June 1994

Protective Pastoral: Innocence and Female Experience in William Blake's Songs and Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market

June Sturrock

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
"For though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The twenty-third psalm has been offered as comfort to the sick and the grieving for thousands of years now, with its image of God as the good shepherd and the soul beloved of God as the protected sheep. This psalm, and such equally well-known passages as Isaiah’s "He shall feed his flock as a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs in his arms" (40. 11), together with the specifically Christian version: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10. 11, 14), have obviously affected the whole pastoral tradition in European literature. Among other effects the concept of God as shepherd has allowed for development of the protective implications of classical pastoral. The pastoral idyll—as opposed to the pastoral elegy—suggests a safe, rural world in that corruption, confusion and danger are placed elsewhere—in the city. In later pastoral, the pastoral of the Christian period, the shepherd’s can be seen as a world of both physical and spiritual tending and care. The late eighteenth and nineteenth century, a period of strong Romantic and post-Romantic preoccupation with human development, could thus associate the pastoral with childhood and the early stages of development: in the early books of The Prelude, for instance, the young poet has both liberty and nurturing within his rural environment. Yet only William Blake in the Songs of Innocence and of Experience and later Christina Rossetti in Goblin Market seem to exploit fully the protective implications of pastoral in connection with the early stages of maturation. Moreover, they alone foreground the female in connection with protective pastoral, variously exploring the implications of the historically determined understanding of woman as protected protector. This paper explores the contrast between the use of pastoral in the two works and the way this contrast parallels their different interpretation of the construction of the feminine.

Both Goblin Market and Songs of Innocence and of Experience deal with the emergence from childhood or a childlike state. Human development in the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is invariably described in Miltonic or biblical terms, and the pastoral of both texts is obviously Edenic. The title page of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* shows the fallen Adam and Eve bowed down among the flames, their nakedness covered with leaves; inevitably in such a setting the text—"Songs of Innocence and of Experience, showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul"—will be read in terms of the narrative of the Fall. Individual songs include gardens ("The Garden of Love," "A Poison Tree"), inauspicious trees bearing tempting fruit ("A Poison Tree," "The Human Abstract"), the question of creation ("The Lamb," "The Tiger"), and the relation of creator and creation, human and otherwise ("The Lamb," "On Another's Sorrow," "Cradle Song").3 Similarly *Goblin Market*—pastoral in its exclusively rural setting, its idyllic quality, and its use of traditional images—is inescapably a Genesis story: it involves an arbitrary taboo, forbidden fruit, and the potentially mortal consequences of disobedience—another movement from innocence to experience.

Pastoral innocence here is the innocence of childhood. Both Blake and Rossetti create works that are formally—indeed commercially—associated with childhood. Not only do the *Songs of Innocence* frequently concern children, they resemble in physical and literary form—in their small size, in the fact and the nature of their illustration, in their simple, repetitive diction, in their use of quatrains and other simple stanza forms—the publications that were aimed at the children's book market in the late eighteenth century. *Goblin Market* with its short, irregular rhyming lines,4 concrete and colloquial diction, proverbs (422–23, 320), and fairy tale elements certainly captured a children's market, bizarre though it may seem as a children's poem.5 Both texts indirectly associate the traditional biblical and Miltonic version of the infancy of humanity with individual human infancy, a condition of necessarily protracted dependence on the protection of others, and traditionally female others.

For Eve moves in both Edens, Blake's as well as Rossetti's. The *Songs of Innocence* are notoriously full of images of females (human and ovine mothers, nurses) as well as female imagery—bowers, nests, cradles ("The Ecchoing Grove" 7, "The Blossom" 5, "A Cradle Song" passim, "Night" 3–7, 17, "On Another’s Sorrow" 17–20). Its world, according to Johnson, is "manifestly uterocentric" and "takes seriously the nursery, the mother-child relationship, the domestic or private sphere" (61). Later Blake would continue to associate the female and the pastoral in the world of Beulah.6 *Goblin Market*, in its turn, is directly, exclusively concerned with women. In both works the pastoral is

3. As far as the *Songs of Innocence* are concerned, this Edenic quality is retrospective; that is, it seems more Edenic in terms of the *Songs of Experience* and their implications of the Fall. As Stanley Gardner points out, the world of innocence includes no gardens: "they are private places cultivated in Experience" (137).
4. Notoriously distressing to Ruskin (Battiscounce 99).
5. McGillis, who deals with *Goblin Market* as a work for children though he notes that it was not written for children, says that *Goblin Market* and *Sing-Song* continue to appear on publishers' children's lists (210). Articles on the poem (such as Watson's) continue to appear in *Children's Literature*.
6. "Blake's pastoral realm is Beulah, a feminine and moony place where the Fall into Generation commences. It is 'threefold,' sexual and associated with a mother's encircling arms" (Wagenknecht 142).
strongly associated with the female and with the condition of innocence. Yet there is a significant contrast between the way the two poets, man and woman, construct female innocence and experience within the pastoral world; that contrast and its implications warrant a closer examination.

The _Songs of Innocence_ exploit the protective implications of pastoral: the sheep and the lambs are not bound for the shearer and the butcher but are at rest in the shepherd’s vigilant care: “He is watchful when they are in peace/For they know when their Shepherd is nigh” (“The Shepherd” 7–8). The pastoral relationship between ward and guardian is constantly invoked: the dreamer sleeps in an “Angel-guarded bed” (“A Dream” 2), as does the infant in “A Cradle Song” (7–8). The paradisal lion lies down with the lamb to “guard over the fold” (“Night” 47). In “A Dream” there are four or six guardians, according to Dike (362)—angel, dreamer, glow-worm-watchman, beetle and perhaps the parental ants; in fact, for the mother ant being lost is distressing because of her concern for her children rather than for herself (9–12). The illustration to “Infant Joy” shows a baby protected in its mother’s arms, while both are protected within the petals of a flower. God’s primary role in several poems is that of protector: the Little Black Boy and his mother both see God as shepherd (20, 24), while in the illustration to this poem Jesus is represented as the good shepherd among his sheep; and in “Little Boy Found” God appears to the child as “his father in white” and leads him home to his mother (3–6).

In an idyll of protection women are especially associated with care: the common female images of bower, nest, cradle are, after all, images of safekeeping. The title page of the _Songs of Innocence_ (1789) shows a woman (mother or nurse) with two children. The Chimney Sweeper and the Little Black Boy both instantly place themselves in terms of their mothers: “When my mother died I was very young”; “My mother bore me in the southern wild.” The mothers in “The Ecchoing Green” (24), “The Little Black Boy,” “The Little Boy Found,” “Cradle Song,” and “A Dream” all apparently exercise protection without restraint—the child can “play till the light fades away/ And then go home to bed” (“A Nurse’s Song” 13–14). The mother is clearly preferred to the father as an image of safekeeping. Yet all this protection implies danger and fear. The care of shepherd, mother, nurse implies threats to child or lamb. As Dike points out, these songs frequently suggest the approach of night, and of course the _Songs of Experience_ begin as the Bard calls the Earth—“the lapsed Soul” (5)—to realize that the night is past and the dawn has come: “Night is worn/And the morn/Rises from the slumbrous mass” (“Introduction” 13–15). But the Earth, significantly the first female voice in the world of experience, only sees darkness and her chains.

Blake’s Thel runs screaming from the terrors of the world of experience and returns to her safe pastoral world (6. 21–22), and the _Songs of Experience_ show

---

7. As Dike notes in an illuminating article, the shepherd is the follower of his sheep and so loses authority. He is presented “exclusively as a guardian” (360).
8. Gardner speaks of “the virtues of paternity in Innocence” as being “singularly and pointedly negative” (75).
a similar uneasiness about the role of woman outside the valleys of innocence. In the (non-pastoral) world of experience the association between protection and the female persists, but it becomes destructive. The female is frequently associated here with a harmful self-protection ("Nurse’s Song," "The Angel," "My Pretty Rose Tree"), which is in fact self-destructive as well as destructive of others. The maiden queen who arms her “fears/With ten thousand shields and spears” ("The Angel" 11–12) deprives her angel as well as herself. The pretty rose tree suffers from jealousy, and the gardener/husband has only the perversive delight of her thorns ("My Pretty Rose Tree" 8). Not only the sexual female but also the maternal female is threatening in this context. The protective parent in *Songs of Experience* is harmfully restrictive as is shown in the words of Ona’s father in "A Little Girl Lost," and the behavior of both parents in "The Schoolboy." The strongest and most pernicious parent figure is the mother as mother nature in the late addition "To Tirzah," the embodiment of all that deprives the human of liberty:

```
Thou, Mother of My Mortal Part
With cruelty didst mould my Heart
And with false self-deceiving tears
Didst bind my Nostrils Eyes & Ears;

Didst close my tongue in senseless clay
And me to mortal life Betray.
The Death of Jesus set me free:
Then what have I to do with thee?
```

(9–16)

Blake writes in an historical context in which the qualities valued and rewarded in women include chastity and fragility, and the role most respected for a woman is that of mother—a context, that is, in which women, being vulnerable and bound to the more vulnerable, are associated inevitably with sexual and physical self-protectiveness and also with the protection of others; the feminine is inevitably associated with the fearful, the threatened. For Blake these associations are positive only within the sheltered world of pastoral: here what Mellor calls their “passive but giving” (7) qualities seem appropriate; the feminine has a (limited) value in relation to infancy. The same associations become negative in the *Songs of Experience*: women here, according to Mellor, are “passive aggressive” (13); they suggest what binds and what accedes to bondage, what restricts and what stifles.

*Goblin Market*, like *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, connects protective and self-protective behavior with women; it immediately establishes the context of this behavior, the perpetual threat to young women: “Morning and evening/Maids heard the goblins cry” (1–2), both tempting them and threatening them. Lizzie and Laura, who are implicitly placed as without parents and

9. Thel’s fears keep her in her pastoral world and prevent her from entering the world of experience, but *The Book of Thel* is less clearly judgmental than the *Songs of Experience*.

10. Erðman dates this poem as later than 1803 (800).
responsible for themselves and for each other, both react to the temptations of the goblins’ call to “come buy” (3) with caution. It is in fact the more adventurous Laura who first repeats the ban:

Lie close . . .
We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots? (40-45)

While Laura looks and buys, the more cautious Lizzie “thrust[s] a dimpled finger/ In each ear,” shuts her eyes and runs (67-68). She meets the returning Laura “full of wise upbraiding” (142), and the next evening eloquently warns her sister of the perils and dangers of the night (for as in the *Songs of Innocence* the approach of night suggests the approach of danger to innocence):

Come with me home.
The stars rise, the moon bends her arc,
Each glowworm winks her spark,
Let us get home before the night grows dark:
For clouds may gather
Tho’ this is summer weather,
Put out the lights and drench us thro’;
Then if we lost our way what should we do?
(245-52)

Even when she sees that Laura is pining away for the goblin fruit Lizzie hesitates—“Longed to buy fruit to comfort her,/But feared to pay too dear” (310-11). She is strongly identified with the traditionally feminine, the protective and restrictive, the conventional and obedient. Not until Laura seems to be “knocking at Death’s door” (321) does Lizzie overcome her caution “And for the first time in her life /[Begins] to listen and look” (327-28). These lines perhaps imply a negative judgment of Lizzie’s original determined conventional deafness and blindness;!! they certainly mark a conscious decision to move on from innocence.

Lizzie in fact shares in the self-protectiveness commonly associated with young women only until caution and convention are challenged by sisterly love. Love pushes Lizzie into danger and adventure and impels both sisters towards adulthood. As McGann has argued, Lizzie is able to “repeat Laura’s history, only at so self-conscious a level that she becomes the master of that history rather than its victim” (251). To reach this stage she needs the knowledge won by Laura’s willingness to experiment and to follow her desires and her senses: “Lizzie does not ‘save’ Laura. Both together enact a drama that displays what moral forces have to be exerted in order, not to be saved from evil, but simply to grow up” (McGann 251). If Laura alone takes the role of Adam and Eve in this poem, both sisters share in Christ’s role of salvation through love. Lizzie braves the goblins for Laura’s sake, but Laura in her turn kisses Lizzie and therefore tastes the antidote not through self-concern but through anxious love for her sister:

11. Campbell (407) makes this point.
“Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted
For my sake the fruit forbidden?
Must your light like mine be hidden,
Your young life like mine be wasted,
Undone in mine undoing
And ruined in my ruin,
Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden?”—
She clung about her sister,
Kissed and kissed and kissed her. (478–86)

Homoerotic female love transforms and restores, while the grotesque heterosexuality of the alien goblin world merely threatens. Love in action is so crucial to the narrative that it is invoked in language that suggests both the most potent forms of love in Rossetti’s world—erotic love as expressed in sexual activity and divine love as expressed in the eucharist.12 Both erotic language and the language of Christ repeated in the Anglican service of Holy Communion, with which the poet will have been very familiar, lend their power to Lizzie’s invitation to Laura, when, covered with the hard-won goblin juices, she summons her: “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices . . . Eat me, drink me, love me” (468–71). These lines compel attention and response from their nearness to what is trebly forbidden—the obscene, the incestuous, the blasphemous. The love of the sisters has the intensity and the power of both sacred and profane love.

Lizzie’s wish to protect life at the beginning of the poem takes the easy form of safe conventional morality. This same wish to protect life, in the form of her love for her sister, eventually drives her out of her comfortable innocence and into an encounter with danger that emphatically demands strength, resourcefulness and resilience, qualities suggested by a remarkable string of similes:

White and golden Lizzie stood,
Like a lily in a flood,—
Like a rock of blue-veined stone
Lashed by tides obstreperously,—
Like a beacon left alone
in a hoary roaring sea,
Sending up a golden fire,—
Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree
White with blossoms honey-sweet
Sore beset by wasp and bee,—
Like a royal virgin town
Topped with gilded dome and spire
Close beleaguered by a fleet
Mad to tug her standard down. (408–21)

Such images suggest to Terence Holt that female power in a world dominated by goblins takes on a phallic guise: “when the sisters achieve power these figures for triumph retain their goblin trait” (59). In fact, the imagery attached to both

12. The erotic element in Goblin Market is noted by Mermin in a distinguished essay (113), by Kaplan (69), by Duffy (288–91), and Prickett (103–06), amongst others. Battiscombe sees Lizzie as a Christ figure (103–06); Mermin, Casey and Shalkhauser also deal with this approach. As Gilbert and Gubar say “obviously the conscious or semiconscious allegorical intention of this narrative poem is sexual/religious” (566).
sisters throughout the poem has a sexual beauty that is curiously epicene in that it suggests both the phallic and the feminine in the Pre-Raphaelite beauty of the sisters, long-necked and long-limbed. Laura, for instance, as she moves toward the goblins is described thus:

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)

In the same way, the sisters asleep together after Laura has tasted the fruit are described as “Like two wands of ivory/Tipped with gold for awful kings” (190–91). The imagery of sexual beauty can be ambivalent, as similarities in the flower photographs of Imogen Cunningham and Robert Mapplethorpe might suggest. What is important here is that the images do suggest sexual—adult—beauty and power. The gold and white beauty and potential strength of the sisters are emphasized throughout the poem, before, after, and during the encounters with the goblins. The beauty of the young women may be endangered by the goblins, but it is neither feeble nor fragile.

Strength and struggle have a privileged position in a poem that ends with the words “to strengthen whilst one stands.” Laura and Lizzie are eventually, as mothers, deeply concerned with their traditional protective female role: “Their mother-hearts beset with fears,/Their lives bound up in tender lives” (546–47). Yet despite their natural sensitivity to the vulnerability of their children, the sisters teach them not about retreat from danger but about sisterhood, strength and above all mutual support: Laura joins the children’s hands (560) as she tells them her story and teaches them her lesson.

Several critics have observed that Goblin Market creates a female world. Certainly Rossetti’s pastoral is a female version of the genre. In Eden gardening is a matter of dealing with beautiful abundance rather than with slugs and aphids, and in traditional pastoral shepherds guard their sheep unconcerned by foot-rot or maggoty fleeces: such practical problems can be dealt with in georgics, but pastoral transforms labor into “the Shepherd’s sweet lot” (“The Shepherd” 1). Rossetti modifies the genre by creating an idyll through beautifying another form of physical labor, traditional female domestic and agricultural tasks:

13. Mermin (109) sees the Pre-Raphaelite quality of these images; Rosenblum (76), like Holt, notes the phallic quality.
14. Holt makes this point (63). The ending is perhaps less conventional than may be implied by Watson’s interesting argument that the sisters are “saved to their own damnation” (73).
15. Mayberry says that the poem is “entirely free of dependence on men” (107). Holt points out that the fact that they are wives at the end defines them in relation to men (63) but Mermin (rightly I think) sees this word as merely legitimizing the children (114). Casey argues that “Rossetti posits not a world without men but a world in which all people are allowed to play all parts, to embrace a wholeness that is only possible with the dissolution of the traditional male/female dichotomy” (65).
Early in the morning
When the first cock crowed his warning,
Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,
Laura rose with Lizzie:
Fetched in honey, milked the cows,
Aired and set to rights the house,
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
Next churned butter, whipped up cream,
Fed their poultry, sat and sewed;
Talked as modest maidens should. (199-209)

This female pastoral valorizes not the middle-class Victorian woman’s function as representative and supervisor, but the ancient practical tasks of rural domestic life. In her Tractarian rejection of worldly values, Rossetti had little concern with the ladylike; but as a writer and as an associate member of an active order of Anglican sisters, she was greatly concerned with women’s activities. The tasks are presented in idyllic terms but also in terms that would clearly have been recognizable by contemporary women readers of all classes as their concerns—food, drink, clothing and domestic order. These activities are also shown as immediately useful to the household—that is, as immediately relating to the care of people. The sisters’ work is explicitly removed from the commercial sphere of the goblins with their insistence on buying, just as middle-class women’s work at this period is explicitly separated from men’s. Goblin Market valorizes women’s ordinary continuing tasks of nurturing by making them the tasks of pastoral. And by extension the pastoral artist is also feminized in this poem. The piping shepherd—the poet-musician—of traditional pastoral, who appears in the “Introduction” to the Songs of Innocence “piping down the valleys wild/ Piping songs of pleasant glee” (1–2), becomes in Rossetti’s version of the genre the mother passing on stories and morality to the next generation as Goblin Market ends with the young women grown into adults. Experience has become art and female art is presented as an aspect of love, as a part of nurture.

Both Songs of Innocence and of Experience and Goblin Market present versions of pastoral that employ its connotations of a protected world to suggest the state of youthful innocence; both works connect the female with pastoral of innocence; in both the pastoral world is essentially Christian. Perhaps the marked contrast between their versions of female experience arises from an inevitably different understanding of a feminized Christianity. For Blake it seems that a religion taught at the mother’s knee—as it is perhaps being taught on the separate title page of Songs of Innocence—is necessarily emasculated, fit only for

16. A useful discussion of literary treatments of this function is provided by Langland. 
17. McGann stresses Rossetti’s rejection of worldly values in his introduction to The Achievement of Christina Rossetti.
18. Campbell argues that the poem “asserts the vital socioeconomic function of women despite their marginalization by the Victorian market economy” (394).
19. I am grateful to my colleague Betty A. Schellenberg for pointing out to me the relevance of the feminization of Christianity at this period. One aspect of the contemporary feminization of Christianity is discussed by Deborah M. Valenze; see also Muir (10–28).
children, a myth as comforting and as misleading as the story told by the mother of the Little Black Boy. Later, in Jerusalem, Blake would associate the female specifically with debased forms of religion. Rossetti, however, experienced personally a feminized Christianity: she shared her passionate faith with her sister and her beloved mother, and not with her father or brothers (Battiscombe 22, 30–31); she became an Associate of the Sisters of Charity. Inevitably she saw Christianity as feminized, and understood a feminized Christianity as encouraging strength, activity and growth.

In Blake’s Songs the female has a positive role only within the world of pastoral, within the state of innocence. If the feminine is constructed in terms of protection it is connected with constraint rather than exuberance, the cistern rather than the fountain. Moreover, Blake, despite his emphasis on the vital importance of work, ignores women’s domestic work, apart from their immediate tasks as caregivers. Rossetti like Blake constructs a version of femininity that connects it with protection, but, in her version of pastoral, female tasks are primary and are part of a world where nurture, art and adventure are connected. The only alternative is the deadly commercialism of the goblins. In such a world, female protectivity is necessarily more complex. For Blake, fear (associated with the feminine) inhibits love: for Rossetti, “perfect love” (associated with the feminine) “casteth out fear” (1 John 4.18). Like Blake, Rossetti sees that protectivity can inhibit action and growth: the incurious Lizzie refuses to see or hear until she feels driven to the dangerous world of experience. Yet in the guise of love female protectiveness is presented as the motive for observation, action and exertion, for movement into adult life and for art. Women are associated not only with nurture and beauty but with courage, resistance and strength. The male world of the goblins continues to appear as a threat to the sisters; the female rejects the male here quite as strongly as she does in the Songs of Experience. Yet the rejection of the male is a rejection neither of experience nor love.

Unlike Songs of Innocence and of Experience—unlike the Bible and Paradise Lost—Goblin Market presents innocence, experience and regeneration as happening within the same idyllic world. Adam and Christ become sisters—women and contemporaries—in this version of the fortunate fall. Experience is a necessary part of the idyll. Lizzie and Laura can remain as adults within the pastoral world, because it has room for active and adventurous love as well as the sheltering love which Blake displays visually and verbally in the Songs of Innocence.

20. The stress on work is more obvious in the later poems, where it is of course primarily associated with Los (Ferber 131–51).
21. Casey says that “Laura’s fall . . . is a fortunate one” (69).
Works Cited


