A Subversive or Utopian Fairy Tale?:
Re-reading *Goblin Market* as a Quest for Female Self

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When *Goblin Market* was first published in 1862, it received much critical attention, establishing Christina Rossetti’s reputation as a major Victorian poet. Yet at the same time, it raised many questions about its genre: was it merely a fairy-tale for children or a well-knitted allegory for adults? According to William Michael Rossetti, Christina Rossetti’s brother who edited *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti* after her death, his sister “did not mean anything profound by this fairy tale” (459). But this remark did not entirely dispel ambiguities surrounding the poem. In 1863, Mrs. Charles Eliot Norton asked again, “Is it a fable—or a mere fairy story—or an allegory against the pleasure of sinful love—or what is it?” in the review article published by *Macmillan’s Magazine* (qtd. in Knoepflmacher 320).
While critics have engaged with complex layers of semantics embedded in *Goblin Market* to offer various religious, psychological and biographical interpretations, most of them commonly observed that the poem contains both spiritual and material aspects. In other words, the poem seems to carry intensively physical expressions and carnal desires in its spiritual journey towards a complete sisterhood. Indeed, this mixture of spirituality and materiality becomes manifest in the rich texture of its fairy tale format. With its grotesque and fantastic fairy-tale motifs of Goblin men and fruits, *Goblin Market* shows strikingly unconventional sexual politics between the two sisters (Lizzie and Laura) as well as between the beast-like figures of goblins and the innocent maiden figures (Lizzie, Laura and Jeanie). And this “combination of the grotesque, the fairytale, the erotic and the moral” was uniquely appealing to Victorian readers (Jones 91).

With the grim principles of Victorian market economy surrounding female body and sexuality, on the one hand, *Goblin Market* embodies the material configuration of Victorian market exchange between industrial goods (as represented by perfect but foreign fruits) and sexual bodies (as represented by Laura’s golden curl and Lizzie’s molested body), challenging the unidirectional interpretation of Victorian gender ideology. As noted by many critics, the homosocial or homosexual overtones in the intimacy between Laura and Lizzie exceed the ordinary boundary of simple sisterhood.

Despite this strong mixture of grim economic materiality and subversive female sexuality, *Goblin Market*, on the other hand, seeks a highly religious and spiritual utopian vision of female