Feminist thinkers have always been interested in the way the female body is “talked about, classified, disciplined, invaded, destroyed, altered, decorated, pleasured, ... and more”.¹ And the Victorian age appears to be a time in which the female body was severely disciplined, partly due to an unprecedented proliferation of discourses on sex in medicine, law, and religion. As the works of William Acton and W.R. Greg demonstrate, women were denied jouissance and were confined within domesticity, marriage and motherhood.²

However, women were banned not only from sexual pleasure but also from textual pleasure – the pleasure of authoring texts. The literary canon, which operated throughout the publishing industry, anthologies and critics, belittled women’s writings – especially poetry – by demeaning their creations as feminine, domestic, and insignificant. Under such circumstances, one cannot expect a female Victorian poet to give vent to pent-up aspirations and desires, especially to sexual ones. This essay endeavours to demonstrate the way Christina Rossetti deals with sexual matters through metaphors and symbols based on flowers and fruit in her two long narrative poems, “Goblin Market” (1862) and “The Prince’s Progress” (1866).³

The female body and sexuality plays an undeniably important role in Rossetti’s fantastic narrative poem “Goblin Market”. At first glance the poem reads like a fairy tale: two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, come across goblin men with beast-like forms selling fruit at twilight. The goblins manage to cajole Laura into buying their strange fruit. After tasting it, she pines away in a state of addiction. Lizzie decides to redeem her sister by an act of self-sacrifice. She finds the goblin men, who attack her, squeezing the juices of their fruit into her closed mouth. She comes home immersed in fruit juice. Laura kisses her, sucking the juice on her sister’s body, which helps her recover. The poem ends in a peaceful atmosphere in which the two sisters, who are now mothers, relate their experiences to their daughters.

Despite its seeming innocence and simplicity, “Goblin Market” has led to various interpretations. Rod Edmond makes an inventory of such readings as

- a Christian allegory;
- a feminist Christian allegory with a female figure;
- an allegory of sexual desire;
- a female rites of passage poem;
- a lesbian manifesto;
- a poem about the erotic life of children;
- a metaphoric statement about patterns of social destructiveness in Victorian England;
- and in psychoanalytic terms as a power struggle between mothers and children.4

Kooistra, who analyses various illustrations of “Goblin Market” such as those in *Playboy*, which turn the poem into pornographic material, claims that the poem is “about both female relationship and sexual exchange”.5 However, D.M.R. Bentley suggests that “Goblin Market” was written for merely didactic purposes, to be read aloud to “fallen women” at Highgate, as a warning about sexuality.6

This plethora of interpretations springs from the evasive and sexually charged content of the poem.7 Whatever the interpretation might be, the

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7 For further readings of the poem, see the Britta Zangen’s article in this volume,