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Rossetti's Epic Breast: Domesticity and Heroism

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<1>The concept of the epic as an embodiment of greatness—e.g. demonstrations of national spirit or universal commonality—while at the same time typically focusing on matters exclusive to men and war requires rethinking, particularly in nineteenth-century literature where distinctions between the domestic and national begin to blur. While critics have noted the shift in nineteenth-century culture and art towards domesticity, which disrupted the formally unified phallogentric ideologies and institutions of Victorian culture with the increasingly diverse expressions of women, inclusion of women epists and heroines in scholarship of the epic has remained limited. The long-standing associations of epic verse with masculine elements have tended to bar domestic issues from equal consideration as those of national and universal concern. This article considers Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862) as an example of a woman's epic that plumbs the inherent contradiction of a genre that claims universality as it upholds the ideals of a specific hegemony to instead share the ways representations and devices of female fecundity and fluidity meet the epic's need for largeness and thus redress the ways female writing may expand the reach and impact of the genre.

<2>By the time the epic arrived upon the Victorian scene, it was a form both lionized and panned. Having passed through the neoclassic and Romantic periods of mock-heroism and Miltonic aggrandizement before being summarily dismissed by Walter Pater's declaration that the lyric is "the highest and most complete form of poetry," the epic by the nineteenth century faced the possibility that it had faded into parody and obsolescence (Pater 143). Claude Rawson remarks that following the Restoration, "the status of the epic as the highest poetic genre went into a decline from which it has never recovered" (167), but at the time, there also remained those who sought to redefine and understand the genre's byzantine history. F. A.

Wolf's *Prolegomena to Homer* (1795) catalyzed a century's long conversation that prompted those like Matthew Arnold to reconsider which traditions should be fundamental in constituting epic poetry. Writers began to ask how ideals of the ancient, potentially primitive, worlds can add to the dignity of modern culture and what poetic structures may give these ideals scope. In his "Defence of Poetry" (1840), Percy Shelley maintained that an epic must declare "a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge, and sentiment, and religion, and political condition of the age" as well as those that follow (692), the implication in this exhaustive list being that the epic must contain 'all.' However, this "Homeric Question," as it has come to be known, unearthed the heterogenous differences distinguishing peoples and cultures across time and place, unmasking the genre as one that is promiscuously large, or ironically rapacious and poetically catholic. Thus, as Herbert Tucker explains, the epic has become a totalizing genre, hybridizing and subsuming the forms, histories, and ideals of classical and modern traditions, broadening its reach and perspectives (17).

<3>Despite these allowances, critics have traditionally delimited the epic to themes generally masculine in nature, e.g. war, national character, and public discourse. Charles Rowan Beye identifies these limitations in his seminal essay on the role of women in Homeric poems: "The generations of male critics apparently did not know how to accommodate women into the epic tradition" (93). More recently, Bernard Schweizer confirms, "Both in subject matter and in form, epic may well be the most exclusively gender coded of all literary genres; so much so that epic and masculinity appear to be almost coterminous" (1). The occlusion of women subject matter and perspective is most readily apparent at the turn of the nineteenth century, when those like Samuel Butler and Benjamin Farrington, returning to examinations of classical epics, declared that the *Odyssey*, implicitly inferior to other great epics like the *Iliad*, must have been written by an authoress; for the epic demonstrated the "weakness," "silliness," and "charm" of the feminine (Farrington qtd. in Clayton 2). From plots of conquest and sieges to the memorialization and legitimation of leaders and victors, the epic has been traditionally concerned with reinforcing an assumed shared sense of order and unity that is undergirded by the power of the symbolically paternal, where, as Juliet Mitchell explains in an introduction to *Feminine Sexuality*, "man [is] the norm and woman [is] what is different therefrom" (8).

<4>Interestingly, this tendency towards the singularly masculine may explain in part the relative scarcity of scholarship on Victorian epics. In Rawson's comprehensive overview of post-Restoration English epics in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, the Victorian period presents a dearth. Other than a nod to Arnold's criticism and tentative ventures into epic verse with *Sohrab and Rustum* (1853) and *Balder*

Dead (1855), Rawson glances swiftly past the Victorians, moving from William Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1799), Lord Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-24), and John Keats's *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* (1820) to T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922), Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1925), and the prose work of James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses* (1922) (167). Victorian culture presents problems for the classic epic. While traditional epics differentiate national character from domesticity, Victorian literature regularly identifies national character with domesticity and desire, frequently engaging with issues directly related to the rise of the domestic woman. This is underscored in Linda Hughes's discussion of Victorian epics in *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry*. Claiming that Victorian epics, "'made it new,' to borrow Ezra Pound's phrase," she points to the ways writers began exploring issues of sexual relations—rape, marriage, heroic love, etc.—as a new form of political power (64). To illustrate her point, she directs readers to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-85), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69) (61-64). This shift towards domestic matters is not an anachronistic observation but one effortfully championed at the time. Reflecting on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Samuel Taylor Coleridge muses, "In my judgment, an epic must either be national or mundane" or "common to all mankind," the companionship of Adam and Eve being, in his estimation, a good model for mundanity (135). Carrying forward this sentiment and philosophy, in the prologue to his influential poem, *The Angel of the House* (1854), Coventry Patmore's speaker chooses as his means of achieving poetic fame, his "Pierian Spring," not classical heroism, "The life of Arthur, or Jerusalem's Fall," but instead domestic affection, the "love that's all in all" (36-38; 40).

Fecundity, Part I: Changing the "Nature" of the Epic

<5>Only two women have been generally admitted the mantle of epist. These include Barrett Browning as mentioned above and George Eliot for her prose-form "home epic," *Middlemarch* (1871) (Marotta 403-20). Tucker pointedly excludes Rossetti's "Goblin Market" from the annals of epic poetry due to its "juvenile clip of the verse" and limitations imposed by "domestic and familial" content (18). Despite generic claims that the epic may respond agilely to narrative needs, such dismissals indicate hardened conventions that disclaim the legitimacy of domestic heroism. The epic forges its reputation as that which looms 'larger than life,' whereas 'life' seems to sit silently darning in the drawing room. In her introduction to *Heroes and Housewives*, Adeline Johns-Putra understands this duality as a perceived incompatibility between the "quiescence, sexual passivity and moral uprightness" of domestic ideology and the practice in epic literature to praise action, or activity in

the province of men and the public domain (22). However, when critics like Tucker argue that a poem like Rossetti's, though fondly characterized as "a radiant parable," cannot be examined as epic because it is not "civic and multiple," one must ask why the domestic is not considered just as large, active, civic, and multiple (18).

<6>At the time of publication, "Goblin Market" drew much criticism for the ways it appeared to innocently subsume and pastiche together male traditions. John Ruskin lamented Rossetti's work as a "calamity of modern poetry," blaming her style on a strong-stress rhythm adapted from Coleridge (355). Meanwhile George Saintsbury delights in her "Bedlam of discord," acknowledging her use of "rock-and-oak-born" English traditions, though he believed she achieved prosodic success unintentionally:

I daresay Miss Rossetti had never heard of the words 'equivalence' or 'substitution' in their prosodic meaning, and though it is extremely unlikely that she ever consciously realised Shakespeare's use of shortened and lengthened norms in, say, *Hamlet*; if she had set herself to give a demonstration of these things [...], she could hardly have succeeded better. (354)

Even in his praise of her work, such comments turn to underestimations as more likely truths, which Rossetti also encouraged. However, far from the famously self-proclaimed "one-stringed lyre" which Rossetti used to characterize her own style, the "calamitous discord" of "Goblin Market" may be instead understood as a fertile kinship with her literary heritage (Letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Spring 1870, 398). Weaving widely and gaily within the scope of the English literary canon, Rossetti demonstrates a Penelopean skill and ingenuity in manipulating multiple strands of poetics. Yet, as Barbara Clayton points out in her study of the *Odyssey* and its interwoven poetics, to weave is vaguely feminine and thus epics of this nature are more easily dismissed (5).

<7>Behind the reductive assumption that such complexity belies inferiority is the fruit of epicized writing, i.e. writing that admits the symbolically feminine and multiplicity inherent in a genre that demands greatness and dilation of scope. Critics have interpreted "Goblin Market" in a multitude of ways. The text is invaginated with allegorical meaning that explores themes of empire and home not in negation against each other but in tandem. One may point to Dante Gabriel's urgings to his sister to speak "from real abundant Nature" as an explanation for the poem's polysemy (Letter to Christina Rossetti, 8 Nov. 1853, 120), but while expounding upon a concept of "Nature," Rossetti goes beyond the aesthetics of Pre-Raphaelitism. While "universality" and "commonality" imply totalities, or a

comprehensive oneness, “Nature”—i.e. the “nature” of the spirit, body, world, and humankind—may nurture pluralities.

<8>What, then, is the “nature” which “Goblin Market” plumbs? The poem famously begins with a prodigious catalogue, inventorying twenty-nine curious fruits and berries, “much and many” (365). Rossetti devoted her life to religion, and an epic catalogue like this calls to mind several important biblical interpretations, not the least being the well-known “fruit of the Spirit” described in Galatians 5:22-23. In Galatians 5, Paul warns Christians of the contest between the flesh and spirit, counseling, “they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. [...] Let us not be desirous of vain glory” (Gal. 5:24-26). Rossetti’s sisterly dialogue, embodying a typical Christian dialectic of body and soul, as well as Lizzie’s symbolic crucifixion, as she is washed in the lusts of the flesh, are two readings that critics have investigated many times before.

<9>However, it is important to add that in her *Benedicite* study, “Green Things” (1879), Rossetti specifically identifies the fruits of the Spirit as “love, joy, and peace” (99), importantly pivoting love as higher matter in comparison to and beyond vainglorious egotism and war. In “Green Things,” Rossetti also stresses the significance of appreciating the “beauty and pleasure” of “all green things,” taking particular delight in their variety of color, and in “all green things,” locates an “inexhaustible cheerfulness” (96-97). In the stunning arrangement displayed in the poem’s opening lines, the catalogue foregrounds this motif of looking, not just to foreshadow Laura’s apparent misdeed but to appeal to audience care: to look out and after each other.⁽¹⁾ The colors also stress the beauty of fruit to call attention to the cyclicity of time, “morning and evening” and “evening by evening” (1; 32). That is, only after the fall may come redemption. Thus, this epic catalogue begins and ends with the apple and fig, both of which invoke thoughts of the biblical Fall, but also washes these fruits with those of more hopeful hue. As readers proceed through the twenty-nine fruits “much and many,” the colors translate into palettes of dawn and dusk, emerging from red and yellow (5-6) to pinkening and then deepening daubs of purple and blue (7-12) which then settle into green and black (13) before once again repeating (red in line 14; purple in lines 20-21; blue in line 22; green and black in lines 23-24). The sequence ends by blooming once more into red “Currants and gooseberries, / Bright-fire-like barberries, / [and] Figs” (26-28) finished by the yellow “citron” (29). The return of evening into morn promises grace after the fall. This “nature” embraces that which is beyond.

<10>The image of “orchard fruits” as an allegorical space of temptation is also common throughout western literature (3). As a notable precedent in the epic

tradition, the catalogued wood of Errors in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* comes to mind. However, of more importance may be the evolution of such cataloguing to represent Britain's imperial maw. The longest English-language epic was penned in the nineteenth century. John Fitchett's *King Alfred* (1841-42) boasts more than an astounding 131,000 lines (nearly three times longer than the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, and *Paradise Lost* combined). This epic wields its prodigious length to reproduce and celebrate England's imperial bounty. Anticipating "Goblin Market," *King Alfred* catalogues "unnumber'd" fruits, delivered familiarly by elves over the course of twenty-five lines to "magic sisters" (3.24.639-64). Unlike "Goblin Market," The scene pits the seeds of the fairy feminine against man, or King Alfred, in a contest of earth and empire. Rossetti may have read Fitchett's epic. While widely criticized, its outrageous prolixity kept it in the public eye for decades after its publication. Despite its blunt stylings, it also succeeds in reifying the imperial vanity of English gigantism which Rossetti condemned. Reversing these androcentric zeitgeists, "Goblin Market" marries Rossetti's devout faith with an historic "nature" that appropriates the fairy feminine and its ancient privileging to cast change, like the seasons, and inspire progress over time.

Fecundity, Part II: The Epic Question Refigured

<11>Sandra Gilbert suggests that "Goblin Market" provides a "revisionary critique" of *Paradise Lost* (369). Many such pregnant asides have been made suggesting the poem's cousinship in the family of epics. Simon Humphries concedes the parallels between *Goblin Market* to *Paradise Lost* and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96), noting "how much we ordinarily underinterpret her work" (410). Despite his fault-finding comments above, Tucker also acknowledges "the overtly epicizing manner and content of several standout similes" (18). Likewise, Erik Gray compares Rossetti's catalogue of similes to those of the *Iliad* (294), and Kathleen Vejvoda compares "Goblin Market" to Milton's *Comus* (1634), which she identifies as prescient of Milton's distinct epic style (555).

<12>Like other epics, "Goblin Market" sought to capture the spirit of the age. It asks questions that had been made common for many a Victorian family: What is the place of woman? What can she give? These questions subvert the more typical epic question, "how fall'n," crystallized by Milton as the preoccupation of kings and kingdoms or rebels with causes (1.84). Whereas a classical epic ends with the man returning home succeeding or failing in his quest, the domestic epic continues the journey, displaying the narrative scotoma berthed in stories of 'might and main.' As the narrator of Eliot's *Middlemarch* concludes, "Every limit is a beginning as well

as an ending [... Marriage] is still the beginning of the home epic” (779). This is not to say that the domestic quest must likewise entail violent victories and losses. Domestic epics, from Eliot and Barrett Browning to Rossetti, chastise the treatment of love as dominion. It challenges the heroic love of epics like Tennyson’s *Idylls*, where King Arthur and Queen Guinevere grimly declare, “Behold, thy doom is mine. / Let chance what will, I love thee to the death!” (1.466-67). This chivalric perception of love as conquest instead gives way, as Rossetti explains in her devotional work, *Letter and Spirit* (1883), to a higher harmony: “The paramount motive for what we do or leave undone [...] is love: not fear, or self-interest, or even hatred of sin, or sense of duty, but direct filial love to God” (35). Such honest love, to borrow Robert Burton’s term, rewrites the higher purpose of the modern hero, abolishing languages of subjection, transgression, and imperialism. Thus, while it is true that “Goblin Market” may be explained as a narrative of the Fall of Woman (or the fallen woman), as will be addressed below, it also challenges the larger patriarchal traditions that glorify and entrench the values of war in all domains of life, positioning instead the ubiquity and primacy of love.

<13>This is true in content and form. The poem’s polysemy hands readers greater autonomy, making this feminist epic a narrative less about authorial control and more about charitable education. In its bid to broaden the vistas of domesticity, “Goblin Market” prefaces the question, ‘what can a woman give,’ with the simpler, ‘what is woman.’ To answer this, “Goblin Market” must work to dispel the myths that come with a heritage of antifeminist imagery. Victorian art is everywhere peopled with representations of women as Lilithian. Dante Gabriel indulged in the trend, reproducing Lilith in his illustrious painting, *Lady Lilith* (1868), the accompanying sonnet, “Body’s Beauty” (1868), and a ballad, “Eden Bower” (1869). Other major works of the nineteenth century likewise illuminate the ubiquity of this myth, including John Keats’s “Lamia” (1820), Marie Corelli’s *The Soul of Lilith* (1897), and George MacDonald’s *Lilith* (1895).

<14>Lilith is a condensation of Abrahamic beliefs that blame women as the precipitants of cultural perversity. Accordingly, her borders can be promiscuous. In an age of rising domesticity, she is fundamentally anathema, the first wife of Adam and an original virago whose literary history draws her as a child-killer and lustful seductress of men. She is also frequently blurred with the myth of Lamia, another child-eater from Greek mythology, lending her a beguiling serpentine body, as well as Eve, whose name, Clement of Alexandria asserts, comes from the Hebrew, “Hevia,” meaning “serpent” (27). These inexact distinctions have been meaningfully proliferated in British literature. Dante Gabriel’s “Eden Bower” fuses the sins of Eve and Lilith, and in *Paradise Lost*, when Adam discovers Eve’s betrayal, he figures

her as Lamian: “Out of my sight, thou serpent, that name best / Befits thee with him leagued, thyself as false and hateful” (10.867-68). These depictions of women as ‘fruitful’—fertile and thus sinful—importantly confuse the ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ states of womanhood and constellate the liberal reach of the illiberal Victorian perceptions of fallen women as those invariably responsible for contaminating Britain’s ideals of matrimonial stability and domestic family. “Goblin Market” seeks to detangle these conversations of the ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ woman and thus her roles and responsibilities in the nation.

<15>The poem opens its first epic simile suggestively, painting Laura’s body as salaciously Lilithian:

Laura stretched her gleaming neck
Like a rush-imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch
When its last restraint is gone. (81-86)

The writing predates Dante Gabriel’s *Lady Lilith*, which became known for its accentuation of the model’s, Fanny Cornforth’s, muscular neck. Still, in Rossetti’s passage, readers may recognize the same serpentine throat in Laura’s outstretched “gleaming” neck, a nude promise of woman’s tempting ideality seemingly announcing and awaiting pleasure. In the rest of the simile, Laura appears as Zeus’s Leda, the lily milk splashed from Hera’s ravished breast, the fertile lunar light of Diana, and spiritual vessel of the Virgin Mary. In this simile, Laura is the purity before the corruption. Dante Gabriel’s painting of *Lady Lilith* tricks the viewer’s vanity by teasing the male gaze with a story of women’s self-absorption; it forgives the glance and, at first glance, these images may likewise tease suggestions of sexual appetite through apparent ideations of motherhood. However, each image freezes the moments perched tenuously on the brink of change, before flight, flowering, waxing, and swelling. Rossetti reminds: before the goblins, her Lilith was a child.

<16>As many have noted, Rossetti was an early and prominent advocate for fallen women volunteering at Christ Church Albany Street and St. Mary Magdalene Home. Beginning in the 1850s, she thrust herself into the heart of the red-light district of London and worked to combat the effects upon women of what was at the time termed the “Great Social Evil,” the problem of prostitution. The challenge was not just that it was up to women to uplift other women but that victims were often children, an issue that would be addressed later by the Offences against the Person

Act 1875 and Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which raised the ages of consent first to 13 then 16. Additionally, the problem of prostitution was perpetuated by cultural precepts that condoned the behavior of men whose reprehensible treatment of women ran collaterally with their acts of national heroism. Tabitha Sparks explores the contexts of this problem as framed by the Crimean War (1854-56). Upon coming home, physicians found that venereal diseases had become endemic in the ranks of the British soldiers, and to stymie the problem, Parliament passed the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, which allowed the arrest of women suspected of prostitution. The response criminalized women suspected of disease while pardoning men as patients in distress. Thus, the laws codified a feedback loop that overlooked the exploitation of impoverished girls and reinforced perceptions that women's sexuality is pathological and unnatural, breeding prejudice in the name of national defense (Sparks 115-16).

<17>War did not stop at shores but imbricated women and children, and this cultural trauma is evident in the language of assault which follows the girls home in "Goblin Market." Upon Laura's first approach to the goblin men, they compass in militaristic fashion, locked in a phalanx, "troop[ing]" up the mossy glen, repeating their shrill (battle) cry, "Come buy, come buy" (88; 90):

They stood stock still upon the moss,
Leering at each other,
Brother with queer brother;
Signalling each other,
Brother with sly brother. (92-96)

Lizzie is then beset by comrades in arms:

Like a royal virgin town
Topped with gilded dome and spire
Close beleaguered by a fleet
Mad to tug her standard down. (418-21)

Meanwhile Laura's salvation is figured as a martial victory, "like a flying flag when armies run" (506).

<18>At the same time that "Goblin Market" locates some of the consequences of war on the home front, it refigures the belief that women are the breeders of cultural decay. Indeed, the goblins represent how the girls are accosted not by the monstrous feminine but *hommes fatales*. The goblins' gifts—a basket, a plate, a golden dish heavily laden with fruits, and a crown woven of seemingly innocuous flowers—

bespeak of a false paradise of matrimonial sovereignty. Thus, Laura is seduced into a market that threatens to circuitously reproduce fallen women.

Fluidity: Invaginated Heroism and the Maternal ‘Order’

<19>After answering the question, “What is woman,” the poem asks, “What can a woman give?” The question inverts those epic narratives anchored in conquest, protection, and possession. In the Anglican Sisterhood, Rossetti found a sororal unity that sought to strengthen women across the fissures of class (Senaha 117). These sisterhoods empowered women by encouraging not passivity and submission but action and ‘work,’ principles embodied by one of Rossetti’s chief role models, Florence Nightingale, whom she not only met in the 1850s but attempted to join as a field nurse for the Crimean War (Nightingale rejected Rossetti due to her youth and inexperience) (Packer 92). Rossetti’s actions put in practice a heroic feminism that Nightingale underscores in her essay “Cassandra” (1860) to leave the drawing room, “utilize,” and “make use of the noble rising heroisms of our own day” and deliver fallen women once again to their own sense of responsibility and autonomy (387; her emphasis).

<20>“Goblin Market” explores the complications that may foil a woman’s commitment to this duty, firstly within the institutionalized abrogations of women’s sexuality that, secondly, accompany heroic patriarchal demands to further lineage and legacy. Critics have read “Goblin Market” as an allegory of sexual and spiritual transgression before, and significantly, they have interpreted the fruit as symbolic poison, a typological sign for sin or disobedience (Arseneau 122-25). However, Laura’s illness may be more literal. She exhibits the exact physiological symptoms Victorians were told to expect in hypersexuality. According to Charles Knowlton’s *Fruits of Philosophy* (1832), a physician’s treatise on sexual health, a woman may fall ill from either celibacy or licentiousness, her “warmest feelings wither[ing]” away in abstinence or her uterine system collapsing from debilitating fatigue, a cause of sterility typically observed in ‘working girls,’ i.e. the ‘wrong’ kind of work (23; 66). “Goblin Market” offers incisive commentary on this Biblical double bind. Laura falls into a state of debility after receiving the “gifts” of the goblins (66). Finding herself deaf and blind to the goblin men, she turns “cold as stone,” and although she plants a “kernel-stone” in hopes of cultivating her own fruit, the seed never germinates, and her own vitality wanes “as the fair full moon doth turn / To swift decay and burn / Her fire away” (Rossetti 253; 281; 278-280). Like the moon, waxing and waning, Laura’s infertility is an oscillating symbol of society’s contradicting expectations. To be fertile, one must be pure; yet one cannot be pure in order to be fertile. The subject of progeniture is one that encompasses

past, present, and future. The charge in Genesis 1:28 to “be fruitful, and multiply” drives the nature of many epics, to fathom the origins of one’s being, to validate one’s lineage, and to comprehend one’s own “nature.” In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, it is “Woman’s Seed” that promises to restore hope for humankind (12.601). However, “Goblin Market” makes clear that seed without care, without a certain kind of “work” as Nightingale said, is not enough.

<21>The work needed is that of heroic motherhood. In an 1878 letter to Augusta Webster, a vigorous advocate for women’s suffrage, Rossetti insisted that motherhood empowers women to defeat all adversaries: “if anything ever does [...make a woman] full grown a hero and giant, it is that might maternal love,” the epic breast being the apotheosis marshaling forth the thronging discourse exploring women’s natural and national roles (399). Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile* (1762) is an important starting point to understanding the multivalency of this kind of republican motherhood. In *Émile*, Rousseau calls upon mothers in the name of the state to nurse their own children. He decried wet nursing and believed that by nursing their own children, mothers may preserve and nourish the natural order, i.e. the “naturalness” and thus the “whole moral order” of a republic:

Do you want to bring everyone back to his first duties? Begin with mothers, [...] let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves, nature’s sentiments will be awakened in every heart, the state will be repopulated. This first point, this alone, will bring everyone back together. Let women once again become mothers, men will soon become husbands and fathers again. (qtd. in Kukla 30)

Here, the question of “nature” reemerges. Popular belief in the nineteenth century held that milk may be the origin and medium of national degeneration. As physician William Buchan’s widely read *Domestic Medicine* (1769) and O. S. Fowler’s *Maternity* (1848) demonstrate, popular belief was that unprincipled mothers may pass their vices onto their children through the porous and capricious breast. Thus, Fowler fervently stresses that, “EVERY CONCEIVABLE state of the maternity affects the embryo,” and repeatedly reminds mothers that they only have themselves to blame for the dissolution of their children if they partake in ‘unnatural’ ways (405). In contrast, Rousseau’s dilated conception of “nature,” which intertwines women’s sexuality with their civic duty, discharges fears that natural sexuality is only ever criminal and deforming, finding in it instead its curative properties. In this discourse, motherhood becomes the epitome of nature and thus birth and berth of nations.

<22>In answering the call to write from “abundant Nature,” Rossetti glorifies these heroic acts. The text peaks with Lizzie and Laura embracing in maternal fluidity and affirming their spiritual and civic purpose as mothers. In the valley, the sisters embark upon a journey to love and liberate each other. Descending into the glen, Lizzie transvalues the “Goblin pulp and goblin dew” into juices her sister may in turn safely imbibe (470). Commanding Laura to “hug me, kiss me, suck my juices,” she nurses Laura back to health (468). The bitter syrup which heals Laura not only typifies Eucharistic love but suggests the revolutionary qualities of mothers’ milk, and when Lizzie embraces Laura, a rhapsodic simile ensues. The moment Lizzie bares her sticky body to Laura is a moment of operatic freedom. The consummated sororal act delivers Laura, “like a caged thing freed,” from the Molochian valley of iniquity and allows her instead the security to emerge reclaimed from the battery of *hommes fatales* (505). It is only after Lizzie nurses Laura—after the return from the goblin glen to the initial “point,” the breast and truth of Nature, as Rousseau says—that they “reform themselves” and realize their gift, having already given of themselves, to “become mothers.” The call for unashamed visible maternity is iconically revolutionary. Consider Honoré Daumier’s *La République* (1848) or William Adolphe Bouguereau’s *Alma Parens* (*The Motherland*, 1883) which feature the national and colonial mother breastfeeding her citizens. This new state of womanhood reconciles the “natural” (previously perceived as ill) condition with a healthy one. In the multivalent allusion to salvific nursing and return to their natural states, they articulate what Dr. Walter Coles comes to proclaim twenty years later, that “breast is nature’s medicine” (120).

<23>Ultimately, the issues confronted by the poem elevate those associated with womanhood to the larger question of Nature itself. As Fowler instructs her readers, “Nature alone can remove disease” (210). The blights of society must be healed, not by the cleaving thrusts and swings of heroic pretension but by pure homeopathic charity. This distinction is important as it highlights the tentative shift, progressive albeit halting, in western culture to rethink the paradigms of impregnable domination which have undergirded metanarratives of home and state and to invite instead principles of responsive sympathy. The discourses of poetics, politics, gender, and health here interweave. In medicine, nineteenth-century homeopathic practices and techniques had begun replacing heroic medicine. Instead of healing by contrasts or battling emphatically against an ailment (e.g. icing a fever or bloodletting), homeopathy purported to cure like with like, *similia similibus curentu*, as said by the father of homeopathic medicine, Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843). Assuming ailments were natural in origin (rather than inflicted by God), Victorian homeopathy relied upon the development of pharmaceuticals derived from mineral, plant, and animal products, i.e. nature. Hahnemann felt certain homeopathy was the way to “a

true *Materia Medica*,” the medical material, or pharmacology, being a “pure language of nature” (qtd. in Whorton 54). Envisioning women as an embodiment of nature, Dr. Coles thus presciently concludes, breast is best.

<24>Confusion in interpretations of “Goblin Market” is often a result of trying to muscle the poem into a Procrustean bed of opposites, even though, as is often conceded, Lizzie and Laura are more alike than not. In a study of conceptualizations of pain and pleasure in nineteenth-century literature, Eijun Senaha considers that Laura’s rebellion is an attempt to mitigate her suffering as a ‘caged woman’ and that such punishment as Lizzie endures in order to save her sister is a necessary reminder of the consequences pleasure breeds (1; 5). In other words, while some might suggest that pain absolves one of pleasure deterring any further wantonness in the female populace, a reading like Senaha’s maintains a path to pleasure albeit through pain, pain being the means of strengthening women preparing them to defiantly pursue pleasure and ultimately being a source of pleasure (124). Senaha once again identifies Nightingale’s essay, “Cassandra,” as a source of Rossetti’s inspiration: “Give us back our suffering, we cry to Heaven in our hearts—suffering rather than indifference; for out of nothing comes nothing. But out of suffering may come the cure. Better have pain than paralysis!” (qtd. in Senaha 120-21). The implication in Senaha’s argument is that inherent in Victorian motherhood is everlasting contradiction and suffering, a woman’s life being a perpetual attempt and trial to balance the Falstaffian twins of pain and pleasure, just as Lizzie and Laura are propelled to find balance in each other. However, this approach threatens to retire once again to the arena of economics and exchange; it contends that pleasure must be paid for. This view offers some truth in that Lizzie and Laura both attempt to barter for a sample of goblin fruit while Laura pays the price comprising of a virginal lock and shed tear “more rare than pearl,” but even in Nightingale’s statement above, it is not the obverse of pain that pain cures but pain itself (127). As she says, “out of nothing comes nothing”—same begets same.

<25>Just as it is Laura’s pursuit of pleasure that impairs her ability to continue experiencing pleasure, it is their sisterly bond and similitude that lifts Laura’s ailment. It is with an actual homeopathic remedy, a “fiery antidote” as bitter as “wormwood” reduced from the same juices responsible for Laura’s poisoned state that Lizzie cures her sister (559; 494). The elixir is also procured during Lizzie’s self-inflicted episode of suffering, and thus Lizzie suffers to end suffering. Some have read the narrative as a titillation of autoerotic desire which handily fits within the language of similitudes (Bennett 194). However, whereas these readings are discerning of deviant self-gratification, the key to the nature of this domestic epic, the epiphany of Rossetti’s verse, is not woman’s public shame (it is not conquest

and suppression) but her public selflessness, the giving of oneself and relinquishment of vanity (again, same begets same). It is her effacement under the obscuring juices of communal ills, her conspicuous surrender to her own natural impulses, and an empathy that, like the poem's form, erases restraints.

“Milton’s Bogey”: Women Epists and the Anxiety of Authorship

<26>“Goblin Market” thus contains much. Motherhood, work, and selflessness sustain economic and political reproductions. Rossetti’s devout faith and civic duty found in Christian love, the homeopathic language of the poem, and its constant reinforcement of and return to “abundant Nature” evince a panoramic attitude that may be called a prototype of the ecological feminine, multiplying the dimensions of nationhood. In scholarship on the poem, many often quote William Michael Rossetti who may suggest dismissing any in-depth reading of Rossetti’s verse: “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” (459). However, it should be noted that immediately following this statement, he also concedes, “Still the incidents are such as to be at any rate suggestive” (459).

<27>Women epists face many challenges. Gilbert claims that a Miltonic “bogey” roots women’s writings with “anxieties about patriarchal poetry” (Gilbert 368). Milton’s *Paradise Lost* elevates Adam, blames Eve, and confusingly defines the act of creation as aggressively male in origin (Gilbert 368). While Gilbert speaks about poetry broadly, she implies the epic as a cradle for the literary heritage that naturalizes a multidimensional exclusion of women from the most cosmic and poetic acts of creation, not only from heroic roles but a canon of epopoeia.

<28>One poetess faced these challenges headlong. Barrett Browning through her titular character, Aurora, famously confronts this Goliath of canonicity. Aurora agrees with contemporaries that the epic must reflect the spirit of the age, but she is determined to defy the phallogentrism which has typified that spirit:

The critics say that epics have died out
With Agememnon and the goat-nursed gods;
I’ll not believe it [...]
[The epists’] sole work is to represent the age,
[...To] catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving double-breasted Age:
That, when the next shall come, the men of that

May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
'Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked!
This bosom seems to beat still, or at least
It sets ours beating: this is living art,
Which thus presents and thus records true life.' (5.139-141; 202; 214-222).

Aurora reifies Britain's national spirit as fiercely maternal. The volcanic breast erupting with "living art" refuses the passive existence that comes with being an object of male desire and instead disentombs the epic heroine's autonomous governance, "behold[ing]" itself. As discussed, this conviction in the force of an expressive breast belies the turmoiled discourses exploring female bodily sovereignty. Rossetti's writings reinforce these points.

<29>Yet, it should be noted that, with great admiration and propriety, Rossetti disavowed bearing any likeness to Barrett Browning. It is clear that the two shared common interests. Both excoriated the vapid idealization of women and demanded fuller portrayals of their sex, at times echoing each other with startling likeness. In Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio" (1896) and *Aurora Leigh*, the speakers chant in unison against men who purblindly "dream of something we are not," "Not as she is [...] Not as she is, but as she fills his dream" (Barrett Browning 1.452-63; Rossetti 13-14). In a letter on Rossetti's "The German-French Campaign, 1870-1871" (1875), one of Rossetti's seemingly more political poems, Dante Gabriel remarks upon its similarity to Barrett Browning's style, perhaps recalling Barrett Browning's "Mother and Poet" (1862) which likewise depicts a mother mourning over national circumstances (3 Dec. 1875, 323). Yet, in Rossetti's own note published with "The German-French Campaign," she insists that her aim was to express "not political bias" but "human sympathy" (208), and in his letter to Rossetti, Dante Gabriel likewise cautions his sister against leaning too freely into such "falsetto muscularity" (3 Dec. 1875, 323). Constantly counseled thus, Rossetti maintained throughout her life that she could never obtain the "many-sidedness" of Barrett Browning's political and philanthropic achievements (Letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Spring 1870, 398).

<30>Meanwhile, the ambition to one day compose an epic of her own preoccupied Rossetti's mind. When Dante Gabriel would prod her to try her hand at this highest of poetic achievements, she would good-naturedly demur, in her letters writing: "[I] plead goodwill but inability" and "please remember that 'things which are impossible rarely happen'" (10 Feb. 1865, 77; Mar. 1865, 89). However, Rossetti's modesty has a history of deflecting the attention of critics. Self-deprecatingly, she once insisted to her brother, "Women are not Men" (Letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti,

Spring 1870, 398). Such statements should be read not as blushing retreats but declarations, in this case that the heroism of women and men must be distinct. In “The Lowest Room” (1864), Rossetti posits a theory describing how women’s heroism may differ from that of men. She rejects the barbaric vanity of “Homer’s sting” that compels women to ask, “Why should not you, why should not I / Attain heroic strength” (28; 115-16). Originally titled “A Fight over the Body of Homer: Sit Down in the Lowest Room,” this poem conspicuously participates in the Homeric Question. Two sisters debate the values of classical antiquity against Christianity and weigh women’s rewards in each. As “The Lowest Room” comes to a close, “the Archangelic trumpet-burst” directs readers to the virtues of “the lowest place” suggesting that women’s heroism can be found in self-abnegation and humility (278; 271). As Jesus instructs in Luke 14:10-11: “But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room [...] For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” “The Lowest Room” suggests heroics for a newly domestic age centering not on vanity but modesty and consideration, principles which she practiced in authorship. Rossetti wrote “The Lowest Room” in 1856, before she began composing “Goblin Market” in 1859 and long before the 1865 letter mentioned above evidencing her brother’s “unflagging prodment” to write an epic (Crump, notes, 234, 301; Letter to Dante Rossetti, Mar. 1865, 89). Careful contemplations led Rossetti to consistently refuse invitations to the field of virile authorial competition which attends epic writing, influencing her instead towards periphrasis.

<31>Where classic epists tend to present clarion values and histories, Rossetti’s refusal to participate in a tradition of heroic vanity may seem confusing, but the problem Rossetti identifies repeatedly is that women have suffered from too many “points” that have been too rigidly defined. Lizzie is not supposed to be a paragon of virtue nor Laura an ingénue. Such views are simply too restrictive, and the epic, already a form of expansive scope, here becomes a poetic playground. The mothers of “Goblin Market” combat impulses to denature women presenting instead an epic breast, which offers suppler attitudes.

Notes

(1)Indeed, the original title of the poem, “Peep at the Goblins,” emphasizes visuality.(^)

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