with a Memoir, London, 1895, i, pp. 44 and 60.
4 From A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act iii, Sc. i. Titania’s instruction to Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed. Keightley, ii, p. 131.
Thus in Keightley she could find the motive of the proffering of fruit by ‘little men,’ and the similarity can be more fully appreciated once the etching in Keightley has been seen.

While childhood recollections of Keightley’s fairies had prepared the background for the poem, something had been necessary to quicken those early recollections in 1859 when she wrote the poem. It is possible that in the poem The Fairies of William Allingham she found that stimulus which recalled her own earlier encounters in Keightley. Apart from the contact of theme there exists in Allingham’s trochaic movement some similarity with the prosody of parts of Goblin Market:

Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren’t go a-hunting
For fear of little men;
Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl’s feather!

They stole little Bridget
For seven years long;
When she came down again
All her friends were gone.
They took her lightly back,
Between the night and morrow,
They thought that she was fast asleep,
But she was dead with sorrow.

That both Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti knew Allingham is well established, and they were both admirers of his work.

Allingham, however, can have only brought back to her consciousness memories which she had long possessed in which the motive of temptation was closely linked with the proffering of rich fruits. The image had existed early within her memory and the elements of it which she gathered from Keightley had become associated with other modifying features. As early as 1847 she had written a poem entitled The Dead City, which obviously owes its origin to the story of Zobeide in The Arabian Nights. Zobeide describes in The Arabian Nights how she passed through a city full of people, motionless and petrified, standing as if they were statues, until she came finally to a palace of great magnificence, where she found a young man who could tell her the secret of this mystery. Christina

1 Allingham’s lyric was written by January 8, 1849. See W. Allingham, A Diary, ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford, London, 1907, p. 45.
2 Ibid.
3 In The Story of the three Calendars, Sons of Sultans and the Five Ladies of Bagdad. The fruit passages in The Dead City were associated with Goblin Market by Edmund Gosse in Critical Kit-Kats, London, 1896, p. 142.
Rossetti in *The Dead City* used this background: she has a city, and petrified people and a palace, but she omits the young man and substitutes an elaborate description of a banquet with the suggestion that it was for ‘luxury and pride’ that the city had suffered. In describing the banquet she returns to the motive of the tempting fruits found in Keightley and she unites this with an *Arabian Nights* setting:

All the vessels were of gold,
Set with gems of worth untold.
   In the midst a fountain rose
   Of pure milk, whose rippling flows
In a silver bason rolled.
In green emerald baskets were
Sun-red apples, streaked and fair;
   Here the nectarine and peach
   And ripe plum lay, and on each
The bloom rested everywhere.
Grapes were hanging overhead,
Purple, pale, and ruby-red;
   And in panniers all around
   Yellow melons shone, fresh found,
With the dew upon them spread.
And the apricot and pear
And the pulpy fig were there,
   Cherries and dark mulberries,
   Bunchy currants, strawberries,
And the lemon wan and fair.

This union of detail derived from Keightley with an *Arabian Nights* motive has left a definite mark on *Goblin Market*. There it is emphasised that the ‘little men’ bear their fruit on vessels of gold:

One hauls a basket,
One bears a plate,
One lugs a golden dish
Of many pounds’ weight.

And later:

One heaved the golden weight
Of dish and fruit to offer her.

Nothing in Keightley’s stories of goblins would suggest such splendour, but the story of Zobeide was decked in gold and luxuries:

All the vessels were of gold,
Set with gems of worth untold.

Already in *The Dead City*, the Keightley passage had coalesced with *Arabian Nights* memories and the same union of recollections reappears in *Goblin Market*. Nor need it be assumed that the sources of suggestion were confined to the passages which have been quoted. It is in them that verbal resemblance is closest, but Keightley had a number of incidents in
which fairy people proffer food to mortals. Only a few pages away from
the extracts from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Christina Rossetti could
have read the following extract from Bovet's *Pandemonium*: ‘Reading
once the eighteenth of Mr Glanvil’s relations, p. 203, concerning an
Irishman that had like to have been carried away by spirits, *and of the
banquet they had spread before him in the fields*¹.’ It is in the same section
in Keightley that she might have read: ‘Such jocund and facetious
spirits...are said to sport themselves in the night by tumbling and
fooling with servants and shepherds in country houses, pinching them
black and blue, and leaving bread, butter, and cheese sometimes with
them, which, if they refuse to eat, some mischief shall undoubtedly befall
them by means of these Faeries².’ Yet despite the comparative frequency
of such passages in Keightley, none has the verbal identity of the extract
from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and none has *The Arabian Nights*
elements present in *The Dead City* and reintroduced into *Goblin Market*.

It would appear then that the central motive in *Goblin Market* arose
from the coalescing of two memories of childhood reading. Apart,
however, from *The Arabian Nights* suggestions, Christina’s goblins differ
in other ways from all of Keightley’s many figures. In Christina Rossetti
they are described as merchant men, and they sell their dread fruits just
as any hawker in the London streets might traffic his wares. Further, in
exactly the same way as the London street-sellers the goblin men had
their cry:

> Come buy our orchard fruits,
> Come buy, come buy.

How came it that this pedlar feature came attached to figures that arose
from memories of Titania and of *The Arabian Nights*? One explanation
may lie in Christina Rossetti’s own childhood experience. The Rossetti
house at No. 38 Charlotte Street was in a road that was of decreasing
respectability and the children were warned against too close contact
with the undesirable members of neighbouring families³. Further, all
biographical evidence would indicate that the virtuous sister in the poem
had a parallel in real life with Christina’s own elder sister, Maria. There
is ample material to show that Christina was an impetuous, wilful child
and that Maria attempted to discipline her impulses⁴. Thus the *Goblin
Market* situation of two sisters with an influence against which they were

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¹ Keightley, II, p. 113 (the italics are mine).
³ See R. D. Waller, *The Rossetti Family*, Manchester, 1932; I am indebted to Mr Waller
for a number of suggestions in this article.
warned and with one sister attempting to check the unruliness of the other is present in the pattern of Christina's life at Charlotte Street. But this still leaves unsolved the transformation of the goblins into pedlars. Christina must have heard as a child the cries of the London street pedlars as she sat by the window of the Charlotte Street house and looked into the street where she was forbidden to play. The memories of London street cries had over a century before cheered Dean Swift and led him to write imitative pieces, which show how closely the Goblin Market movement is to the jingle of the street pedlar:

Come buy my fine wares,
Plums, apples, and pears.
A hundred a penny,
In conscience too many:
Come, will you have any?  

But Christina's interest in the street-sellers does not rest entirely on speculation. One knows that within the Rossettis' house there were a number of volumes, favourites of all the children, which collected a large number of pedlars' cries within their pages: these were Hone's Every-Day Book and possibly The Table Book and The Year Book. The full influence of these delightful miscellanies on Victorian poetry has yet to be traced. They certainly gave Tennyson the story of St Simeon Stylites, and they furnished a number of suggestions for both Dante Gabriel and Christina. No one can have read them (and it must be remembered that the Rossetti children were frequently turning their pages) without realising the interest that Hone took in London street cries. When Christina turned to Hone's Every-Day Book for August 25, 1827, she would read:

My pity is reserved for their forlorn little brethren, doomed to breathe the wholesome atmosphere of crowded manufactories, and close narrow alleys in populous cities! What a luxury would a supper be twice a week, for instance, to the poor little 'bottoms' in Spitalfields. Who knows but they might receive their first taste for Shakespeare while being fed, like their great prototype in the 'Mid Summer Night's Dream' with blackberries! 'Dewberries,' which Titania ordered for the refreshment of her favourite, are so nearly allied to their glossy neighbours, that when the season is far advanced the two are not easily distinguished. Shakespeare, who knew everything, was of course aware that the dewberry ripens earlier than the blackberry; namely, in the season for 'apricota.' . . . I own I am sanguine respecting the general introduction of blackberries into the London street cries. What an innovation they would cause! What a rural sight, and sound, and taste would they introduce into that wilderness of houses! What a conjuring up of happy feelings—almost as romantic as those that are inspired by 'bilberries, ho?'


2 William Hone, The Every-Day Book or Everlasting Calendar, 2 vols., London, 1827, 1829; William Hone, The Table Book, London, 1827; William Hone, The Year Book, London, 1832. See W. M. Rossetti, Memoir etc. of D. G. Rossetti, i, p. 82. W. M. Rossetti mentions the Every-Day Book, but as The Table Book and The Year Book are in the same series, I have thought it probable that the Rossetti children would have seen these as well.

3 Loc. cit., p. 559.
Here was the very passage from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which Keightley had quoted, allied now to the London street cries and reset amid the 'wilderness of houses' which Christina was always to know better than country scenes. While I regard this as the crucial passage which telescopes with her other memories, Christina could have found many other references to street cries as she turned the pages of Hone. In *The Table Book* she would have found an illustrated article on *London Cries* and with others the cry of the negro-man, 'balloon lemons, quality oranges, quality lemons, holiday limes,' and later in the same volume she could have found another illustrated collection of miscellaneous cries. In *The Every-Day Book* for July 4, 1826, she could have found an illustrated article on *The London Barrow Woman* and her cries,

Round and sound  
Two-pence a pound  
Cherries! rare ripe cherries!

and later,

Cherries a ha'penny a stick!  
Come and pick! come and pick  
Cherries! big as plums!  
Who comes? Who comes?

Yet even if she did not encounter these and other references, she can scarcely have missed the first entries in *The Every-Day Book* for 1826. Here in a delightful article Hone records the New Year gifts given to Queen Elizabeth including a 'box of cherries and one of apricots' and continues: 'Some of these gifts to Elizabeth recall to recollection the tempting articles which Autolycus in the "Winter's Tale," invites the country girls to buy: he enters singing

*Lawn as white as driven snow.*

Hone gives the whole of Autolycus's song to the words:

What maids lack from head to heel,  
Come, buy of me, come: come buy, come buy;  
Buy, lads, or else your lassies cry,  
Come buy.

Here with the very words which she introduces into the first lines of her poem she finds again the motive of 'tempting articles' inviting 'the country girls to buy.'

To attempt to trace the influence of Hone on incidental passages of *Goblin Market* would lead to digression from my attempt to see how the

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main motives of the poem arose in Christina Rossetti’s mind. Further I am aware that caution must be used in estimating Hone’s influence as a source. His volumes are so miscellaneous, and contain so many references that it is inevitable that there should be many contacts between *Goblin Market* and Hone of which Christina Rossetti need not herself have been aware. It is one thing to affirm the memory of the street cries which are such a persistently reiterated feature in Hone and quite another to identify a single passage in Hone with a single incident in the poem. Yet with this caution in mind, one is still impressed by the way in which poems and extracts in Hone coincide with passages in the poem. I will digress to quote only one instance. In *Goblin Market* Lizzie reminds her sister of the tragedy which befell Jeanie who succumbed to the temptation of the goblin men:

She pined and pined away;
Sought them by night and day,
Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey;
Then fell the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow
Where she lies low;
I planted daisies there a year ago
That never blow.

The whole incident seems to be the recollection of some ballad theme which I have been unable to identify, but the fate of Jeanie and of her grave resembles the poem ‘The young maid stole from her cottage door,’ given in Hone’s *Every-Day Book* (1826)\(^1\). The theme is of the maiden who gathered St John’s wort:

With noiseless tread
To her chamber she sped,
Where the spectral moon her white beams shed—
‘Bloom here—bloom here, thou plant of pow’r,
To deck the young bride in her bridal hour!’
But it dropped its head the plant of power,
And died the mute death of the voiceless flower.
And a withered wreath on the ground it lay,
More meet for a burial than bridal day.
And when a year was past away,
All pale on her bier the young maid lay.
And the glow-worm came
With its silvery flame,
And sparkled and shone
Thro’ the night of St. John,
And they closed the cold grave o’er the maid’s cold clay.

To return from this digression to the dominant features of *Goblin Market*, one notices that the goblin men, despite their *Midsummer*

\(^1\) *Loc. cit.*, p. 427.
Night's Dream fruits, and their Arabian Nights vessels of gold and their London street hawkers' cries, are weird animal creatures:

One had a cat's face,
One whisked a tail,
One tramped at a rat's pace,
One crawled like a snail,
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

Nothing in Keightley, or The Arabian Nights or Hone, except Bottom's head—and there the analogy is very incomplete—can prepare us for these grotesques. Here 'wombat' alone gives the clue. It is known that Christina had an interest, earlier than that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in the Zoological Gardens. One group of animals attracted her, sufficiently for her to make sketches of them, and in The Family Letters¹ W. M. Rossetti has reproduced Christina's drawings of 'a wombat,' 'a grey squirrel,' and 'a fox.' So the 'wombat' would appear to unite with her childish memories and produce the animal-faced men of Goblin Market. She had a number of legends in her reading including the story of Zobeide already mentioned, where humans and devils change into animals. Christina gave each goblin one animal feature, and in this way heightened the magic atmosphere of her poem. The delight which all the Rossetti children took in the Zoological Gardens would have given Christina sufficient incentive for the animal element in the poem. Her enthusiasms were confirmed by Dante Gabriel's early interest in Peter Parley's Natural History which led him later to keep an ill-disciplined menagerie at Cheyne Walk².

The main motives of Goblin Market would appear therefore to lead back to Christina's childhood, and to the reading of these town-bred, bookish children. Nor in the composition of the poem does she lose sight of this childish atmosphere; the racing metre, the extravagancies of the story, the simplicity of the diction are such as a child could appreciate. The contacts of the poem with Christina's childhood extend beyond these main motives. Her naïve introduction of a moral can be paralleled by the advice on the relationships of brothers and sisters given at the close of the stories in Peter Parley's Magazine, a mid-Victorian favourite which the Rossetti children enjoyed. Further, the imagery of the poem, apart from a few Tennysonian derivations, has its contacts with the same early memories. The poem startles one at first both by the variety and the

¹ The dates of the sketches reproduced by W. M. Rossetti are too late to form an origin for this feature in Goblin Market. The wombat was not in the Gardens when the Rossettis were children. See Family Letters, ed. by W. M. Rossetti, London, i, p. 39.
² D. G. Rossetti, Memoir etc., i, p. 58.
wildness of its comparisons, and one wonders why shipwrecks, sieges, storms and battles, were made to do service in this magic adventure of Laura and Lizzie. The Rossetti children varied their excursions into Hone, Keightley and Peter Parley with reading of a more violent type, brigand tales, tales of romance and horror, the popular Victorian heritage of the terror tale of the Romantic Period. I would not attempt to assign any image in *Goblin Market* to a particular passage in the adventure-story reading of the Pre-Raphaelite children: the nature of imagery is too complex for such analysis. A single passage from one of the collections which they are known to have read gives, however, the generic similarity. I choose an example from *Tales of Chivalry: or Perils by Flood and Field*\(^1\). W. M. Rossetti mentions this volume, and confirmatory evidence that the children knew it well can be found by the presence here\(^2\) of Henkerwyssel’s Challenge, the source of D. G. Rossetti’s ballad of *Jan van Hunks*. The following is a passage from the story of *The Flame-girt bark of the Burning Sea* which has additional interest from its parallels with Christina’s *A Ballad of Boding*:

And now, when the wild sea rolls and roars, tormented by the wanton wind, and the blue lightning gilds the blackening sky, the affrighted seaman oft has seen the lovers’ bark, manned by her crew of corses, careering over the deep; but her line of gold is a belt of fire, and the blue is rent from the midnight sky, and her spar and sail are of the northern mist, and her rigging is twined of the stars’ faint beams: and around her dash waves of blue, gleaming flame, that show like a sun bright sea.

When one remembers that such was the content and style of the less respectable side of the childhood reading of the Rossettis, one need not be surprised at the storm-swept wildness of some of the imagery in *Goblin Market*.

Such were some of the sources of suggestion which led to *Goblin Market*. Their organisation results in the most secure and attractive of all Christina’s poems. To identify the impulses which led her to manipulate them, and the motive which gave them unity would lead one back to Christina’s biography and to relating this poem with the rest of her creative work. My own view is that she explored here more fully than elsewhere her impulse towards resignation in her attitude to experience, present in her poetry by 1847.

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\(^1\) *Tales of Chivalry: or Perils by Flood and Field*, 2 vols, London, 1835 (?).