CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST
I

Elizabeth Russell

This is the first part of a joint workshop paper on Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market". It offers a brief outline of different readings of "Goblin Market" which have been the basis of three hourly class discussions lasting one week. Whereas the readings in this part widely concern what has been termed "Anglo-American" feminist theory, my colleague, Eileen Fauset, has focussed her paper on reading "Goblin Market" as an expression of "écriture féminine".

As a teacher, I am well aware of what Isobel Armstrong points out:

> All teaching is full of danger because of the power of the teacher, but it can nevertheless help to unbind one from the power of ideology.[1]

It is obvious that the "ideology" the teacher brings with her to the class will make itself felt, along with the other "ideologies" and cultural markers of other members in the class. Nevertheless, an attempt is made never to impose one ideology over the others, but to challenge and question, to contradict and complement, wherever possible.

It must be pointed out that the class—as a group— have not decided on any of the following readings as being the most plausible, but have preferred to accept all of them. It will be seen that the readings overlap.

"Goblin Market", written in 1859 is, like many of Christina Rossetti's poems, an open text, in that it lays itself open to different readings. Perhaps it was because Rossetti was well aware of this that she insisted that her poem was "just a fairytale", no more —no less. This undoubtedly made the poem more acceptable, not only to the Victorian public in general but also to her brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, who acted as her moral censors. Both brothers advised her not to write texts that were "unsuitable" for women and to steer clear of politics. Women's texts should be "all roses" —insisted Dante Gabriel— and should be devoid of the "falsetto muscularity" of women poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning.[2] Both brothers unashamedly edited

1.- I. Armstrong, "Christina Rossetti: Diary of a Feminist Reading", in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1992), (pp. 117-137), p. 124.
2.- K. Jones, *Learning Not To Be First. The Life of Christina Rossetti*, (Gloucestershire: the Windrush Press, 1991), p. 124.

their sister's manuscripts before publication, altering words to make the whole effect more moral, adding words to change the meaning or simply deleting a whole line. Christina Rossetti often gave way to her brothers' forceful editing but not always. Her poetry must be read with all this in mind. It may not be explicitly concerned with political and social problems as Barrett Browning's poetry is, nevertheless the themes are there, internalised "as moral and emotional games, which threaten the very values she seemed, in life, to exemplify".[3]

"Goblin Market": Just a Fairytale?

"Goblin Market" may be considered Christina Rossetti's contribution to the female Gothic consciousness which produced such well loved works as *The Mystery of Udolpho*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein*. This is how Ellen Moers views Rossetti's poem, as a tale about the erotic life of children, a tale of sexual fantasy which loomed large in the Victorian nursery.[4] Rossetti was well acquainted with Gothic novels. As a child she may have read *The Vampyre* (1819) written by her uncle, John Polidori. An article by David F. Morrill draws the links between the Goblins and vampires. Both supernatural figures belong to a mysterious land of the unknown, of the unconscious. Both vampires and Rossetti's goblins have the powers of seduction and, once invited by innocent virgins over the threshold, the vampires engage in acts of sucking and biting which emaciate their victims, who eventually die, or are doomed to a living death. Clearly, there is an explicit sexual nature in vampirism and this is equally consistent in "Goblin Market", where Laura invites her fall by giving the Goblins a lock of her hair, where the juices she sucks become symbolic of semen and the breaking of the hymen.[5] Once Laura sucks her fill she enters a hypnotic state, becomes very ill, and can no longer engage in household tasks. However, like most vampire victims, she is invaded by "baulked desire" as each evening draws on. As her desires can no longer be fulfilled she grows prematurely old and listless, until Lizzie decides to obtain the fruit as a means of curing her. Lizzie—remembering the fate of poor Jeanie, who died because she had no sister to help her—meets the Goblins but does not give them a lock of her hair, nor does she eat their fruit. By obtaining the fruit on her terms rather than on theirs she makes them impotent. Lizzie then subverts the vampiric myth by offering her dying sister her own body (through love) so that Laura can suck the fruit juices from it. Unlike a vampire, Lizzie gives, she does not take. In a scene which is symbolic of the Eucharistic ritual, Lizzie's body becomes Christ's body, the juices smeared on her body become Christ's blood. Through Lizzie's acts of love and heroism, the Goblins' juices have changed from being harmful and evil to being good.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote in his notes to "Goblin Market":

3.- A. Leighton, "'Because men made the laws': the fallen woman and the woman poet", *New Feminist Discourses*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 129.
4.- E. Moers, *Literary Women*, (London: the Women's Press, 1978), pp. 100-107.
5.- D.F. Morrill, "'Twilight is not good for maidens': Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Poetry*, 28, (1990), pp. 1-16.

> I have more than once heard Christina say that she did not mean anything profound by this fairy tale —it is not a moral apologue consistently carried out in detail. Still, the incidents are such as to be at any rate suggestive, and different minds may be likely to read different messages into them.[6]

The last six lines of the poem are extremely important. In no way do they moralise or reprove Laura's behaviour. There is no religious knocking of knuckles, no lingering guilt in Laura's heart, no punishing God or father. The poem points to a formula for dealing with women's problems in a patriarchal society. It is the Language of the Father that splits the signifier "woman" into various other signifiers which become fixed and inviolable: woman into angel, woman into whore. The angel and the whore are linked to each other in a hierarchic vertical relationship. The angel rises in esteem. The whore falls from favour. There is always the risk of an angel falling but the whore can never rise. In a society where men make the laws, it is only a horizontal relationship between women as sisters, a relationship based on respect and solidarity, which will finally subvert these laws.

"Goblin Market" as a Celebration of Sisterhood

Rossetti's poem may be read as a separatist utopia where Laura and Lizzie decide to reject their identities (which have been construed by a patriarchal society) and live on the margins of this society, together with their daughters. One critic who follows this viewpoint is Dorothy Mermin. She points out that most of Rossetti's work depicts relationships between mothers and babies or between sisters, leaving men either absent or peripheral.[7] There are no men in "Goblin Market" although the Goblins are distinctly male. According to Mermin, they are present for procreation purposes only. Once the two sisters gain the knowledge of male sexuality they reject the world it creates. Laura, who eats the Goblins' fruit is in danger of succumbing to the evils of the Goblin world but through Lizzie's heroic and loving act she is shown that that world holds nothing but a living death: a fate that fell to poor Jeanie. Lizzie, unlike Eve in Genesis, gains knowledge without eating the fruit. Moreover, as Mermin points out, she becomes like a female Christ (a Christ-ina?), when she bids Laura to eat, drink and suck her body. A contemporary of Rossetti's, Florence Nightingale, wrote of the coming of a female Christ in *Cassandra* (1852):

> at last there shall arise a woman, who will resume, in his own soul, all the sufferings of her race, and that woman will be the Saviour of her race.[8]

6.- K. Jones, op. cit., p. 91.
7.- D. Mermin, "Heroic sisterhood in 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Poetry*, 21, (1983), pp. 107-18.
8.- D. Mermin, op. cit., p. 112.

In a patriarchal world unjust laws separate and divide people into hierarchies. Christina Rossetti believed that the only place where this was not the case was "in Christ [where] there is neither male nor female, for we are all one".[9]

In contemporary French feminist theory, Luce Irigaray propounds a women's symbolic order that would run parallel to and constantly subvert the Law of the Father. But for this symbolism to exist, women must learn to speak to each other, not in the Language of the Father but in what she terms "parler femme" which indicates a pun: "par les femmes". Further, a female symbolism needs a female religion. Mother-daughter relationships are absent in the religions of the west. It is true that they exist in Greek mythology, but our contemporary society has a great need to invent a woman-centred religion. "Goblin Market" may be read as a tentative search in this direction. Because of the traditional split between mind/body, where mind equals man and woman equals body, only relationships between men have been spiritualized. "Goblin Market" focusses on the body, but not on the terms of the Goblins. Lizzie rejects giving up her body to them as an object of exchange in a market economy. Instead, she and Laura lead a life at home that is a busy industry where they produce and make their own food and clothes, being completely independent of the world of the Goblins.

"Goblin Market" and Women's Literary Creation

The Goblin's market, like the literary market, is permeated by a vocabulary of buying and selling. Moreover, they are both represented through a language of male complicity which is conniving and complacent because of the double standard on which both markets function: women cannot have full access to the Language of the Father in the literary market. The language of the Goblins also excluded the sisters. The Goblins "signal to" and "leer at" each other. Their tones are "as smooth as honey", they "purr" and laugh and insist on selling their fruit on *their terms only*. Laura is desirous of their language but once she tastes it, it has the effect of slowly destroying her. She loses her identity, she is no longer active, she becomes the woman who does not exist, according to Lacan. She is no more than a lack, a negation, an absence, swallowed completely by the symbolic order of the Goblins who have constructed her non-identity in their language. When Lizzie visits the Goblins, she too is shown their masterful possession of the WORD:

> Chuckling, clapping, crowing,
> Clucking and gobbling
> But when she refuses to eat their fruit:
> No longer wagging, purring,
> But visibly demurring,
> Grunting and snarling
> [...]

9.- D. Mermin, op. cit., p. 116.

Lizzie uttered not a word
Would not open lip from lip.

Lizzie responds through silence, a technique of passive resistance, according to feminist theory. she will not eat the fruit, but steal it —in a Helène Cixousian feminist flight (if you will pardon the expression!)— for her sister. Laura sucks the fruit juices from her sister's body in a scene where the FLESH becomes WORD and then she is possessed by the poetic spirit in another scene which strongly echoes "Kubla Khan". Her "muses" are the Goblins themselves, "the desirous little creatures so many women writers have recorded encountering in the haunted glens of their own minds, hurrying scurrying furry ratlike *its* or *ids*, inescapable *incubi*".[10] It is only then that Laura can create —through renunciation. What she creates is, of course, the poem itself. Laura is the teller of a tale which she and Lizzie then pass on as mothers to their daughters.

"Goblin Market" : a Sociological Reading

According to Ronald Pearsall, there may have been as many as 120,000 prostitutes in Victorian London alone.[11] The highest prices were to be had for young virgins (the age of consent was 12 but rose to 16 by 1885) who were "untouched" by the dreaded venereal disease. The feminist movement was split on prostitution. Some feminists saw the prostitute as a victim of a patriarchal society; others felt that the prostitution question might spoil their campaign for suffrage.

Rossetti was not a suffragette and indeed she once declared in a letter to Augusta Weber that she could not "aim at 'women's rights'".[12] Paradoxically, however, she did support the idea of women M.P.s:

> for who so apt as Mothers [...] to protect the interests of themselves and of their offspring? I do not think if anything ever does sweep away the barrier of sex, and makes the female not a giantess or a heroine, but at once and full grown a hero and a giant, it is that mighty maternal love which makes little birds and little beasts as well as little women matches for very big adversaries.[13]

The "fallen woman" is not excluded in Rossetti's praise for mothers. Like many other writers, Rossetti sympathised with the lot of the fallen woman, seeing her not only as a victim but also as her "sister", her other.[14] Rossetti dedicated much of her spare time

10.- S.M. Gilbert & S. Gibar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 570.
11.- R. Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud. The World of Victorian Sexuality*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 16.
12.- K. Jones, op. cit., p. 193.
13.- ibid.
14.- A. Leighton, op. cit., p. 358.

in doing social work with the Anglican Sisterhood and her experiences there find an echo in her poetry. As Leighton points out[15], Dante Gabriel expressed reserves about her writing about unmarried mothers and illegitimate children but this is exactly where Rossetti's "feminism" lies: in her deliberate confusion of good/evil; angel/whore; moral/immoral; lawful/lawless. "Goblin Market" destabilizes these boundaries, especially in the figures of Laura and Lizzie. When Laura hears how Lizzie has risked everything for her, she cries:

> Undone in mine undoing
> And ruined in my ruin.

Lizzie has beaten the Goblins at their own game. She has subverted their power and rendered them impotent in an act of female bonding which denies patriarchal definitions.

II

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This discussion is the second part of a joint workshop paper. In this part of our workshop I concentrate on Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market" from the perspective of French Feminist Theory.

A consideration of Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market" from the viewpoint of French Feminist Theory might seem to be merely partisan as there are different viewpoints, particularly relating to the issues of gender and essentialism, within the overall framework. Moreover, the concept of "écriture féminine" or "writing the body" put forward by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, in particular, has been challenged both in Europe and America.

However, it is this aspect of French Feminist Theory which, I believe, has helped to open up new perspectives in relation to the concept of subjectivity in women's writing. My argument here is that in much of her writing, and in particular "Goblin Market", Christina Rossetti defies an accepted historical concept of female subjugation to masculine ideology through her own subjectivity in the text and as a means of expressing

15.- A. Leighton, op. cit., p. 348.

her anger against an ideology which, for the most part, denied her right to acknowledge her subjectivity.

"Goblin Market" has been looked at from many different perspectives: religious allegory, sexual fantasy, sisterly love, moral fable depicting the temptations of the flesh, a tale which depicts a fear of the unknown "other" and so on. Without necessarily arguing with these perspectives when presenting this poem to students in a seminar situation, I have proposed that "Goblin Market" contains much of what I understand to be "writing the body". I concentrate mainly on the arguments put forward by Luce Irigaray but I make it clear that I am not necessarily defending this particular perspective as the only one worth considering. There are undoubtedly contradictions here, and room for argument in the way I have applied this to the text. However, this approach certainly offered new possibilities of interpretation to a group of Second Year students, made up of nine men and nine women who were studying Christina Rossetti as part of a course on Pre-Raphaelite Poetry. After studying the poem, along with various essays about the poem, students were invited to ask new questions and to apply these to worked themes as a means of negotiating the relations between context and language in the poem and also to consider undoing and re-forming ideas relating to the writer, the text and the reader. The seminar, which lasted for one hour and thirty minutes, took the form of an introductory talk lasting approximately ten minutes (outlined below), in which I invited students to intervene at various points. The issues raised were then considered further in a follow-up discussion.

"Goblin Market" is considered by many to be Christina Rossetti's most accomplished poem. When it was published in 1862 it was met with unanimous critical acclaim and was accepted as a straightforward narrative for children in spite of the fact that the Victorians most certainly recognized an element of sexual ambiguity in the text. Georgina Battiscombe in her biography (1981) comments that "Even small children, too young to be aware of sex, sometimes find themselves, for no reason that they can understand or explain, obscurely puzzled and embarrassed by the poem."[16] Similarly, Cora Kaplan has suggested that "we are confronted by the poem's ability to induce fantasy, its power to stir further erotic association in the reader".[17] From the opening lines there is an ambiguity encoded in the nature of the scene:

> Morning and evening
> Maids heard the goblins cry
> 'Come buy our orchard fruits,
> Come buy, come buy:

These lines are positional insofar as they proliferate a curiosity which beckons towards the delights encoded in the fruits offered by the goblin men. At the same time the very nature of these proposed delights evokes a deliciously liberating letting-go of

16.- G. Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life*, (London: Constable, 1981), p. 106.
17.- C. Kaplan, "The Indefinite Disclosed: Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson", in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus, (London: Crook Helm, 1979), p. 67.

imposed cultural restraints. The reader is not only seduced by the description of the fruit and the pulse-like rhythm of the language, which propels the excitement of the pleasurable situation further, but is also made aware of the relational gender position of non-mortal goblin men and mortal women. The situation is actualised in the predatory characteristics of the goblin merchants against the potential gullibility of the women.

In coming to terms with the patchwork of intertextual associations in "Goblin Market", it is useful to consider the ways in which essentialism and difference have been applied in a traditional (historical) understanding of how we perceive knowledge. For example, although "Goblin Market" is written as a fantasy and has been interpreted and commented upon as such, it is necessary to question the very entity of the non-mortal men, their origin in the context of the narrative, their possession of the fruit in the first place and their overall relation to the sisters Laura and Lizzie. From the outset they are in possession of the fruit which for the most part is presented in cumulative associations of fecundity and roundness. The continuous fluidity of language and multiplicity of signifiers associating the fruit to productivity suggests that it is synonymous, in this section of the poem, with the female body. In her essay "When Our Lips Speak Together", Luce Irigaray discusses the idea of female sexuality and "difference" as this relates to women's creativity in language. She purports "if we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story".[18] I am suggesting that Christina Rossetti in "Goblin Market" consciously explores the idea of the body's language in the poetics of the poem for her own political end.

The goblin men materialize as if from nowhere; they are heard before they are seen, like gender inverted sirens tempting the sisters to their world. It is testimony to Christina Rossetti's irony that she should introduce the poem in this way. Laura, the sister who is eventually tempted, listens to their cry, but Lizzie, perhaps in parody of Odysseus, whose men stopped their ears with wax against the sirens' song, chooses to defy their power:

> 'No,' said Lizzie, 'No, no, no;
> Their offers should not harm us,
> Their evil gifts would harm us.'
> She thrust a dimpled finger
> In each ear, shut eyes and ran:

Prior to this preventive action, Lizzie cautions Laura not to "look at goblin men" and she covers her eyes for protection. It is as if the goblin men have a Medusa-like power to immobilize all those who succumb to their offers. Rossetti's inventive allusions to Greek mythology in this context suggests a revealing insight into her sense of anger against phallocentric constructs of gender difference.

18.- L. Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together" (1977), extract reprinted in *Feminisms: A Reader*, ed. Maggie Humm, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

If we accept the idea of the fruit as synonymous with the female, it is arguable, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, that the goblin men, as custodians of the fruit, are themselves part of the female psyche.[19] The poem abounds with metaphors of the body as productive entity which act as a network connecting different images into a more homogeneous political framework of ideas. As I said earlier, the goblins seemingly appear from nowhere, but do they come from the earth itself? When Lizzie defies them access to her own body later on in the poem, they scuttle and disappear back into the elements, some going back into the body of the earth, as it were, defeated into retreat as they

> Flung back her penny, kicked their fruit
> Along whichever road they took,
> Not leaving root or stone or shoot;
> Some writhed into the ground
> Some dived into the brook

(At this stage in my talk I opened up the discussion to the students, proposing a series of questions relating to the nature of the goblins' presence.) eg.

Are the goblins, who appeared initially to "own" the fruit, synonymous with patriarchal control, not simply through the agency of ideology? Is their very presence a form of threatening "other" systematically aligned to a female psyche which is conditioned to support this ideology?

(Student response was interesting insofar as they were prepared to consider Rossetti's means of undermining a phallocentric order by exposing it within its own ideological framework. They then suggested that I continue the talk so that they could pick up on issues raised here in the follow-up discussion later.)

If the goblins are a form of threatening "other" then Lizzie, who refuses the goblin fruit, is not the Victorian ideal of the obedient "angel in the house" as suggested by Gilbert and Gubar.[20] She is the sister who, in refusing to forfeit that part of herself to patriarchal control defies phallogocentrism and is more representative of Cixous's laughing Medusa.[21] (It is doubly ironic in this context that Laura, who succumbed to the goblin cry, bought their fruit with a "golden lock" of her hair). Moreover, in her refusal to submit to the goblins' enforced seduction, Lizzie is refuting their claim to power by

19.- op. cit., p. 570. In their discussion of "Goblin Market", Gilbert and Gubar suggest that "...at every point Rossetti distinguishes them (goblin men) from the *real* men who never do appear in the poem. Instead they are -were all along- the desirous little creatures so many women writers have recorded encountering in the haunted glens of their own minds, hurrying, scurrying furry ratlike *its* or *ids*, inescapable *incubi*."

20.- See Gilbert and Gubart, p. 567: "Like Lizzie, Laura has become a true Victorian angel-in-the house -selfless and smiling- so naturally (we intuitively feel the logic of this) the "haunted glen" and the "quaint" goblins have disappeared."

21.- H. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", reprinted in *New French Feminisms*, ed. E. Marks and I. de Courtivron, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980).

not allowing them to control her desires. The fruit in their hands, i.e. the fruit as female body, is merely a commodity, a means of control. The cautionary tale within this tale then takes on a new twist and proposes that forfeiting one's subjectivity, by implication one's self, to an ideology which sucks the life force out of that self is non-productive. As a result of eating goblin fruit Laura is unable to continue her life independent of that fruit which has become the centre of her whole being. In desperation she attempts to create life from the kernel she kept for this purpose, but to no avail. The section depicting this episode is significant of the futility of this delusive situation:

> One day remembering her kernel stone
> She set it by a wall that faced the south;
> Dewed it with her tears, hoped for a root,
> Watched for a waxing shoot,
> But there came none.

Laura's own body is barren, the kernel stone is a dead seed watered by the tears of non-life. Later Lizzie recalls Jeanie, who withered and died as a consequence of eating goblin fruit. In accepting goblin fruit Laura and Jeanie were the unwitting agents of self destruction in that they subjected their own autonomous sexuality to a phallocentric order which, by definition, denies what Irigaray terms an "essential femininity" (or femaleness) which is located in the female body. In her publication *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Chris Weedon comments on Irigaray's arguments, which helps to unfold this element in Rossetti's text:

Irigaray argues that the patriarchal definitions of female sexuality caused women to lose touch with their essential femininity which is located in the female body and its capacity for multiple and heterogeneous pleasure. As in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the acquisition of language produces desire and women's language is motivated by the attempts to satisfy desire...[22]

In her efforts to cure her ailing sister, Lizzie attempts to buy more fruit from the goblins. They refuse to accept her money and deny her position as an autonomous subject by taunting her with the fruit, squeezing it on her body and attempting to force it into her mouth. The language in this section is predominant with graphic phallic symbolism which leads into an obvious attempt by the goblins to rape Lizzie. Presumably their intention is to punish her for refusing to accept the fruit which they offered her in exchange for her autonomous self. The goblins taunt her with a list of fruits, which is delivered in a violently aggressive parody of the fruit which was initially offered when they first met the sisters; here the description of their fruit is predominantly phallocentric:

> "Look at our apples
> Russet and dun,
> Bob at our cherries,

22.- C. Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, (London: Blackwell, 1987), p. 63.

Bite at our peaches,
[...]
Plums on their twigs;
Pluck them and suck them,
Pomegranates, figs.

By closing off her body and denying the goblin men access, she is able to retain autonomy over her own desires:

Lizzie uttered not a word;
Would not open lip from lip
Lest they should cram a mouthful in:

Lizzie's "closed lips" signifies her determination to hold out against the goblins' attempts to violate her body and, by implication, her subjectivity, which is synonymous with her sexuality. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray argues that a woman's sexuality is multifarious in that a "woman has sex organs just about everywhere".[23] She purports that this is the basis of her creativity; her language is not confined to a phallocentric logic but, like her ability to experience pleasure in her own body, it too is multifarious and essentially female.

Later, when Lizzie confronts Laura with her fruit smeared body, she urges her to take sustenance by licking the fruit juices which the goblin men smeared on her:

Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Make much of me:

Lizzie implores Laura to "suck my juices/Squeezed from goblin fruit for you" but the juices are no longer desirable and they "scorch her lips". The goblin fruit now tastes bitter and she is released from a phallocentric construct of her own sexuality. Consequently, she is nurtured by the strength of her sister's body which contains the essence of new life.

The eroticism encoded in the language here is a form of "writing the body" and as such is significant of the creative essence of female autoeroticism as defined by Irigaray:

> ...in order for a woman to arrive at the point where she can enjoy her pleasure as a woman, a long detour by the analysis of the various systems of oppression which affect her is certainly necessary. By claiming to

23.- See Marks and Courtivron, p. 103.

> resort to pleasure alone as the solution to her problem, she runs the risk of missing the reconsideration of a social practice upon which her pleasure depends.[24]

The poem ends with the sisters both married and with children, living in harmony with the world around them, confident and aware of their own subjectivity in an ideology which might easily have robbed them of this sense of self.

I finish my discussion at this point, inviting students to comment on the perspective offered and in the session quoted response evolved, not surprisingly, on the implications of biological essentialism and language.

One male student suggested that the idea of "sexy fruit" had been conceptualised by Andrew Marvel in his poem "The Garden" and so the ideas implicated in "Goblin Market" were not new. He was quickly seized upon by a group of four women students who argued that Rossetti was, in fact, parodying the very framework in which it was conceived. They suggested that the poem could readily be a form of "writing the body" insofar as Rossetti, unlike Emily Dickinson, informs, not through gaps, but through parody. These same students referred to the proposals put forward by Shirley Foster in her essay "Speaking Beyond Patriarchy: The female voice in Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti".[25] One of the more sustaining areas of discussion, however, was narrative voice and the ways in which meaning is determined through tone and focus, which lead to a consideration of how "writing the body" is "actualised" both "as text" and "as part of the text". This, in turn, brought into focus the implication of "writing the body" for political ends. Students were interested in the idea that Christina Rossetti actually disrupts the organized symbolic order in which language is formed by supplanting this order with the imaginary semiotic "poetic" concept which is encoded in the narrative. It now seemed quite obvious that some of the students were considering critical viewpoints and utilizing other writers here in a positive and productive way. Some women students addressed the concept of woman's subjectivity in the nineteenth century in relation to the way women see themselves in today's society, which raised further discussion concerning the ending of the poem. Most students considered the ending to be too sentimental, regardless of Rossetti's intentions.

For the most part, the mixed male/female group formed an interesting basis for a discussion which involved a female poet who is writing against the ideological grain. For the most part the men were intrigued by the concept of "writing the body" insofar as it offered them scope to question the position(s) of both men and women in language and communication further. However, from my own position as a teacher it became clear that during a seminar session in which "Goblin Market" is discussed primarily from the perspective of French Feminist Theory, it is not possible to discuss all of the contradictions and the problems which inevitably arise from such a viewpoint. But, at

24.- ibid. p. 105.

25.- S. Foster, "Speaking Beyond Patriarchy: The female voice in Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti", in Wilcox et al. eds. *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

best, a consideration of some of the possibilities proved to be stimulating and thought-provoking in that students, whether they agreed with the concept of "writing the body" or not, were caught up in the debate.