"THERE IS NO FRIEND LIKE A SISTER": THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHURCH PENITENTIARY MOVEMENT ON CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S SISTER-POEMS, 1858-1860

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INTRODUCTION

This study is the result of asking what seemed at the time a relatively simple question while reading Christina's Rossetti's "Goblin Market": in what sense am I to take Rossetti's use of the word "sister"? The most obvious answer to this question—and the assumption I had always made when reading the poem—is that "sister" simply denotes a familial bond. Rossetti's dedication of "Goblin Market" to her sister Maria seems to substantiate such an interpretation. But "sister" does not always indicate familial relations and can also denote women who share ideological or political bonds: women who share common interests or professions, women who are members of religious communities, or, even, "sisters" can function as a metaphor for all women. We could certainly extend this short list a great deal, and each possible reading of sisterhood dramatically affects our reading of the poem.

"Goblin Market" is not the only poem in which the use of "sister" is ambiguous, and in Rossetti's first volume of poetry alone, there are four poems which deal directly with sisters, sister-relationships and sister-communities, and in each we are faced with these same problems in reading sisterhood.[1] All four poems were composed during a two-year period: "The Convent Threshold" was composed on July 9, 1858; "Goblin

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[1] I use the word "directly" here in order to differentiate these four poems from other poems contained in that volume of poetry which are concerned with relationships between women who, while they may be figurative "sisters," are not directly referred to as such.

Market" on April 27, 1859; "Noble Sisters" and "Sister Maude" in 1860.[2] As the dates of composition indicate, between the summer of 1858 and the spring of 1860, Rossetti took a tremendous interest in sisters, sister-relationships and sister-communities. Each of these sister-poems is also a "fallen woman" poem, and this conjunction of sisters and the fallen woman suggests that sisterhoods in Rossetti's poetry may be "Sisters of Charity"—women devoted to the caretaking and reclamation of their "fallen sisters." Rossetti's biography supports such a reading: from roughly 1859 through 1870, she volunteered regularly at the St. Mary Magdalen home for fallen women, or "Highgate Penitentiary," as it was also known.[3] Highgate was one of many "Church Penitentiaries" founded at mid-century devoted to the "reclamation" of fallen women, and its principal means of effecting this reclamation was by employing devoted, "unfallen" sisters to watch over, (re)educate and, care for the penitents. Christina was one of these "unfallen" sisters.

It is this aspect of sisterhood, and its suggestion of an entirely new approach to sisterhood in Rossetti's poetry, with which this study is primarily concerned. More specifically, I will explore sister-relationships in Rossetti's poetry from 1858 through 1860, examining the ways both the structure of her poetic sister-relationships and her treatment of the fallen woman theme show the influence of her involvement with the

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[2] These are the dates Christina entered the poems into her manuscript notebooks, a practice which she carried on from April, 1842 until "about 1866. . . . From 1866 she discontinued the practice of writing in notebooks" (Bell 162). In her standard edition of Rossetti's complete poetry, Rebecca Crump's textual notes offer definitive dates for neither "Noble Sisters" nor "Sister Maude," although in her biography of Rossetti, Lona Mosk Packer refers to the two poems as "ballads of 1860" (151). Similarly, while Jan Marsh's more recent biography does not suggest a date of composition for the poems, she does discuss "Noble Sisters" alongside "Goblin Market" and "Cousin Kate" (composed November 18, 1859), thus suggesting that the three poems were composed in roughly the same brief span of time.

[3] For reasons I will discuss in more detail later in this study, providing exact dates for Rossetti's beginning work at Highgate is impossible at present.

Church Penitentiary Movement. Attention to the relationship between Rossetti's sister-poems and the Church Penitentiary Movement contributes not only to current estimations of her literary achievements by offering new reading strategies, but also to her biography, to our understanding of her position on many of the various social and political issues facing women at mid-century, to our understanding of the history of the Penitentiary Movement and its influence on Victorian women's poetry, to our perception of the fallen woman at mid-century, and (to return to my original question) to a fuller understanding of the significance of sisters in her poetry.

The Church Penitentiary Movement was part of the Victorian response to a dramatic increase in prostitution in the industrial centers of England, especially in London, where in 1845 Friedrich Engels estimated that "40,000 prostitutes . . . fill the streets of London every evening" (144). Similarly, in his landmark study *Prostitution* (1857), William Acton described how in 1851

> 42,000 children were born alive in England and Wales upon a total of 2,449,669 unmarried women. . . . Each of these mothers has taken the first step in prostitution; and, conceding to each the trifling expectation of five years of unreformed life, we shall find that 210,000, or one in twelve, of the unmarried females in the country above the age of puberty have strayed from the path of virtue. (7).

In Acton's comments, we can find the Victorian tendency to collapse the distinctions between a woman who has had sexual intercourse outside of marriage and a woman who is a prostitute. Indeed, his claims about the "42,000 children" born illegitimately in England to mothers who have "taken the first step in prostitution" situate him firmly

within the Victorian tradition which believed "the path of the fallen woman led only downward—from seduction through ostracism, poverty, pregnancy, and prostitution to a miserable, untimely death" (Hickok 96). Prostitutes were, of course, only the most visible "kind" of fallen women, and although they were perhaps the impetus behind Victorian attempts to reclaim their fallen women, the fallen woman was not necessarily a prostitute. In *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1858), Dinah Mulock describes how, among the poor, "few young women come to the marriage-altar at all, or come there just a week or two before maternity; or having already had several children, often only half brothers and sisters, whom no ceremony has ever legalised" (289). Nor was the fallen woman exclusively of the lower classes, for "many a well-reputed British lady is as much a 'lost' woman as any poor, seduced creature whose child is born in a workhouse, or strangled at a ditchside. . . . I have heard it affirmed by more than one lady . . . that many of them are of the very best; refined, intelligent, truthful, and affectionate" (Mulock 288-91). The status of fallen woman, then, was reserved for any woman who had taken "the first step in prostitution" by violating Victorian standards of sexual conduct (Acton 7), and despite Acton's almost certain exaggeration of the actual number of fallen women in London, his estimations of the number of prostitutes in London clearly shows that "The Great Social Evil" (as prostitution came to be called) had left an indelible mark on Victorian social consciousness. Indeed, prostitution in England became associated with "'the deterioration of national character—and to the consequent exposure of the nations among whom it abounds to weakness, decline, and fall'" (qtd. in Houghton 366). For the Victorians, the rise of prostitution had become a national, *moral* emergency, about which something had to be done. In response, churches offered their own forms of assistance,

and in addition to food and shelter, these "Church Penitentiaries" offered "spiritual reclamation" for fallen women, and according to Frances Finnegan's *Poverty and Prostitution: A Study of Victorian Prostitutes in York* (1979), Church Penitentiaries were "society's main effort to cope with the appalling problem in the period" (166-67).[4]

The leading figures in the Church Penitentiary Movement were Reverend John Armstrong and Reverend Thomas Thellusson Carter. In his memoir of Reverend Armstrong, Carter tells us

> Mr. Armstrong is unquestionably to be regarded as the originator of the Church Penitentiary movement, although in this, as is the case in all great changes whether in the natural or spiritual world, the thoughts of other minds were simultaneously drawn in the same direction. The then Archdeacon Manning had published a sermon, "Saints and Penitents," preached at the Magdalen, which had a very considerable effect. But this and other like expressions of the feelings and convictions then stirred were but insulated cases. There had been little communing together, no attempt at combination, and no awakening of the public mind; no sign of action. (196)

According to Carter (writing in 1857), when Armstrong began his work with penitentiaries, they

> had for many years stood in the gap to provide a remedy against the dreadful progress of perhaps the greatest spiritual curse prevailing in the

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[4] Although Finnegan is concerned primarily with the penitentiary system in York, she does note that the "Refuge at York was. . . . representative of Shelters and Female Missions throughout the country" (167).

midst of us. . . . But it was a general and increasing conviction, that some vital change was needed in the plans that had been pursued [in structuring the penitentiary system]; that the root of the evil had not been reached; and that both greater powers of influence upon the inner life, and a fuller working out of the Church's system, were needed to promote any adequate and satisfactory results. . . . In the public mind there was for the most part either a complete torpor or a chilling hopelessness as to the possibility of any good being done. (197)

Before Armstrong's influence, penitentiaries were generally staffed by "paid matrons and a few visiting ladies" (D'Amico 71), and these "Houses of Mercy" and "Houses of Refuge" were aptly named, as they offered little more than food and shelter. Armstrong disagreed with the practice of employing only paid matrons in these institutions, and argued that "no real good could be effected except through the instrumentality of self-devoted and unpaid ladies, working upon sound Church principles; and that less attention should be paid to work, and more to gaining a religious influence over the mind of the Penitent, than prevailed in existing institutions" (Carter 28). The difference between the Church Penitentiary Movement and the "House of Mercy" or the "House of Refuge" lay primarily in the ways that the Penitentiary system sought to "reclaim" and even train fallen women in "proper" social behavior. Houses of Refuge and Houses of Mercy were, generally, little more than shelters, and devoted little or no effort to the reclamation or retraining of those they aided.

Diane D'Amico's research into the daily routine at Highgate confirms that the two institutions operated similarly.

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In 1848 and 1849, Armstrong published a flurry of articles making clear his views on the need for such institutions and his plans to restructure the penitentiary system,[5] and from his devotion to the cause of the Church Penitentiary system, Carter suggests, we can trace "the growth of the widespread sympathy with which the cause of the Church Penitentiaries has been supported" (Carter 236). Armstrong was instrumental in founding the "Church Penitentiary Association" in the spring of 1852 (Carter 240). The Association was formed in London with the intent of "carry[ing] out the new principles on a very extended scale" by procuring "grants of money to assist local efforts in the formation and maintenance of such institutions" (Carter 240-41).

If Armstrong effectively began the Church Penitentiary Movement, it was Thomas Thellusson Carter, Armstrong's biographer, who took up the project and became a "pioneer in . . . *effective* penitentiary work" (Hutchings 75, emphasis mine), putting Armstrong's theories into practice at the penitentiary at Clewer while serving as Warden there. Like Armstrong, Carter saw penitentiary work as "one of the greatest and most hopeful efforts of the century" (Hutchings 75), but admitted that the structure and effectiveness of the "old system" of penitentiary work was either "weak and defective" or "hurtful and impotent," and even possibly exacerbated the problem, since its failure to reclaim fallen women might inadvertently lead to *more* prostitutes on the street. Indeed, some argued that it "was a question of supply and demand; and that by lessening the number of these wretched beings the gaps would be filled by the seduction of fresh and innocent souls. . . . [T]he evil was pronounced incurable, and St. Paul's doctrine that

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[5] See Carter, 233-34.

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'where sin abounded grace might much more abound' denied or distrusted" (Hutchings 76).

One of Carter's boldest modifications of the penitentiary system was the "forming of a Sisterhood for the care of Penitents," an idea inspired by the ad hoc sisterhood which had formed around Mrs. Tennant's efforts—these fallen women gave up their "evil ways" and remained with Mrs. Tennant in her home where they "formed a nucleus, and then others gathered round them, and so began the penitentiary work at Clewer" (83). Carter relates this story in a pamphlet called "The First Ten Years of the House of Mercy, Clewer":

> Our first intention was only to house these women for a while, till they could be transferred to a London Penitentiary. But as the numbers increased, and they became fondly attached to their benefactress, and she urgently desired to devote herself to their care, the idea arose of forming an institution, to be carried on in the same spirit in which the work had been commenced, by women devoting themselves for the love of God, as Mrs. Tennant had done. (qtd. in Hutchings 83)

The Penitentiary at Clewer was founded in 1849, but quickly became riddled with both financial and organizational problems. Carter's solution to these problems was the "formation of the Community of St. John the Baptist, Clewer" (Hutchings 84), an Order of Sisters of Mercy founded in 1852. According to Carter, this Anglican Sisterhood's relationship to the penitentiary at Clewer was "not only post hoc, but propter hoc" (Hutchings 84)—the Sisterhood, he claimed, "arose out of the Church Penitentiary movement from the very necessities of the case" (Hutchings 85). To these Sisters, Carter

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committed the "teaching and training of the penitents" to such a degree that "clergy had little communication with the penitents, except of a sacramental character" (85). Clearly, for Carter—and the House of Mercy at Clewer—the role of the Sister in the reclamation of the fallen women was a crucial one, and Carter perceived them as possessing the "transforming power" which would be instrumental in the spiritual and moral reclamation of fallen women (Hutchings 85).

Carter recognized that "no precedent in the Church of England was known to us of a Penitentiary of the kind proposed. Strong popular prejudice would certainly have to be met. The prospect of finding persons able and ready to devote themselves was wholly uncertain, and without such fellow-helpers the design was impracticable" (qtd. in Hutchings 83). There was indeed "strong popular prejudice" surrounding Carter's efforts. There was considerable anxiety about placing unfallen women—whether they were members of a religious order or simply volunteering—in such proximity to the fallen, for fear that they might be "corrupted." There were also tremendous reservations about the possibility of reinstating Anglican religious sisterhoods. Primarily these reactions were anti-Catholic in nature and capitalized on gothic notions of the convent as a place of imprisonment, while other forms of resistance to the Penitentiary Movement revolved around organizational issues: How would such sisterhoods be organized? To what extent would the women be isolated from male clergymen? If these sisterhoods were to engage in the reclamation of fallen women, was such a close relationship between the fallen and the chaste safe? Would the Sisters take vows?

At Clewer's Sisterhood of St. John the Baptist, there were "no vows or promises binding for any definite period, nor any further separation from home, than [was]

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rendered necessary by living apart" (qtd. in Allchin 74). Carter's views were, as A. M. Allchin has pointed out, "traditional in the Church of England since the Reformation. Irrevocable vows were without any clear warrant in Scripture, and even if admissible in theory, perilous and full of danger in practice" (74). Carter's feelings about the role of vows in Anglican Sisterhoods were not shared throughout England, and while Carter chose to allow the community's "views on the subject to be informed by the demands of the developing communities," Dr. Pusey, a conservative member of the Romish wing of the Church of England, "proclaimed the sanctity and necessity of vows" (Allchin 74). As his comments suggest, Carter allowed for the ultimate possibility that vows would be taken, and indeed, for some communities (such as Carter's at Clewer) the life-long dedication was, in fact, the unrequested norm among the women involved in it (Allchin 74-75). Whether they took vows or not, and whether they were "officially" associated with the Sisterhood or merely volunteering their assistance, the women involved in these institutions were commonly referred to as "Sisters of Charity" or "Sisters of Mercy."

This, of course, makes "sisterhood" an ambiguous term, designating not only members of religious orders, but also those women who volunteered as "Sisters of Mercy" and "Sisters of Charity." Indeed, in her highly influential lecture "Sisters of Charity" delivered in 1855,[6] Anna Jameson described the Sister of Charity as "not merely the designation of a particular order of religious women, belonging to a particular church, but also in a far more comprehensive sense, as indicating the vocation of a large number of women in every country, class, and creed" (23). The Sister of Charity, then, could be any woman involved in a large number of philanthropic efforts, ranging from "district

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[6] Jameson's speech was subsequently published in 1857

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visiting" and Sunday schools, to assisting Florence Nightingale in Scutari during the Crimean War, to members of a religious order.

The sheer variety of possible meanings of the phrase "Sister of Charity" indicates quite clearly that at mid-century, what we would now describe as "social work" had become a significant feature of Victorian life. At Rossetti's own Christ Church at Albany Street (which she had attended since 1843), Reverend H. W. Burrows was an advocate of "Sunday schools, an orphanage, a refuge for outcast women and a network of district visiting whereby parishioners became voluntary social workers" (Marsh 131). Rossetti's aunt Eliza Polidori was among those who "took on a district" (Marsh 131) in Burrows's network of district visiting, and the Rossetti sisters sometimes assisted (Marsh 59). Although there is little record of Rossetti's involvement with efforts to aid the urban poor, when pleas were made to churches and Catholic and Anglican sisterhoods for nurses during the Crimean War, she heeded the call (Marsh 159): Eliza Polidori went with the "second group of women who left London," and in 1854, Rossetti, too, volunteered her services, but was refused—most likely for reasons of age, inexperience, and persistent ill-health (Marsh 160). Rossetti's relatively sudden interest in social work was most probably the result of the strong sense of both patriotism and emergency aroused by the war with Russia. But the call for nurses was one made specifically toward women, and one which offered them the chance to play a role in opposing what was nationally perceived as a serious threat to English society.

It is clear, though, that she had been involved in various types of social work through Christ Church (with her sister and her aunt Eliza) for some years prior to this date, and Jan Marsh speculates that Christina was making donations to the penitentiary

through William Michael Rossetti as early as 1857 (220). In addition to the opportunity to take part in such significant social/moral work, the penitentiary possessed another attraction. Around 1885,[7] Rossetti wrote to Caroline Gemmer and "confessed to a 'romantic impulse' towards the convent 'like many young people'" (Marsh 59), but admitted that she had been unable to bring herself to enter the cloister.

Volunteer work at Highgate required no vows, and in an article for the *English Women's Journal* published in 1858, one Sister working there described how "ladies need sacrifice no really sacred worldly tie by joining us, for we can return to the world whenever we cease to feel our duty is here. At any time of sickness of sorrow in our own families we can return to our homes, for we are bound by no vow" (qtd. in Marsh 221). At Highgate, volunteer workers were referred to as "Sisters" (Rossetti eventually became an "Associate Sister" in 1860), and so while working there, Rossetti could contribute to what was perceived as one of the most important social/moral causes of her day, wear "the quasi-conventual dress, with veil" (Marsh 224) which the Associate Sisters wore, and take the name "Sister Christina" while still being able to come and go as she pleased from this community of women.

The proposal for the establishment of Highgate Penitentiary appeared in the *Times* on 25 January 1854, and it announced that a "proposal . . . submitted to the Bishop of London . . . has received his Lordship's sanction, for the establishment of a Penitentiary for Females in connection with the Church Penitentiary association" ("Church Penitentiary" 8). The proposal explains that the London Diocese intended to "establish it,

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[7] This letter is not included in either collection of Rossetti's letters, although presumably Antony Harrison will include it in his next volume of Rossetti's collected letters. Jan Marsh's note on this letter in her recent biography of Rossetti notes it as circa 1885 (598n).

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in the immediate neighborhood of London, upon the system of that Association which contemplates two distinct . . . houses for the reception of female penitents" ("Church Penitentiary" 8), one of "refuge," where "the doors . . . are open day and night" (8), and the "Penitentiary . . . to which the more hopeful cases may be transferred after a short probation at the Refuge" (8). This division of "houses" was not new,[8] and the proposal indicates that the proposed penitentiary would be modeled after the "system adopted for some years past in the Penitentiaries at Clewer and Wantage" (8).

Highgate Penitentiary was officially founded in 1855, and was housed in a "large building known as Park House on Highgate Hill"; in 1856 it was given the name St. Mary Magdalene's (D'Amico 68), but was popularly known simply as "Highgate Penitentiary."[9] The Penitentiary's charter indicates that it was intended "for the reception and reformation of penitent fallen women with a view to their ultimate establishment in some respectable calling" (qtd. in D'Amico 68). Penitents remained there for no more than two years, during which time they received instruction related to the servant classes, and "could receive training in cooking, washing, and needlework" (D'Amico 69). If Finnegan's findings in her study of the Penitentiary at York parallel that of Highgate Penitentiary, it is probable that of the prostitutes housed there,

> most had had disturbed, neglected childhoods, or had been brought up in poverty and squalor with little or no education. Others . . . had limited

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[8] There was considerable argument about whether to divide the penitentiaries according to the *class* of the penitents received there. In W.H. Hutchings's memoir of Reverend Carter, he describes how "Carter saw the necessity of widening the *social* area of repentance. 'One crying want is a separate department for penitents of a higher grade.' Of old, only those who came from what is called 'the lower classes' entered the Penitentiaries; now a part of the Clewer building is used for the reception of 'lady penitents,' who are altogether separated from the rougher elements, and put under rule—quite as necessary in their case as with those who had not the same privileges and safeguards" (87).

[9] Throughout this essay, I will refer to the penitentiary simply as "Highgate."

> intelligence; and all, during their involvement in prostitution, must have been brutalised and humiliated, becoming accustomed to being regarded [and] regarding themselves, as social outcasts. (166)

But as Diane D'Amico rightly points out, Highgate Penitentiary was not inhabited exclusively by prostitutes, but by "ladies" as well, since "a woman did not have to be the 'vilest of her sex' to be considered fallen. According to D'Amico, "only one [annual] report mentions that some 'inmates [were] of the higher class as regards birth and education.' She need only have had sexual intercourse outside of marriage" (68-69). Unlike refuges, which focused simply on providing shelter, the penitentiary system's insistence upon spiritual and moral reformation indicates that in the eyes of the Penitentiary workers and supporters, the fallen woman was not doomed to be "forever a social outcast" (D'Amico 69).

Since Highgate Penitentiary was patterned on the Penitentiary at Clewer, we can assume that specific emphasis was placed on the role that "unfallen Sisters" would play both in the daily operations of the establishment and in the actual spiritual reclamation which was to take place. In its prospectus for the Penitentiary, the Diocese of London lamented that the city "has not one home for the fallen where their Sisters in Christ can labour for their restoration and guide the feeble steps of their penitence to peace . . . We earnestly hope that ladies who act as Sisters will be led by God's grace to join this work" (qtd. in Marsh 219). This appeal for "Sisters" to care for one another is one of the dominant features of the literature of the Penitentiary Movement, which often refers to prostitutes as "fallen sisters" in its "pleas made to enlist the services of 'self-devoted women'" (D'Amico 71).

The literature of the Church Penitentiary Movement from the 1850s coincided with this nationalist enthusiasm aroused by the War, but unlike the nursing positions offered by Florence Nightingale in Scutari, the Penitentiary Movement seemed to offer women a chance to take direct part in a great war against "the greatest of our social evils,"[10] where women would be the principal means of spiritual reclamation, fighting on the front lines of a battle to stamp out a swelling "tide of corruption" ("Church of England" 4). Indeed, as D'Amico suggests, Rossetti would have perceived the efforts of the Penitentiary Movement "the most significant moral welfare work of her day" and, would have "heard a special call to become involved in such work" precisely because of the appeals made specifically to women (71).

We have only a handful of references to Rossetti's involvement with Highgate Penitentiary. In a letter to Amelia Barnard Heimann from August 1859, Rossetti describes how she missed the opportunity to visit William Bell Scott on one of his visits to her home since she was "away almost the whole time at Highgate" (Rossetti *Letters* 125).[11] This is the first record of Rossetti's involvement with the community at Highgate, and it clearly indicates that she began working there sometime earlier than August of 1859. Over two years later, Rossetti wrote in a letter to her brother William Michael that she had "promised to go to Highgate for a short time, on condition that I shall have leisure to attend to proofs" (*Letters* 150). In his headnote to this letter, William Michael writes "Christina stayed [at Highgate] from time to time, but not for

[10] See for instance a rather lengthy letter to the editor of the *Times* dated 6 May 1857.

[11] There are now two editions of Rossetti's letters, the *Family Letters* edited by Christina's brother William Michael, and the recently published *Letters of Christina Rossetti*, edited by Antony Harrison. Although the *Letters* includes the letters contained in the *Family Letters*, because William Michael included numerous informative headnotes, it is necessary to use both editions of Rossetti's letters. All references to

lengthy periods together, taking part in the work. The 'proofs' which she had to attend to must have belonged to her volume, 'Goblin Market,' &c." (*FL* 26). William Michael elaborates on his sister's relationship with Highgate Penitentiary in a letter to Christina's first biographer, Mackenzie Bell: "At one time (1860 to '70) she used pretty often to go to an Institution at Highgate for redeeming 'Fallen Women'—It seems to me that at one time they wanted to make her a sort of superintendent there, but she declined—In her own neighborhood, Albany Street, she did a deal of district visiting and the like" (Bell 60). What, precisely, Rossetti's role was at Highgate Penitentiary is unknown, but the efforts of D'Amico and D. M. R. Bentley have done much to map out what Rossetti's experiences at Highgate might have been.[12]

This study is an attempt to map the evolution of Rossetti's treatments of sisterhood in her poems composed between 1858 and 1860 and to explore the ways Rossetti is influenced by and responds to both conventional Victorian attitudes toward the fallen woman, especially those held in institutions devoted to the reclamation of her. The period of time from 1858 to 1860 represents a significant period in Rossetti's poetic career, for during this time Rossetti's poetic treatments of the fallen woman parallel chronologically her involvement with Highgate Penitentiary.

Chapter one, "The Edge of Sisterhood: The Penitent's Progress in Christina Rossetti's 'The Convent Threshold,'" examines Rossetti's earliest treatment of the fallen

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Rossetti's correspondence are from the *Letters* (hereafter cited parenthetically as *Letters*), and all references to biographical headnotes are from the *Family Letters*, hereafter cited parenthetically as *FL*.

[12]Much of the information in this study about Highgate Penitentiary is indebted to Diane D'Amico's excellent study "'Equal Before God': Christina Rossetti and the Fallen Women of Highgate Penitentiary." However, as D'Amico's title suggests, her study is concerned principally with the ways that Rossetti's experiences at Highgate influenced her perception of and treatment of fallen women, and while the fallen woman is a figure who looms large in the present study, it is a concern secondary to my exploration of the

woman's reclamation in the period under investigation. In this chapter, I explore the ways Rossetti's treatment of the fallen woman adheres largely to conventional Victorian attitudes about her, associating her sexual transgression with a form of physical contamination to be "cleansed" inside the female community. While Rossetti's treatment of the fallen woman as "infected" is highly conventional, the poem is curiously lacking in any suggestion that the female community is a receptacle of these contaminated women. By thus "sanitizing" the female community, I argue, Rossetti's vision of the fallen woman's reclamation shows the influence of sentimental descriptions of penitentiary work and also suggests her own lack of practical experience in such institutions.

Chapter two, "'There is no friend like a sister'?: 'Goblin Market,' Sisterhood and the Church Penitentiary Movement" examines the ways that in Rossetti's treatment of the sister-relationship we can see the clear influence of the literature and rhetoric of the Penitentiary Movement. "Goblin Market," though, offers us a much more detailed description of the internal dynamics of the sister-community and its relationship to the world outside it. This movement inside the sister-community indicates that Rossetti is becoming increasingly knowledgeable about the inner workings of the penitentiary, and that the situation of the fallen woman—with whom she had been principally concerned in "The Convent Threshold"—has become secondary to her interest in the sister-relationship. By paying specific attention to relationships between women, "Goblin Market" engages the most significant socio-political issue surrounding the Penitentiary Movement: women's capacity for communal activity, and, more generally, the viability of relationships between women. What "Goblin Market" argues, I suggest, is that women

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ways Rossetti's probable experiences at Highgate affected her perception and treatment of women's

are, in fact, fully capable of communal activity independently of any masculine presence. The way that the poem shows this, however, marks the beginning of another element in Rossetti's sister-poems, for in order to show that women's communities *can* operate independently of masculine presence, Rossetti posits the male presence in the poem as the source of the trouble, rather than some inherent weakness in women or in their communities.

The final chapter, "Sisterhood, Sch(m)isterhood: Christina Rossetti's 'Noble Sisters' and 'Sister Maude'" examines poems whose treatments of the sister-community differ significantly from Rossetti's earlier treatments. In these poems, written after Rossetti began volunteering at Highgate penitentiary, the sister-community is no longer presented as an idealized vision of harmonious communal activity, and is instead characterized by internal hostility and aggression between the sisters. Moreover, these poems' treatment of the sister-community is wholly internalized: unlike the sister-poems which precede them, "Noble Sisters" and "Sister Maude" focus primarily on the relationship between women in the sister-community, while the plight of the fallen woman seems only a secondary concern. This internalization coincides with Rossetti's volunteer work at Highgate, and in her engagement of troubled relationships within the sister-community, we can see her directly engaging questions about the viability of female communities. The instability of Rossetti's sister-community, I show, does not place her alongside "anti-feminist" contemporaries such as Eliza Lynn Linton who argued that women lacked the capacity for communal activity, but, instead, stems from

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relationships and women's communities in her poetry

the ways that masculine presences (either within or outside the sister-community) destabilize women's relationships within the community.

These readings reveal a sense of the progression of Rossetti's treatment of sisters, sisterhood and sister-relationships, as well as a fuller sense of the origins and complexity of Rossetti's position on issues facing women in the nineteenth century. Clearly, from 1858 to 1860, we can trace a steady movement in Rossetti's treatment of the sister-community as we move from the convent threshold to the inner dynamics of the sister-community in the sister-poems of 1860 as she gained increasingly "insightful" personal experience with the community of women at Highgate. In one sense, these readings attempt to "politicize" Rossetti, to situate her better amongst nineteenth-century poets concerned with socio-political issues facing women by revealing the complex issues surrounding her use of sisters and sister-communities. In another sense, these readings merely attempt to answer the seemingly harmless question "What does Rossetti mean when she uses the word 'sister?'"

CHAPTER ONE

THE EDGE OF SISTERHOOD: THE PENITENT'S PROGRESS IN "THE CONVENT THRESHOLD"

For most of her poetic career, Christina Rossetti was interested in thresholds, transitional states and the "spaces" (both figurative and literal) between two "places." Generally, these thresholds are manifested as physical locations, either in the form of the grave or the death-bed, where the speaker is situated on the threshold between death and ascension into the afterlife. Rossetti's interest in this "moment" of transition was not just poetic; her brother William Michael has described how "the point during the intermediate state after death and before the Resurrection" (Bell 236) was a significant theological concern for her, and indeed, her poetic treatments of this "intermediate state" are often tinged with the suspicion that the period between death and general resurrection might be interminably long. Even more, Rossetti's poetic treatments of this state are characterized by a fear that the individual would somehow be aware of the passage of time, the separation from the natural world, and, terrifyingly, the process of one's own decomposition. Clearly, Rossetti's transitional states are closely associated with loss (of the world, of life, or of the physical body), and because of this, when Rossetti's speakers are "in" these intermediate states, they reflect upon what they have left behind and, usually, imagine what lies beyond their passage over the threshold. It is not surprising

then, that when Rossetti imagined a woman's entry into the convent in "The Convent Threshold," the speaker would pause on the literal space of the doorway threshold and reflect upon what her entry into the convent forces her to leave behind and imagine what lay ahead of her within the convent walls.

"The Convent Threshold" has received little critical attention, the bulk of which is contained in Rossetti's two modern biographies by Lona Mosk Packer and Jan Marsh. Packer argues that the poem is spoken by "a nun [who] is forced to choose between love and the cloister, and . . . her choice is the renunciation of love and the vow of celibacy" (127). This is, of course, a reasonable reading; Rossetti wrote about nuns for much of her poetic career. But, as Jan Marsh has noted,[13] "The Convent Threshold" also retells the "story . . . of the love between Heloise and Abelard, taken without acknowledgement from Alexander Pope's version 'Eloisa to Abelard'" (214), thus suggesting that Rossetti may have been prompted to compose "The Convent Threshold" in response to Pope's closing invitation to "some future bard" to "join / In sad similitude of griefs to mine . . . Let him our sad, our tender story tell . . ." (359-64).[14] The connection between Pope's poem and "The Convent Threshold" raises the possibility that the speaker of Rossetti's "The Convent Threshold" may, in fact, *not* yet be a nun speaking from within the convent as Lona Mosk Packer has suggested (127). The title of the poem permits the speaker to not yet be inside the convent, but instead on its threshold. Thus the entire poem can

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[13]See Packer 127-30 and Marsh 213-14.

[14]While there are certainly similarities between the two poems, the major elements of "Eloisa to Abelard"—the lamentation of a "fallen woman," the separation of the lovers and the speaker's entry into the convent—are certainly not the exclusive province of Pope, nor are they uncommon features in Victorian treatments of the fallen woman.

become the reflective moment while in-between two "states," a characteristic feature of much of Rossetti's poetry.

Such an interpretation of the significance of the convent is a complicated process, however. Convents are a common feature in traditional literary and artistic treatments of the fallen woman, for if her fall does not result in her nearly immediate death,[15] the fallen woman is forced to live out her life in isolation, either in the convent or on the fringes of society.[16] As I have discussed, convents were closely involved in efforts to reclaim fallen women, and this close association complicates the assumption that crossing the convent threshold entails becoming a nun, since the effects of entering the institution devoted to the reclamation of fallen women were in some ways very similar to those entailed by entry into the Convent: just as a woman entering the cloister could expect to live an isolated life in a community of women, so too could the fallen woman seeking refuge and "reclamation" in a penitentiary expect to live in a community of women (with perhaps the exception of a male clergyman), almost totally isolated from the outside world, as it was widely believed that the most effective way to bring about her reclamation was through the "separation from the 'occasions' of sin; not enough in the inward change of heart and

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[15]As Kathleen Hickok has observed, "[i]t became conventional wisdom that the path of the fallen woman led only downward—from seduction through ostracism, poverty, pregnancy, and prostitution to a miserable, untimely death" (96).

[16]For an example of a contemporary poetic treatment of the fallen woman, see for example Adelaide Anne Proctor's "A Legend of Provence," in which a nun leaves her convent with her lover, descends into a life of poverty and degradation and, ruined, returns to the same convent seeking refuge. I discuss the parallels between Proctor's poem and "The Convent Threshold" in more depth later in this chapter For an example of a contemporary artistic treatment of the fallen woman, see Augustus Egg's trilogy of paintings *Past and Present* (1858), in which a fallen woman is first presented prostrate on the floor at the feet of her husband, then kneeling in prayer under the supervision of another woman, and finally in isolation on a wharf with her child in her arms, resting beneath a sign upon which is written in large block letters marketing to "Victims" the availability of "A Cure for Love." Egg's trilogy, then, traces the "descent" of the fallen woman, whose ultimate end (according to convention) will most likely be either a life of poverty or death. While the sign over the fallen woman's head may simply be a "tonic," it is perhaps more likely that it is a

cleansing of the conscience," failure to remove the fallen woman from the circumstances which facilitated her fall was like "weeding a garden with your hands, and leaving the roots in the soil" (Hutchings 76). Similarities between the conventual life and the life of the "inmate" in a Penitentiary were so great that, as Felicia Skene complained in 1865, those entering many of England's Penitentiaries "are straightway subjected to a system of conventual rule and severe religious observance, which the best-disposed novice that ever sought to be trained as a nun would find hard to bear" (10).

Simply by placing the speaker on the convent threshold, then, Rossetti simultaneously engages the traditional treatments of the fallen woman which marginalize her and she invokes the entire Victorian project of reclaiming its fallen women. And by bringing to the fore the possibility for the fallen woman's reclamation, Rossetti echoes the shift in attitudes toward the fallen woman at mid-century: it was, at mid-century, believed that the fallen woman could "wash the spot" (14) left by her fall and cleanse her soul. As Kathleen Hickok has pointed out, during

> the first third of the century . . . most poets—men and women alike—were portraying the fallen woman strictly according to convention, if at all. During the middle decades of the century, however, literature underwent a gradual shift in emphasis from depicting the fallen woman as miserable and irretrievably lost. . . . Novelists and poets thus helped to secure for the fallen woman a greater degree of sympathy and toleration on the part of the general public. (97)

"cure" for venereal disease which remained uncured at mid-century In either case, Egg's trilogy closely associates the sexual encounter with disease and infection.

Although the fallen woman theme was not the exclusive province of women writers, it was largely in the work of such poets as Dora Greenwell, Adelaide Anne Proctor, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning that we find the traditional theme of the irredeemable fallen woman in the process of breaking down. The fallen-woman speaker of Dora Greenwell's "Christina" (1851) leaves "the guilty city far behind" (409) through the efforts of the Christ-like Christina, who effects her reclamation. Adelaide Anne Proctor's "A Legend of Provence" (1866) describes the novice Angela's seduction, departure from the cloister, and descent into a life of such depravity that she is forced to return to the same convent for refuge, where she finds that the Virgin Mary has interceded and taken her place so that she might return to her cloistered life. In *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's quintessential fallen woman Marian Erle's rape and figurative banishment to Paris are erased through the intercession of Aurora Leigh. These kinds of sympathetic treatments of the fallen woman paved the way for later writers to delve "more deeply into both the causes of a woman's lapse and the details and varieties of the suffering and punishment she might endure as a result" (Hickok 97). "The Convent Threshold," with its speaker on the threshold of her reclamation, situates Rossetti comfortably within this group of nineteenth-century poets concerned with the situation of the fallen woman and the ability of the female intercessor to cleanse the stain of sexual transgression.

In "The Convent Threshold," this "spot" left by the speaker's sexual transgression is a "scarlet mud which tells a tale / Of hope that was, of guilt that was, / Of love that shall not yet avail . . . if I could bare / My heart, this selfsame stain is there" (8-12). These vague references to sexual transgression ("scarlet mud" and a "stain") are not uncommon in Victorian treatments of the fallen woman, for it is characteristic of the

Victorian sub-genre to elide the *actual* fall, since, "given the current ideology about respectable womanhood, [women poets] could not reasonably have been expected to" explicitly depict sexual transgression (Hickok 99). Indeed, as Penitentiary founder Thomas Thellusson Carter noted, "the conventional usages of society almost forbade the open discussion of the subject" (199). Even in institutions which dealt with fallen women, penitents were barred from even mentioning the details of their fall, for, as Reverend John Armstrong explained in "The Church and her Female Penitents" (1849), "No surer means could be used to convince them of the exceeding sinfulness of their sin than thus to treat it as something too horrid even to be alluded to in the most indirect and distant way" (17).

But despite its ambiguity, Rossetti's treatment of the signs of the sexual fall reveals much about Victorian attitudes toward the fallen woman. Although as Jan Marsh has noted this "stain" is reminiscent of *Macbeth* (213), it is also a transformation of sexual transgression—and, indeed, physical pleasure—into a physical presence. The sexual fall becomes a tincture which has contaminated the woman and must, therefore, be cleansed. The fallen woman's decontamination takes place, the speaker claims, in "the sea of glass and fire" (13)—which Lona Packer suggests symbolizes a "purifying and regenerating agent" (128)—which she can reach only by mounting "the stairs that mount above, / Stair after golden skyward stair, / To city and to sea of glass" (4-6), the path to which lies beyond the convent threshold and inside the community of women.

In traditional treatments of the fallen woman at mid-century, women (both as individuals and as members of female communities) figure prominently. The speaker of Dora Greenwell's "Christina" is redeemed through the intercession of the Christ-like

Christina; the fallen nun of Adelaide Anne Proctor's "A Legend of Provence" returns to her convent seeking refuge, only to find that Mary has interceded and taken her place; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Marian Erle is redeemed by Aurora Leigh. Even Christina Rossetti, nine months after she composed "The Convent Threshold," would employ the intercessor figure of Laura in "Goblin Market" to save the fallen Lizzie.

Just as literary treatments of the fallen woman theme insist upon the necessity of a mediatress, in the penitentiary it was believed that "no real good could be effected except through the instrumentality of self-devoted and unpaid ladies, working upon sound Church principles" (Carter 199) who would instruct penitents "in the path of penitence, and in preparing to lay down the burden of their sins at the foot of the Cross" (Hutchings 85). Like the intercessor-figures of the fallen woman poems of mid-century, the penitentiary system looked to these women "as a transforming power" (Hutchings 85). To a certain extent, these mediatresses play upon the dichotomies of fallen/unfallen, pure/unpure and contaminated/uncontaminated: the binary opposition amplifies the moral depravity of one and the wholesomeness of the other. But these associations also inscribe the thresholds which separate them, and the ability of the woman to cross and re-cross them, to be *transformed*, from one state to another and back again. While the fallen woman could not hope for her body to be transformed back into a "pure" or unfallen state, she could, as the speaker of "The Convent Threshold" articulates, expect her soul to be "cleansed" of the stain left by her sexual transgression.

This stain, and its suggestion of contamination, adheres to conventional Victorian attitudes toward the fallen woman which held that her fall was connected to a "'decay of bodily vigour'" and an "'increasing weakness of will'" (qtd. in D'Amico 70). To be sure,

associations between the sexual fall and infection were not always ill-founded, since the possibility of the transmission of disease through the sexual encounter was always present—and for the prostitute, "venereal disease was a real occupational hazard" (Hickok 96). Amy Levy's fallen woman poem "Magdalen" (1884) voices this possibility in its speaker's claim "'A poison lurks within your kiss, / Gall that shall turn night to day'" (43-44) as she lies dying in what is presumably a "magdalen hospital."[17] As the poison lurking within the kiss of the lover indicates, the connection between sexual pleasure and disease was a close one, and this conjunction of contamination and disease infecting the fallen woman becomes a central feature of conventional thought about her.

The notion of the fallen woman's "contamination" (whether real or figurative) plays a significant role in the Penitentiary systems as well. Felicia Skene's description of the fallen women seeking admittance into the penitentiary describes how women were motivated to enter the penitentiary by

> a sudden impulse following some act of cruelty from the wretches among whom they live, or it is the sight of some worn-out companion dying in a workhouse, or some other phase of the temporal penalties of their career. Sometimes it is want succeeding lavish excess, or pain, *disease*, disappointment, disgust at the miseries which go side by side with their so-called pleasures; these, and a hundred other motives, drive those wayward, impulsive beings to any refuge which may seem to present itself. . . . (9, emphasis mine)

[17]See Acton's *Prostitution*, which deals extensively with efforts to cope with health issues surrounding prostitution.

The fallen women housed by the Penitentiary, it was believed, exuded an "atmosphere of evil which a gathering of degraded women is apt to produce" which could only be counteracted by "a collection of pure, devout, dedicated souls, from whom would emanate a victorious power for good" (Hutchings 86). But Skene's reference here to the "disease" which might prompt the fallen woman's desire to enter the Penitentiary, and the association of the sexual fall with contamination, marks the Penitentiary as a receptacle of both literally and figuratively contaminated female bodies, where disease is both isolated and eradicated.

In Rossetti's treatment of the fallen woman's entry into the female community we are only offered half of this idea that the female community is a place where contaminated bodies are "cleansed." For the speaker of "The Convent Threshold," the convent is only a place where she may "wash the spot [and] burn the snare" (14) left by her sexual transgression and secure her place in the afterlife. While her desire to cleanse herself indicates her awareness of the work carried on within the community, we are afforded no glimpse *inside* the convent at all. Because the speaker is on the convent threshold, we can safely assume that beyond that threshold lies a community of unfallen Sisters, despite the absence of any direct treatment of the inner workings of the community. What we cannot assume, however, is the presence of *other* fallen women within the convent (since as I have discussed the speaker's reasons for entering the convent are ambiguous). While this failure to treat directly what lies beyond the convent threshold is on the one hand the result of Rossetti's wholly external treatment of the female community, it is, on the other, a "sanitizing" of the relationship between the fallen woman and the institution of reclamation.

Rossetti's treatment of the female community echoes various descriptions of the penitentiary contained in appeals for volunteer workers which tended to romanticize the process of reclamation. One such appeal described how the self-devoted Sisters working in the penitentiary,

> By sympathy, by cautious discipline, by affectionate watchfulness, will teach [penitents] to hate what has been pleasant to them, and to love what they have despised, that so after a while they may go forth again into the world and be able to serve amid the ordinary temptations of life, the merciful Saviour whom they have learnt to serve and love in retirement. (qtd. in Marsh 220)

Notably, this description focuses on reeducation, not contamination. This is, of course, not surprising, since appeals to unfallen women asking them to devote their time in institutions filled with an "atmosphere of evil" (Hutchings 86) exuded by "contaminated" women (again, both figuratively and literally) would most certainly have "deter[ed] young ladies from offering themselves for Sisters, and families from allowing them to enter Sisterhoods, where such work was carried on" (Hutchings 85). Like the literature of the Church Penitentiary Movement, Rossetti's speaker imagines the reeducation entailed by entry into the female community, lamenting "Woe's me the lore I must unlearn!" (53). Similarly, the openly penitent posture of Rossetti's speaker echoes a description of Penitentiary inmates published in *The English Woman's Journal* in which the author (who Jan Marsh suggests was probably Mary Howitt) describes how the sight of

> these unhappy girls snatched from a hell upon earth, with the sunshine streaming in through the clear windows upon the white capped heads, and bowed grey and lilac forms, and in the hushed silence to hear the Warden's voice chant forth 'O God the Father of Heaven, have mercy upon us miserable sinners!', and then those young penitent voices reply 'O God the Father of heaven, have mercy upon us miserable sinners!' brought sudden tears to my eyes. . . . (qtd. in Marsh 221)

Neither Rossetti's openly penitent speaker nor the description of the "young penitent[s]" in this last description engage the possibility of the fallen woman's resistance to reclamation. In fact, only two lines of "The Convent Threshold" are devoted to the speaker's acknowledgement of the hardships she faces beyond the convent threshold: "Woe's me the easy way we went, / So rugged when I would return" (55-56). Instead of focusing on the actual process of reclamation, the speaker looks almost exclusively toward her ascension into the afterlife.

The "way" of the penitent was indeed rugged, and Reverend Carter pointed out the naïveté of believing otherwise:

> It is a common idea that the women who are admitted within the walls of a penitentiary are penitents, as they are called [despite the fact that] those who have any practical experience of this work know that this is a fallacy. They are often removed hither by the strong influence of relatives, or of the clergy of the parish. Many of them have not tasted the misery of sin. Even those who are weary of an evil life have often little penitence when they come and ring at the gate and ask for admission. (Hutchings 85)

For Carter, as well as other instrumental figures of the Penitentiary Movement, simply applying for admission into the Penitentiary did not signify penitence, and he believed that "Penitence has to be formed after they are admitted in a very great number of cases, and Sisters—trained Sisters—become experts in teaching and training these inmates in the path of penitence. . ." (Hutchings 85).

Rossetti's treatment of the fallen woman in "The Convent Threshold," then, suggests that Rossetti had little or no direct contact with efforts to reclaim fallen women when she composed the poem. Until she began volunteering at Highgate Penitentiary sometime between the summer 1859 and the summer of 1860, Rossetti's only insight into the reclamation of fallen women would have been through appeals for volunteer workers, and her sanitized portrait of the penitent's progress in "The Convent Threshold" is most likely the combination of her lack of practical experience in these communities coupled with the influence of sentimental descriptions of penitentiary life such as those found in the appeals to self-devoted parishioners.

While Rossetti's treatment of the fallen woman and the female community in "The Convent Threshold" may in some respects adhere to conventional beliefs about fallen woman and their reclamation, the poem is not an entirely conventional treatment of the theme. Rossetti offers no indication that the speaker of "The Convent Threshold" has experienced the "miseries which go side by side" (Skene 9) the fallen woman in conventional treatments of the theme. The speaker's physical health is not threatened by infection (as we have seen in Amy Levy, nor has her experience been anything like the rape and degradation of Marian Erle in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*) and, indeed, her fall seems to have carried with it *none* of the traditional features of the fallen

woman's situation—except, of course, for the notion that she has been morally/spiritually contaminated by a male agent who is the source of that contamination.

Even in her treatment of the fallen woman's contamination, Rossetti's fallen woman is unconventional—both in terms of literary treatments of the fallen woman theme and prevailing beliefs in institutions devoted to the reclamation of fallen women. While it was commonly believed that the fallen woman's reclamation required a female intercessor, in "The Convent Threshold" there is no intercessor, and, in fact, the speaker asserts her own instrumentality in her own reclamation. Her reclamation, she believes, is an active process: she *seeks* the "sea of glass and fire / To wash the spot, to burn the snare" (13-14) and imagines that "Surely, clean Angels cry, she prays; / She laves her soul with tedious tears" (58-60). It is the speaker's *own* "washing" and "laving," she insists, that bring about her reclamation—not the efforts of an intercessor.

The cleansing of this contamination occurs in isolation, and it is in terms of her separation that the speaker of "The Convent Threshold" articulates her understanding of the penitent's path, for just as the fallen woman entering the convent or penitentiary was isolated from the world which gave rise to her fall, so too does the speaker tell her lover "I turn from you my cheeks and eyes, / My hair which you shall see no more" (61-62). This separation was not temporary; these institutions were devoted too *keeping* the "restored" woman from returning to her former life. In some institutions, as William Acton describes, "if the girl wished to return to her friends after being cured, not only was the wish seconded, but a policeman was sent with her to see that she really was remitted to the care of her parents" (*Prostitution* 265). The penitent's restoration requires

both her immediate separation from the "circumstances" of her fall, and also her complete abdication of her former life. In effect, she must undergo a figurative death.

Rossetti's speaker plays out this figurative death in her death-dream, wherein she imagines encountering her lover from the grave:

> It was not dark, it was not light,
>
> Cold dews had drenched my plenteous hair
>
> Thro' clay; you came to see me there.
>
> And "Do you dream of me?" you said.
>
> My heart was dust that used to leap
>
> To you; I answered half asleep:
>
> "My pillow is damp, my sheets are red,
>
> There's a leaden tester to my bed:
>
> Find you a warmer pillow for your head,
>
> A kinder love that mind."
>
> You wrung your hands; while I like lead
>
> Crushed downwards thro' the sodden earth. . . . (111-23)

This death-state is certainly consistent with Rossetti's usual treatments of the intermediate state between death and ascension into the afterlife.[18] The speaker's awareness here of her own death and process of decomposition, her separation from the

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[18] See for instance Rossetti's poems "At Home" (1858) wherein she imagines a dead speaker who seeks her "much frequented house" (2) and, upon "pass[ing] the door" she finds her "friends / Feasting beneath green orange boughs" (3-4) and laments "I was of yesterday" (24); or "After Death" (1849), wherein the dead speaker is aware of a man to whom she had been attracted in life "lean[ing] above me, thinking that I slept / And could not hear him" (5-6), and claims "He did not love me living; but once dead / He pitied me; / and very sweet it is / To know he still is warm tho' I am cold" (12-14). In much of Rossetti's secular poetry she is preoccupied with death and death-states, and as I have pointed out, this concern is not merely a penchant for the morbid, but is part of Rossetti's theological concerns about general resurrection.

lover and the suggestion of the interminability of this process in the image of herself crushing "downwards thro' the sodden earth" (123) all suggest Rossetti's typical treatment of the death-state. Indeed, almost everything about this scene is couched in terms of in-between-ness: it is neither dark nor light, the speaker is neither alive nor dead, conscious nor unconscious, totally awake nor totally asleep.

While this threshold-state offers Rossetti's speaker an opportunity to reflect upon her separation from the lover, it also allows Rossetti a situation wherein she might explore the ways that the fallen woman's body is decontaminated by the process of reclamation. This scene's emphasis upon transformation and decay echoes official attitudes toward the fallen woman which marked her as diseased or contaminated, and suggests that through the cleansing and decontamination which take place within the female community, the fallen woman is somehow separated from the unfallen. Through the cleansing work of the female community, the sexual transgression the speaker had previously identified as a "pleasant sin" (51) transforms into something decayed and contaminated. In the death-state, the speaker imagines everything associated with her "fallen-ness" has been metamorphosed into something horrifyingly decayed: her "plenteous hair" (112) has been soaked by "Cold dews" (112) seeping "Thro' clay" (113) and her "heart [is] dust that used to leap" (115). The body of the fallen woman has not just been discarded; it has been transformed into a monstrosity of decay and death. Even the "landscape" of the sexual transgression—the bed—has been transformed into a grave, and the tester over it suggests both the lid of a coffin and the earth lying above it. This discarding of the diseased body is part of the transformation of the fallen woman into a new, respectable (although, as Kathleen Hickok points out, *unmarriageable*[95]) woman.

Just as the sexual transgression transforms the fallen woman, so too does the process of *de*contamination transform her. The speaker expresses this in her description of how she is so transformed that she tells the lover "If now you saw me you would say: / Where is the face I used to love?" (136-37). This is a curious statement, for it suggests the discarding and loss of the fallen woman have physically transformed the cleansed fallen woman to such a degree that she is unrecognizable. In the process of cleansing, she has been transformed into a new woman with a new identity. Women entering an institution of reclamation assumed new identities, shedding their former lives and beginning life anew with, as Jan Marsh explains, both new clothes and a new name (Marsh 223). Even the Sisters working within such an institution could expect a similar change. Anna Jameson describes how the Sisters were marked by their "uniform dress and a certain similarity in the placid expression and quiet deportment" which made them look "so like each other, that they seemed, whenever I met them, to be but a multiplication of one and the same person . . . a certain self-complacency, arising, not from self-applause, but out of that very abnegation of self which had been adopted as a rule of life. ("Sisters" 69).

While Rossetti acknowledges this abnegation of self in "The Convent Threshold," she does not accept its permanence; it is merely a displacement of self, not an eradication of it. The speaker's un-transformed face, she tells the lover, "tarries veiled in paradise" (140), where she and the lover will "stand safe within the door, / Then [he] shall lift the veil thereof" (143-44). Their separation, and her transformation, she insists, are merely temporary difficulties she and her lover must endure in order to insure their reunion in the afterlife. Most of "The Convent Threshold" is comprised of the speaker's concern with

this reunion; she is certain, as was Rossetti, that "after the Resurrection . . . there would be recognition" (Bell 236) and reunion of those separated by death, and claims that the lover must "Repent, repent, and be forgiven" (79) in order to achieve it, and assures him that "far above / Our palms are grown, our place is set; / There we shall meet as once we met / And love with old familiar love" (145-48). This "old familiar love" which awaits the lovers in the afterlife is the "face [the lover] used to love" (138)—the un-transformed, physical object of his sexual desire.

This belief that the lovers' separation is not a permanent one is an interesting feature of Rossetti's treatment of the fallen woman's reclamation, for it suggests that the "exceeding sinfulness of their sin" (Armstrong 17) does not preclude its recommission in the afterlife. But in order for the lovers to be reunited in the afterlife, the lover, like the speaker, must "Repent, repent, and be forgiven" (79). For the speaker, the lover's failure to repent is a very real concern, and in order to convince him[19] of the necessity of repentance, she suggests to him the possibility of their eternal separation in the afterlife:

> How should I rest in Paradise,
> Or sit on steps of heaven alone?
> If Saints and Angels spoke of love
> Should I not answer from my throne:
> Have pity upon me, ye my friends,
> For I have heard the sound thereof:

[19] Although there is no direct description of the lover as a male, the speaker's references to the contamination resulting from her fall as well as her dream of the male "spirit with transfigured face" (86) both suggest that the lover is a male. There is also the possibility that the speaker's "stain" is the more physical mark of either pregnancy or venereal disease, both of which would, of course, result only from a heterosexual sexual encounter.

Should I not turn with yearning eyes,

Turn earthwards with a pitiful pang?

Oh save me from a pang in heaven. (69-77)

This image of the woman in heaven lamenting her separation from her lover clearly echoes Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem "The Blessed Damozel" and its lovers separated by the untimely death of the woman. In "The Blessed Damozel," the woman expresses her desire for reunion with her lover, saying "'I wish that he were come to me, / For he will come. . . . Have I not prayed in Heaven?—on earth, / Lord, Lord, has he not pray'd?" (67-70). In "The Convent Threshold," the situation imagined by the speaker is similar insofar as she believes they might be separated by death, but unlike "The Blessed Damozel," the speaker of "The Convent Threshold" fears that her lover will be unable to overcome his attraction to worldly attractions, and will thus jeopardize their reunion in the afterlife. His attention, she insists, is focused on the pleasures of a world in which "Milk-white, wine-flushed among the vines, / Up and down leaping, to and fro, / Most glad, most full, made strong with wines, / Blooming as peaches pearled with dew, / Their golden hair afloat, / Love-music warbling in their throat, / Young men and women come and go" (30-37). Her attention, in contrast, is focused upon the "far-off city grand, / Beyond the hills a watered land, / Beyond the gulf a gleaming strand / Of mansions where the righteous sup" (18-21).

While the contrast here between the ephemeral and the eternal attentions of the lovers points out the difference in the lovers' attitudes toward their sexual transgression, it also carries with it the suggestion that the man does not think it necessary to repent. Although the complicity of the fall was, of course, widely acknowledged, the woman

bore the "undivided burden of guilt. . . . While the partners of her sin pass in and out among us, unnoticed, except by the sleepless Eye of God" (Hutchings 78). Similarly, Victorian social critic W. R. Greg noted that "if young men, who commit one act of unchastity, were compelled to feel that all their prospects in life were in consequence blighted forever, and that their position was lost, hopelessly and irrecoverably—society would be infested with, and almost made up of, desperadoes" (qtd. in Hickok 93). Although in literary treatments of sexual transgression the complicity of the fall did not go completely unaddressed, and as Kathleen Hickok has pointed out, even though

> most women's poetry throughout the century did assign at least partial blame either to the male seducer or to the destitute condition of the woman (or both). . . . even when they represented the male seducer as being equally culpable with the woman morally, women poets demonstrated the strength of the double standard by punishing the woman harshly and the man lightly or not at all. (97)

"The Convent Threshold" directly confronts this double standard by constantly asserting the complicity of the sexual fall: the poem is addressed directly to the lover, and the speaker's claims that "*You sinned with me* a pleasant sin" (51 emphasis mine) as well as her insistence that the lover must "repent with me, for I repent" (52) clearly point out that in "The Convent Threshold," fallen-ness is not the exclusive province of women.[20] In some ways, what emerges from "The Convent Threshold" is the idea that if sexual transgression creates the fallen woman, it simultaneously creates the "fallen man"—

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[20] See also Amy Levy's poem "Magdalen" (1884), which is spoken by a fallen woman who is as I have discussed earlier lying a "Magdalen hospital," dying from her sexual encounter. The poem is an incredibly accusatory treatment of the role of the male in the fallen woman's physical and moral contamination.

whose soul is in an equal amount of danger, who bears equally the stain of sexual transgression, and who, therefore, is equally in need of repentance, reclamation, and decontamination.

This idea of the body contaminated by the sexual fall, as we can see, looms large in "The Convent Threshold." Rossetti will again return to this idea in "Goblin Market," where the consumption of the goblin fruit constitutes a physical threat to the woman's body. But this is not the only theme Rossetti will return to in later poems, for the relationship between the speaker's contaminated body and the female community in "The Convent Threshold" is a theme which will figure prominently in her poetry for the next two years. Notably, though, Rossetti's treatment of the male figure here—a figure whose sexual experience renders him just as fallen as the woman—will change radically in future poems as the male figure is transformed Indeed, "The Convent Threshold" takes us only to the outer edge of the female community, to the threshold of the sisterhood, and offers only an external imagining of what internal dynamics are at work within it. Despite its externality—and, to a certain extent *because* of it—"The Convent Threshold" marks the beginning of Rossetti's exploration of the relationship between female communities and the fallen woman, as well as the work of decontamination and cleansing which these communities contain. From "The Convent Threshold," then, we can trace a steady progression inside the female community in Rossetti's poetry of the next two years as she begins to examine more fully what lies beyond the convent threshold and as her own knowledge of the inner workings of those communities becomes more complete while volunteering at Highgate Penitentiary.

CHAPTER TWO

"GOBLIN MARKET," SISTERHOOD AND THE CHURCH PENITENTIARY MOVEMENT

Just as "The Convent Threshold" takes us to the edge of the sister-community, it also places us upon the threshold of Rossetti's interest in women's communities. The "next step," if we may call it that, for Rossetti's poetic treatment of sister-relationships and communities of women is thus the step which takes us over the convent threshold and into the sister-community. The poem which marks this movement inside the sister-community is "Goblin Market," the central poem for Rossetti studies. The poem was composed in April of 1859, nine months after Rossetti composed "The Convent Threshold," and still four months before our first written indication that she had begun her volunteer work at Highgate. The poem is generally regarded as Rossetti's expression of her own proto-feminist beliefs, and indeed, the poem's treatment of the relationship between the sisters, Lizzie and Laura, and the goblin brotherhood, seems to mark out Rossetti's position on questions regarding relationships between men and women.

Recently, the function of sisterhood in "Goblin Market" has begun to garner tremendous attention.[21] This is an important development in Rossetti criticism, for rather than reduce the various dualities within the poem—such as goblin/sister,

[21] See for instance articles by Bristow, Casey, Holt, Mermin, Michie ("There").

brotherhood/sisterhood, Lizzie/Laura, pious/tempted, and domestic/market—to a "single unwavering level of meaning" (Casey 63) or to assign them simple allegorical values, readings of sisterhood in "Goblin Market" have opened up the ways that Rossetti engaged problems facing women not only as individuals, but as members of female communities.

"Goblin Market" is a special poem for such investigations, as its treatment of sisterhood seems to draw moral and political distinctions between men and women. This, in turn, has led many critics to consider Rossetti as something of a proto-feminist, but as Joseph Bristow has pointed out, "we need to bear in mind that Rossetti was not, strictly speaking, a feminist" (258) and her position on various aspects of the "woman question" were, at best, ambivalent.[22] Rossetti considered the political issues of her day poor subjects for poetry and made these feelings clear in a letter to her brother Dante Gabriel: "It is not in me, and therefore it will never come out of me, to turn to politics or philanthropy with Mrs. Browning: such many-sidedness I leave to greater than I, and, having said my say, may well sit silent" (*FL* 31).[23] But in "Goblin Market," Rossetti does not seem to have sat silently, and the poem's treatment of the relationship between the fallen woman and the female community, and its exploration of the ways female

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[22] In a letter to Augusta Webster, Rossetti writes: "Many who have thought more and done much more than myself share your views [on women's rights],—and yet they are not mine. I do not think the present social movements tend on the whole to uphold Xtianity, or that the influence of some of our most prominent and gifted women is exerted in that direction: and thus I cannot aim at 'women's rights'" (qtd. in Bell 125).

[23] Rossetti's positions on the political and social issues of her day were, at best, *erratic*. On the issue of female priests, she writes. "Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood unalterable distinction between men and women, their position, duties, privileges? . . . The fact of the Priesthood being exclusively man's, leaves me in no doubt that the highest functions are not in this world open to both sexes: and if not all, then a selection must be made and a line drawn somewhere" (qtd. in Bell 124). Conversely, Rossetti felt that "if female rights are sure to be overborne for lack of female voting influence, then I confess I feel disposed to shoot ahead of my instructress, and to assert that female *M.P.'s* are only

communities respond to the world outside them, places Rossetti among the other women poets of the nineteenth century who were engaging political and social issues facing women as individuals and as members of female communities.

"Goblin Market" was originally titled "A Peep at the Goblins," which Christina claimed was a tribute to her cousin Mrs. Anna Eliza Bray's "A Peep at the Pixies," which was contained in a volume called *A Peep at the Pixies, or Legends of the West*, published in 1854 (Marsh 230).[24] The title "Goblin Market" was later suggested by Dante Gabriel, and Christina thought it a great improvement over her original choice (Marsh 230).[25] As Dante Gabriel Rossetti's influence suggests, source studies of the poem have found that the poem was heavily influenced by friends of the family and relatives. In his source study of "Goblin Market," B. Ifor Evans points to Thomas Keightly's *Fairy Mythology*, an illustrated anthology of folk tales,[26]and points out that Keightly "was a friend of the household and the book was a favorite with the children" (157). Other sources may have come from within the family, and David F. Morrill has suggested a relationship between "Goblin Market" and the vampire stories of Christina's uncle, John Polidori, the author of *The Vampyre*.[27] More recently, critics such as D. M. R. Bentley and Diane D'Amico

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right and reasonable" (Bell 124). Similarly, she took "exceptions at the exclusion of married women from the suffrage" (124).

[24] Jan Marsh notes that "within *A Peep at the Pixies* is one tale bearing a striking resemblance to 'Goblin Market.' While traveling to a distant chapel, Serena of Tintagel hears fairy music and is so beguiled by the sight of the fairy musician that she fails to complete her prayers at the appointed time. She then falls into decline, wracked by desire to hear the music again. . . . Serena consults a wizard who gives her a spell to say when she reaches a waterfall; in doing so she topples into the pool and drowns. There is no happy moral ending, but the germ of 'Goblin Market' is surely here" (230). In addition to the poem's possible sources, Marsh suggests "that Christina's goblins came more directly from *Comus* . . . and the action describes a similar contest between evil and innocence" (231).

[25] See also Goldberg.

[26] For an in-depth discussion of the sources of "Goblin Market," see Evans, Packer 141-47, and Marsh 229-33.

[27] "Goblin Market," Morrill argues, suggests that [although] women may help initiate evil by inviting it over the threshold, that same evil can be contained: men can be put in their place, the submerged force of

have proposed that "[w]e should . . . add to the list of sources for "Goblin Market" the literature of the Church Penitentiary Movement" (D'Amico 78).[28] The poem was composed as late as April 1859[29]—just a few months prior to any written record of her involvement with Highgate penitentiary. Despite the obvious chronological problems troubling any attempt to draw a direct line of influence from Rossetti's experiences at Highgate to "Goblin Market," D. M. R. Bentley and D'Amico have found numerous parallels between the poem and Rossetti's experiences there.[30] While both of these critics view "Goblin Market" primarily as a fallen woman poem, specific attention to the structure and function of sisterhood within the poem reveals the ways Rossetti's treatment of this theme intersects with the literature and ideology of the Church Penitentiary Movement, as well as much larger discussions about the potential benefits and risks of communities of women.

On the surface, "Goblin Market" appears to be little more than a folk ballad about two maidens, Lizzie and Laura, who live in an enchanted glen where they must "Morning and evening" (1) endure the cries of goblin merchant men who seek to sell them exotic fruits. Consumption of these fruits results in an addictive need for another taste (which the goblins never grant) and ultimately brings about the death of whoever has consumed the fruit. Despite this, Laura succumbs to the goblins' temptations and exchanges a

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Victorian sexuality can be suppressed, and the fashionable vices of the world can be replaced with sisterly love and spirituality" (13-14).

[28] Bentley suggests an even closer connection between "Goblin Market" and Rossetti's work at Highgate, arguing that "Goblin Market" was possibly written "to be read aloud by Rossetti to an audience of fallen women" at Highgate (58).

[29] Rossetti's note in an 1893 copy of "Goblin Market" reads: "'Goblin Market' first published in 1862 was written (subject of course to subsequent revision) as long ago as April 27, 1859" (Crump 234n).

[30] D'Amico's study of Christina's involvement at Highgate centers around how it influenced her representations of fallen women. Bentley's essay suggests that the poem was actually written as a fairy-tale/allegory of life at the penitentiary which was actually intended to have been read to the "inmates."

"precious golden lock" (126) of her hair for some of their fruit. Rather than watch her sister die for want of another taste of the goblin fruit, however, Lizzie braves the goblin men and returns home covered in the pulp and juice—she herself never consumes the fruit—and offers her pulp-covered body to Laura, who is magically cured by the second taste of goblin fruit.

One of the most striking features of "Goblin Market" is its distinctly *feminine* world. While the only *people* we encounter in the poem are the sisters, Lizzie and Laura, they do not live in complete isolation: the poem's opening lines "Morning and evening / Maids heard the goblins cry" (1-2), Lizzie's warning that "not another maiden lags" (223), and the story of "Jeanie," who "met [the goblins] in the moonlight, / Took their gifts both choice and many, / Ate their fruits and wore their flowers" and "for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died" (314-15) clearly indicate that the sisters live in a community. At no point in the poem do we encounter a *human* male figure, and even in the poem's closing lines, when we are told that "Days, weeks, month, years / Afterwards, when both were wives / With children of their own" (543-45), we find merely the *suggestion* of the presence of men in the sisters' lives. In fact, the only male figures we encounter in the poem at all are the goblin-men, whom the sisters are to avoid at all costs.

The sisters' home is separated from the goblin-glen by a physical distance, across which the sisters must leave their home twice daily to go "with pitchers to the reedy brook" in the glen (216). Lizzie even warns her sister that the brook is far enough away from their home to make the trip a dangerous one: "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?" (248-52). As

Terrence Holt has noted, the sisters' "repeated journeyings back and forth between market and home [defines] a physical distance between" the sisters-sphere and the goblin-sphere and points out that the sisters are separated from the goblins by a gate, and a "heath with clumps of furze" (Holt 53; "Goblin Market" 325).[31] The physical distance between the sister-community and the goblins situates the two on each others' border (across the glen from one another, for instance), and in such proximity that the sisters must, on a daily basis, endure the cries of the goblin market while they navigate its boundaries.

The separation is so complete that even the economic system of the goblin world has little place in that of the sisters. The sisters have no reason to interact with the goblin market out of necessity, though, since their community is completely self-sufficient, and their daily chores produce all they need: they "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).[32] The fruits of the sisters' domestic labors are, as Terrence Holt describes, "healthful foods [produced] independently of the marketplace" (Holt 52), and thus they have no reason to venture beyond the sister-community for their daily needs. During her encounter with them, Laura tells the goblin men that she has "no coin; / To take were to purloin: / I have no

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[31] It should be noted that Holt is not discussing the relationship between the Penitentiary Movement and "Goblin Market," but is instead investigating the ways that Rossetti marks what I call the "essential difference" between the goblins and the maidens. This physical distance, Holt argues, marks the sisters' and goblins' alienation from one another and indicates their independence from the economic/commercial world of the goblins.

[32] In presenting the sister-community as completely self-sufficient, Rossetti offers a very similar situation to what Adelaide Anne Proctor envisions in the poem "A Legend of Provence," which describes a female religious community which is entirely self-sufficient.

copper in my purse, / I have no silver either, / And all my gold is on the furze / That shakes in the windy weather / Above the rusty heather" (116-22). The fact that Laura carries no money with her to the brook tells us that sisterhood has no day-to-day need for what the goblins' consider valuable—and indeed, even that what the two "communities" value are completely different—but we would be wrong to assume that the sister-community has neither use for nor means of obtaining money.[33]

Whatever efforts Rossetti may make to establish two independent "communities" in the poem, we are constantly reminded that the two spheres *do* interact—and on a daily basis. The goblin market, and the way that it operates, is certainly not unknown to Laura, who "in haste" (115) admits her lack of money even before the goblins have requested payment. Likewise, Lizzie "put a silver penny in her purse" (324) and goes to acquire the goblin fruit, where she almost immediately "Held out her apron, / Tossed them her penny" (365-66). Clearly, both sisters have an understanding of the market's workings, and their "repeated journeyings" into the goblin glen reinforce the inescapability of that market. Moreover, the sisters acknowledge the danger of the market almost as a part of their daily routine—their warnings to one another assume mantra-like proportions—and despite their lack of any *daily* need for engaging with the market, we can clearly see that encounters between "maids" and markets—while dangerous—are not unheard of.

By marking out the separate communities of the male goblins and the sisters, Rossetti has established a women's community which is apparently independent of the world outside it. Moreover, the sister-community actively avoids contact with the male goblin-world. Such an actively isolationist community of women immediately suggests

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[33] Terrence Holt is among those who have suggested that the sisters have no money, saying "Laura's

the possibility that the sister-community here is a parallel of the community of women involved in the penitentiary system—a community of women with which Rossetti would become involved (at latest) only four months after composing "Goblin Market."

The isolation of the female community was a common theme in the literature and ideology of the Penitentiary Movement, where it was believed that the "cure [for the attractiveness of the 'sinful' life] seemed chiefly to be sought in the change of external surroundings—separation from the 'occasions' of sin" (Hutchings 76). The most efficacious way to bring about this separation, it was initially thought, was to place Penitentiaries in the country, but this plan was never strictly followed, and the Penitentiaries such as Highgate were established within cities. Why this was the case is unclear, although it seems likely that the practice of transporting penitents from the city to the country would certainly have been problematic. Whether in the city or in the country, though, these communities demanded the isolation of the penitents from the outside world, and as Felicia Skene complained in her scathing indictment of the penitentiary system,

> one of the cruelest parts of the system is [the penitents'] rigorous confinement to the house, and total want of exercise in the open air. . . . [I]t is a fact that not one breath of fresh air is allowed to these poor prisoners through the day; not one half hour is granted them in which to look on the blue sky and the sunshine, and to meet the cool breeze with its invigorating power. (11)

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paradise of unalienated labor has no need for money, and no means of getting it" (55).

Inside the penitentiary, inmates would have been constantly surrounded almost exclusively by women. At the Penitentiary at Clewer, Reverend Carter "commit[ted] the teaching and training of the penitents to the Sisters. So strong was he on this point that the clergy had little communication with the penitents, except of a sacramental character. . . . It was to the Sisters' influence that Mr. Carter looked to as a transforming power" (Hutchings 85). In the ideology of the Penitentiary, the goal was to offer an institution "where penitents were received, and not only separated from their past evil life, but brought into a new and pure atmosphere, and gradually transformed. . ." (Hutchings 76). Similarly, in "Goblin Market" the central action of the poem is Lizzie's willingness to come to the aid of her fallen sister, and thus the poem's concluding lines— "there is no friend like a sister . . . to fetch one if one goes astray, / To lift one if one totters down, / To strengthen whilst one stands" (565-67)—echo the Church Penitentiary Association's belief that the fallen woman could only be redeemed by a "special type of self-sacrificing, pure woman" (D'Amico 71) who comes to the aid of her fallen sister.

"Goblin Market" seems to argue, even the "pure atmosphere" of the sisterhood cannot always supplant the appeal of the world outside it. As the sisters' domestic labor indicates, the sisterhood provides only staples, while the goblins are merchants of luxury. The use of luxury in seduction is not an uncommon theme in Victorian literature, and one letter to the *Times* advocating Penitentiary work notes that the "story so common in works of fiction occurs over and over again in real life. The country girl accompanies some heartless villain up to London, is maintained in splendor for months, weeks, or days, is then deserted" ("Greatest" 7). Another letter to the *Times* paints a similar picture:

> Only a few days ago an old fisherman applied to me, as a magistrate, for protection against the attempts of a notorious profligate to seduce his daughter, a mere child, not yet 16 years of age. . . . By flattery and presents, and, I believe, by the arts of one of his former victims, who, like fallen spirits, are ever ready to become the instruments of corruption, this hapless child is inveigled from her home late at night by this villain. . . . ("Church of England" 4)

The parallels (at least superficially) between the profligate enticing the young maiden away from home and the goblins enticing Laura away from home are certainly obvious, and much of the criticism devoted to "Goblin Market" interprets the goblin fruit and Laura's consumption of it exclusively as symbols of sexual promiscuity. Such readings, however, unnecessarily limit the possibilities of meaning in the poem and ignore Rossetti's common usage of fruit as a symbol of "luxurious desire" (Marsh 177). As Jan Marsh writes, the goblin fruit "was not intended by the author as a symbol of sexual desire, nor received as such by her original audience, for both Christina and her readers were accustomed to interpret 'forbidden fruit' as pleasures and self-indulgences of various kinds" (Marsh 232). To be sure, Laura's "fall" is highly sexualized, but we need not see the goblin fruit as exclusively sexual, nor do have to view the goblins as exclusively representative of men. We can instead view the fruit simply as representative of the temptations of the extra-sororal world, and the goblin men as those forces in it which convey the temptation.

If "Goblin Market" emphasizes the female community's potential to reclaim morally and spiritually tempted women, it also pays specific attention to the "place" of

that community, asserting that that place is undeniably "home." When the sisters first encounter the goblins, Lizzie "thrust a dimpled finger / In each ear, shut eyes and ran" back to the safety of home, where the goblin men may not come. Similarly, during her meeting with the goblins, Lizzie (understandably) voices her desire to return home, and tells the goblins that "one waits / At home alone for me" (383-84). Lizzie emphasizes her hurriedness by calling attention to both "home" and her separation from her sister, both of which suggest the sister-relationship and the domestic sphere which, because it excludes the goblin men (and, with the lack of mention of male children or husbands, apparently *all* men), is clearly the safest place for maidens. In "Goblin Market," "home" (and the sisterhood that it contains) provides a place of refuge for sisters who have encountered—or *are* encountering—the threatening forces that exist outside it: Laura "turned home alone" (140) after her encounter with the goblins; Lizzie invokes "home" as a place of refuge to be sought "before the night grows dark" (248), telling her sister "You should not loiter longer at this brook: / Come with me home" (244-45).

Home is a central feature of the literature of the Church Penitentiary Movement, and, in a letter to the editor of the *Times*, one writer describes the ways Penitentiaries "afford a home where they may hear the tidings of Divine forgiveness, and whence they may behold a prospect of future happiness and peace" (*Times* 2 Feb. 1854 12). This idea of home is a significant feature of the language of the Church Penitentiary Movement and is tied to an idea of "home" as a

> source of virtues and emotions which were nowhere else to be found, least of all in business and society. And that in turn made it a place radically different from the surrounding world. It was much more than a house

> where one stopped at night for a temporary rest and recreation . . . in the midst of a busy career. It was a place apart, a walled garden, in which certain virtues too easily crushed by modern life could be preserved. . . . (Houghton 343)

In "Goblin Market," home is certainly a place of refuge from the goblins, and that refuge stems from the fact that it is "radically different from the surrounding world" of the goblins, which is a place of chaos. Penitentiary founder Thomas Thellusson Carter saw this world as a place where "children suffer . . . from too close contact in cottages, with insufficient space to separate the sexes and preserve the veil even of common decency . . . where all ages and both sexes mingle without restraint; or in the way homewards amid the contaminations of the hamlet, or along the crowded street. . ." (Hutchings 78). Home, then, and specifically the type of home offered by the penitentiary, acts as counteragent to the chaos of this surrounding world. As Rossetti lays out Lizzie and Laura's sisterhood—and their "home"—as a male-excluding place of refuge from the world outside the community, she expresses these same notions of home as a place of order and the surrounding world as a place of chaos.

Indeed, the sister-community is rigidly ordered—both in Rossetti's poem and in the Penitentiary. In a Penitentiary Felicia Skene described as "one of the most lax in the treatment of penitents" (11), the women's schedule in the penitentiary consumes nearly their entire day:

5 A.M.	Rise.
5.30,	Private Prayer.
5.45,	Industrial Work.

6.45,	Prayers in Chapel.
7,	Breakfast.
7.30,	Industrial Work.
12,	Dinner.
12.30,	Mid-Day Prayers and Recreation.
1,	Industrial Work.
4,	Tea.
4.30,	Work.
7,	Bible-Class and Reading.
8,	Service in Chapel.
8.15,	Private Prayers. (12)

Clearly, inmates in the penitentiary were busy. Similarly, as Lizzie and Laura perform their daily chores "Neat like bees, as sweet and busy" (201-02), fetch their water "morning and evening" and repeatedly endure the goblin cries, their day possesses a repetitive orderliness reminiscent of the daily routines provided by the penitentiary system.

The rigid schedule alone, though, is not the only source of order in either "Goblin Market" or the penitentiary. In the penitentiary, it was believed that "simply by her influence, aided by her habit, [the trained Sister] soon brought order out of chaos," and because of the sisters, "New forces seemed to be at work, and [disorderly penitents] soon became orderly and restful" (Hutchings 84). Similarly, "Goblin Market" insists upon the strength of sisterhood in bringing order out of chaos. After Laura consumes her sister's offering of the goblin-pulp, she "Writhing as one possessed leaped and sung, / Rent all

her robe, and wrung / Her hands in lamentable haste, / And beat her breast. / Her Locks streamed like the torch / Borne by a racer at full speed, / Or like the mane of horses in their flight. . ." (496-502). It is Lizzie who, like the "trained Sister," offers comfort and nurses Laura back to health: "That night long Lizzie watched by her, / Counted her pulse's flagging stir, / Felt for her breath, / Held water to her lips, and cooled her face. . ." (525-28).

This scene is doubly significant, though, because Lizzie's willingness to remain by her sister's side reinforces the "doubling" which plays a prominent role in Rossetti's descriptions of the sisters. The sisters, apparently, are completely identical, and Rossetti describes them as "Golden head by golden head, / Like two pigeons in one nest / Folded in each other's wings . . . / Like two blossoms on one stem, / Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow, / Like two wands of ivory . . . / Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest" (184-98). This dualism has led many critics to suppose that "Goblin Market" presents us with Rossetti's poetic representation of her own dualistic, proto-psychological understanding of the individual psyche.[34] But regardless of whatever

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[34] See, for instance, Winston Weathers and Theo Dombrowski, although there are certainly many more studies of "Goblin Market" devoted to this thesis. Interestingly, though, this scene bears striking similarities to a short ode composed by Christina's father, Gabriele, for his two daughters:

> Christina and Maria
> My dear daughters
> Are fresh violets
> Opened at dawn.
> They are roses nurtured
> By the earliest breezes,
> Lovely turtle-doves
> In the nest of Love. (qtd. in Marsh 24)

Like Christina's image of the two sisters in their "bower," her father's ode describes the girls as flowers and as birds, just as Christina describes Lizzie and Laura as "two pigeons in one nest" (185) and "two blossoms on one stem" (188). Gabriele Rossetti's image of the "earliest breezes" which "nurture" the girls is also similar to Christina's description of how "Wind sang to [Lizzie and Laura] a lullaby" (193). There are other connections between "Goblin Market" and Christina's relationship with her sister, as well, most

psychological underpinnings may be at work within the poem, this dualism also distinguishes the sameness of the sisters from the variety of the goblin brotherhood. Rossetti would some years later voice this same difference in a letter to her brother Dante Gabriel: "Here is a great discovery, 'Women are not Men'" (*FL* 31). If the identical Lizzie and Laura represent women, and the individual and varied goblins men, then "Goblin Market" pushes Rossetti's "great discovery" to such fantastic limits that men are unlike women to such a degree that they have been transformed into non-humans.

Yet as Michael Cohen suggests in his discussion of Augustus Egg's painting *The Traveling Companions* (1862), dualism among sisters defines them in terms of one another and as such, is a means of constituting identity through a series of "equalities": their appearance is the same, their ages are the same and their experiences are probably the same (15). Dualism, then, is a means of establishing not only identity, but the organization of authority within the sister-relationship as well, for if the sisters are constantly defined in terms of their similarities, then "twinning"—and its perhaps sinister potential suggestion of interchangeability—establishes the sister-relationship as one of "unique equality" (Cohen 15). Rossetti's use of dualism is also connected to the penitentiary system in several ways, since "by being in every way like her sister, the respectable woman effects a rescue of her fallen sister because she cancels all of the moral opprobrium that goes along with being fallen" (86). Rossetti's use of dualism also suggests characteristic features of the Penitentiary Movement as well. Sisters working at Highgate "wore muslin caps and black dresses, with a string of black beads and a crucifix . . ." (Marsh 221), and in "Sisters of Charity," Anna Jameson even remarked how "the

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notably that the poem was originally inscribed "To M. F. R.," and a later edition in 1893 included this note:

uniform dress" of the Sisters of Charity made the women in those communities appear "so like each other, that they seemed, whenever I met them, to be but a multiplication of one and the same person" (69).

In addition, Rossetti's use of dualism in "Goblin Market" echoes the Penitentiary Movement's insistence upon penitents' being "watched constantly" and "never left without a 'sister present'" (D'Amico 70) for fear that inmates might leave the penitentiary and return to their former lives. At Highgate, even the penitents' sleeping chambers were placed in close proximity to the sleeping chamber of an unfallen sister who kept them under surveillance (D'Amico 70). This surveillance was necessary, according to Felicia Skene's *Penitentiaries and Reformatories* (1865), because the penitents were

> accustomed only to lives of the wildest indulgence, the grossest excess, the most lawless freedom,—governed solely by passion and impulse, without hope in the future, or memory in the past, to inspire them with a wish beyond the gratification of the present moment,—they come, in the fiery excitement of some passing fancy, to the Refuge, and are straightway subjected to a system of conventual rule and severe religious observance, which the best-disposed novice that ever sought to be trained as a nun would find hard to bear! (10)

This sort of "care" provided a countermeasure against penitents fleeing the penitentiary, and as I have discussed earlier, Carter's biography points out that the "common idea that the women who are admitted within the walls of a penitentiary are penitents. . . . is a

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"'Goblin Market . . . was inscribed to my dear only sister Maria Francesca Rossetti" (qtd. in Crump 234).

fallacy. They are often removed thither by the strong influence of relatives, or by the clergy of the parish. . . . Even those who are weary of an evil life have often little penitence when they come and ring at the gate" (Hutchings 85). For those merely seeking refuge and not reform, the conventual order offered by the penitentiary would certainly have been distasteful.

At Highgate, recidivism was not as significant a problem as in other institutions, but the penitentiary was not immune. In *Highgate: Its History Since the Fifteenth Century* (1983), John Richardson notes that in 1862, out of 62 inmates, "22 penitents were discharged: 8 went into service, 1 got married, 2 went home, 2 had ill-health, 8 went by their own accord and 1 was expelled for misconduct" (132). The temptation to leave the rigors of penitentiary life and return to the "occasions of sin" must—for some—have been very strong, and Rossetti echoes this concern in her maxim "There is no friend like a sister . . . To fetch one if one [went] astray" (565). There is a double-meaning here, though: on the one hand, the phrase suggests the Church Penitentiary Movement's belief in women's' ability to be a "transforming power" in social/moral reform (Hutchings 85); on the other, it suggests the careful watch that must be kept over those already within the penitentiary.

In "Goblin Market," just as in the penitentiary, the temptation to leave the sister-community is present, and the sisters' exhibit this "watchfulness" when, early in the poem, they travel away from the sister-community in pairs. Unlike the penitents and their overseers, in their initial encounter with the goblins, neither of Rossetti's sisters assumes a role of "guardian" or "protector." The initial goblin-encounter and its repercussions for the organization of authority within the sister-community is significant,

for attention to the effects of the goblin-encounter reveals the presence of two distinctly different "types" of sister-relationships: the first, "pre-goblin" sister-relationship, emphasizes the absence of a hierarchical organization of authority between the sisters; the second, "post-goblin" presents us with a sister-relationship organized along clear hierarchical lines.

During the initial moments of the first goblin-encounter, the sisters crouch "close together . . . With clasping arms and cautioning lips" (36-38). Instead of differentiating themselves as protector/protected, each sister warns the other, and thus both assume a protector role:

> "Lie close," Laura said, Pricking up her golden head:
>
> "We must not look at goblin men,
>
> We must not buy their fruits. . . ."
>
> "Oh," cried Lizzie, "Laura, Laura,
>
> You should not peep at goblin men." (40-49)

But the warnings are not enough to stave off Laura's temptation by the goblin-wares, and she "chose to linger / Wondering at each merchant man" (69-70), while Lizzie "shut eyes and ran" back to the safety of the home. At this point, Laura is alone and figuratively sister-less—or even worse, she has *abandoned* the sister-community in favor of the luxury of the goblins. Laura's alone-ness and the lack of a sister in close proximity is a striking contrast to descriptions of the sisters acting in tandem and runs counter to the Church Penitentiary Movement's insistence upon the necessity of community and companionship in maintaining any moral or spiritual standard among women. Laura's

alone-ness, then, suggests her lack of community as well as her loss of a moral and spiritual standard, and thus precipitates her fall.

Interestingly, the moment Laura chooses to remain with the goblins, the scene loses whatever semblance of realism it had previously possessed. Until this moment in the poem, Rossetti has offered no description of the goblin men's physical characteristics. Here, though, the goblins appear as fantastic creatures with "a cat's face," and "a tail," some of whom move "at a rat's pace," while others "crawled like a snail," or "like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry" (71-75). Likewise, the description of Laura is "unreal" as Rossetti describes her through a series of similes: "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). These images describe the progression of Laura's emergence from her hiding place and into full view of the goblins: like the rush-imbedded swan, she watches cautiously from a place of safety; like the lily and the moonlit branch, she has moved into full view but still maintains a tie to the moral and spiritual foundation of the sisterhood; and like the freed vessel, she has completely abandoned any connection to a structure which might restrain her and quickly begins ravenously to consume the goblin fruit. The fruit-juice is "Sweeter than honey," "Stronger than . . . wine," and "Clearer than water" (129-31); as such, it is as unreal as the goblins. While Rossetti may describe the fruit "fantastically," Laura's consumption of it constitutes a very real—and very *explicit*—act of self-indulgence, the consequence of which is the completion of the fall that had begun with her choice "to linger / Wondering at each merchant man" (69-70).

These images of the fair maiden being tempted away by luxury were most certainly cliché by the time Rossetti used them, and her exclusive reliance upon hackneyed imagery in her description of Laura's fall tells us that Christina deliberately avoided a realistic depiction, most likely because any "accurate" representation of a woman's fall would have been considered offensive.[35] The lack of realistic depictions of the actual instance of the fall most likely presented Rossetti with a sizable obstacle, because her description of Laura's temptation is an explicit one, and one with little or no literary precedent. Generally, the fallen woman's "story" is only told from the past tense, and with little or no detail: Barrett Browning describes Marian Erle's rape and pregnancy in *Aurora Leigh* only as the result of "man's violence / not man's seduction" (6. 1226-27); the speaker of Dora Greenwell's "Christina" describes her fall similarly, saying "I was sought / By one that wore me for a time, then flung / Me off" (68-70); and Adelaide Anne Proctor's "A Legend of Provence" simply asks "What need to tell how all such dreams must fade, / Before the slow, foreboding, dreaded shade, / That floated nearer, until pomp and pride, / Pleasure and wealth, were summoned to her side, / To bid, at least, the noisy hours forget, / And clamour down the whispers of regret. / Still Angela strove to dream, and strove in vain; / Awakened once, she could not sleep again" (188-95).[36] Clearly, none of Rossetti's contemporaries offer an explicit description of the

[35] Hickok explains that "[i]t comes as no surprise, of course, that women poets did not depict female passions more frankly, even in their representations of fallen women. Given the current ideology about respectable womanhood, they could not reasonably have been expected to do so. Nevertheless, they did occasionally reveal greater acknowledgment of female sexual motivation and give greater credence to passion as the cause of sin than male sociologists like Acton and Hemyng were willing to postulate. Partly, perhaps, because it wasn't possible to be very direct about it, women poets tended to accord the sexual aspect of seduction and prostitution only a cursory treatment and to concentrate instead on other motivations and on the ensuing distress" (99).

[36] Rossetti personally knew Dora Greenwell, and in February 1882 was asked to contribute an entry on Proctor in a series of Biographies of Women (*FL* 212). Christina held Barrett Browning in particularly

actual fall, and neither does Rossetti, although her presentation of Laura's consumption of the goblin-fruit is certainly closer than any of these contemporaries offer.[37]

It is unlikely that Rossetti's work at Highgate (even if it had begun before the generally accepted date of composition for "Goblin Market" in April of 1859) provided her with detailed accounts of the inmates' sexual transgressions, since records of the Penitentiary Movement indicate that there was little or no social interaction between the inmates and the workers. Felicia Skene, speaking generally of the major trends in the "rules" of penitentiaries, claims "[t]he ladies in charge, whose self-denial and devotion, generally speaking, it is impossible to praise too highly, have adopted the unfortunate theory, that it is necessary to keep these unhappy women at a distance, in order to teach them the heinousness of their sin and the vast difference between the pure and the fallen" (12). Armstrong, in his influential essay "The Church and Her Female Penitents" (1849), explains the reasoning behind this "distance" between the penitent and those working at the penitentiary:

> Let it not, then, be supposed that in the intercourse between the Sisters and the Penitents any mention of the particular sin should be allowed. On the contrary, it should be a most strict and stringent rule, that not the faintest nor slightest allusion should ever be suffered to be made to the former guilty mode of life. It must be a forbidden theme. . . . Such a law of silence between the Sisters and the Penitents is for the good of both

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high esteem, and her brothers William and Gabriel "were [sometimes] frequent guests of the Brownings'" (Marsh 185).

[37] This is, of course, not to suggest that the fall is seldom treated in Victorian women's poetry Rather, I want to suggest that Rossetti would have found few if any "uncoded" or explicit treatments of the fall among her contemporary poets. For a fuller discussion of this tendency among Victorian poets (and

> parties. Many pure-minded women might shrink from offering themselves to a post which might bring knowledge of evil, which might taint their minds, and cause distressing thoughts to haunt them against their will. . . . No surer means could be used to convince them of the exceeding sinfulness of their sin than thus to treat it as something too horrid even to be alluded to in the most indirect and distant way. (17)

Whether we can assume that Skene's vitriolic attack upon the methods of the penitentiaries is accurate, or if Armstrong's sweeping declaration was actually enforced at Highgate, we cannot say. Nonetheless, we can assume that the exchange of explicit information about the "former guilty mode of life" would have *officially* been frowned upon. And so just as Rossetti found little or no literary sources for her description of Laura's fall, it is equally possible that work in the penitentiary offered little insight, either.

The penitentiary's exclusion of all reference to the inmates' former ways of life was not only an effort to emphasize its sinfulness, though. As I discussed in the previous chapter, conventional beliefs about the fallen woman associated her sexual transgression with a physical contamination and disease which might even infect those around her. Armstrong had worried about the presence of "pure" women working in such close proximity to fallen women, and early on had advocated the use of widows for the penitentiary work (Carter 220-21). Similarly, Carter's belief that large groups of fallen women generate "an atmosphere of evil" (Hutchings 86) assumes that fallen women possess the ability to "infect" those around them. In part, this stems from the correlation

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specifically women poets) see Hickok 92-99.

often drawn between the weakness of a fallen woman's moral/spiritual fortitude and her physical stamina, or from similar notions that "her 'fall' had weakened her both mentally and physically" (D'Amico 70). This is the case in "Goblin Market," where those who have consumed the goblin-fruit are doomed, like the unfortunate "Jeanie," who "dwindled and grew grey; / Then fell with the first snow" (156-57) after her encounter with the goblins.

The repercussions of a goblin-encounter unfold in interesting and significant ways, for just as the goblin-sphere and the sororal-sphere are to be kept separate, the kernel-stone Laura takes away from her encounter with the goblins will not take root within the sister-community: "One day remembering her kernel-stone / [Laura] set it by a wall that faced the south; / Dewed it with tears, hoping for a root, / Watched for a waxing shoot, / But there came none; / It never saw the sun, / It never felt the trickling moisture run" (281-87). Similarly, over Jeanie's grave "no grass will grow / Where she lies low" (158-59) because she has had to do with goblin men. In this inability of all things "goblin" to take root in the sororal-sphere, we can see that the goblin fruit ruins more than just the maiden who has been tempted by it; it is a corrupting force that, even though it will not grow, affects its immediate surroundings.

In addition to the physical effects of the extra-sororal encounter, the goblin-infection/addiction necessitates a change in the organization of authority within the sister-relationship:

> Lizzie met her at the gate
>
> Full of wise upbraidings:
>
> "Dear, you should not stay so late,

Twilight is not good for maidens;

Should not loiter in the glen

In the haunts of goblin men. (141-46)

Because such dichotomies as protector/protected have not been present in the poem until *after* Laura's temptation, "Goblin Market" makes it clear that the transformation of the power structures in its sister-relationship from an egalitarian to an hierarchical order occurs only *after* the masculine element has come into play.

The goblin infection even disrupts the domestic labor that the sisters had previously done in tandem: "Lizzie [performed her chores] with an open heart, / Laura in an absent dream, / One content, one sick in part; / One warbling for the mere bright day's delights / One longing for the night" (210-14). As Laura's infection progresses, it renders her completely unable to perform her duties: "[s]he no more swept the house, / Tended the fowls or cows, / Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat, / Brought water from the brook: / But sat listless in the chimney-nook / And would not eat" (293-98). Because of Laura's goblin-experience, the sisters no longer perform their duties as a unit, and instead move about (or remain sedentary) as individually, and any former sense of their community as a place of common participation is gone. In essence, despite their close proximity to one another, each sister is alone.

In some ways, this breakdown in the sister-community is the result of what Pauline Nestor calls the "continuing definition of women and women's friendships in relation to men" (5). When we first encounter the sisters, the "roles" they play in the sister-community are defined in terms of their relationship to one another, and neither sister assumes a role of hierarchical distinction over the other. After Laura's goblin-

experience, however, the ensuing infection progressively disrupts the sister-community by reconstituting the terms by which each sister's identity is defined. Immediately upon Laura's return, Lizzie assumes a role of protector. Later during the descriptions of the sisters' domestic chores, Lizzie is "content" to perform the duties required by the sister-community, while Laura's behavior is described in terms of her desire to return to the goblins for more fruit. In this, Laura's identity is no longer "defined" by its relationship to her sister and the sister-community, and is instead defined in terms of her relationship with the extra-sororal fruit and its effects. Because the redefinition of the sisters' roles within the relationship also restructures any sense of its formerly egalitarian organization of power, replacing that matrilineal power structure with a patriarchal one, Lizzie assumes the role of caregiver as Laura's health begins to fail and she lies "dwindling . . . knocking at Death's door" (320-21). In this image of the ailing fallen woman being nursed by her unfallen sister, we can readily see the parallels between the structure of the poem's sister-relationship and that of the Church Penitentiary.

While Lizzie's selfless devotion to her sister may have its parallels in the Church Penitentiary Movement, her method of "reclaiming" her fallen sister does not. Lizzie's willingness to brave the goblins for her fallen sister is doubtless the same sort of devotion that the Penitentiary Movement looked for in its workers, but when she leaves to procure some of the goblin-fruit, there is no indication that she knows that it will magically cure Laura. Indeed, Lizzie "longed to buy fruit to comfort" (310) Laura's "addiction" (300)—in essence, she desires to supply an addict with *more* of the addictive substance. Lizzie does, in the end, supply her sister with the second taste that she desires. But this time, the fruit is devoid of the accompanying luxury of the "crown / Of tendrils, leaves and rough

nuts brown" (99-100) or the "golden weight / Of dish and fruit" (102-03). Indeed, Lizzie returns without even the external trappings of the fruit-rind, and instead covered with "juices / Squeezed from goblin fruits . . . Goblin pulp and goblin dew" (468-70). This action, Dorothy Mermin has suggested, makes Laura both the bearer of the goblin fruit-pulp *and* the fruit itself: she both "brings the 'fiery antidote' and she *is* the antidote" (Mermin 112). The notion that Laura has "become" the fruit begs (at least) the question: "What kind of fruit has she become?"

Lizzie's method of obtaining the fruit offers some insight into this question. Unlike Laura, who succumbs to the temptation of the luxury of the goblin's wares and then engages the goblin market, Lizzie does not transact—and thus *inter*act—with the goblin market. She successfully negotiates the boundaries of the extra-sororal sphere while still maintaining its separation from the sororal, and thus without compromising the major tenets of the sister-community. Lizzie's devotion to the sister-community strengthens the association between her role as protector/caretaker of her fallen sister and the devout woman caring for her fallen "sisters" in the penitentiary. As such, Lizzie, like her parallels in the penitentiary, would possess a "transforming power" (Hutchings 85), "emanate a victorious power for good" (86), could act as counteragent to an "atmosphere of evil" (86), and would be able to replace chaos with order (84). And so Lizzie, like the Sisters in the penitentiary, could possess the magical ability to negate the harmful effects of the fruit. But Lizzie has done more than transformed the fruit—she has "become" it. And in offering her consumable body to Laura, she offers what is, in effect, the fruit of the sororal world, which is possessed of all transformative powers of the Sister in the penitentiary, just as the goblin fruit possessed the "infective" abilities of the extra-sororal

world. Laura consumes the transformed fruit-pulp and her "burning" desire for more of the fruit is (presumably) eradicated; consequently, she and the sister-relationship can return to their "innocent old way" (538)—Laura's contaminated body has been cleansed by the selfless devotion of her sister, and she has thus been restored to her previous, uncontaminated "innocent old way" (538).

Two years before Rossetti composed "Goblin Market," William Acton expressed a similar certainty in the fallen woman's ability to survive the dangers (whether real or imagined) of her situation, saying

> I have every reason to believe, that by far the number of women who have resorted to prostitution for a livelihood, return sooner or later to a more or less regular course of life. . . . Is it surprising, then, that she should look to the chance of amalgamating with society at large, and make a dash at respectability by a marriage? (qtd. in Auerbach, "Rise" 158).

Acton's belief in the ability of the fallen woman to return to "respectability" no longer situates her in her traditional place as a social outcast, and instead asserts, as did the Penitentiary Movement, her capacity for a return to respectability (Auerbach "Rise" 158-59). While Acton's belief does, as Nina Auerbach points out, redefine the fallen woman in economic rather than moral terms (158), his vision of the fallen woman's potential for a return to respectability depends upon a masculine influence.

In the redemptive capacities of the female community, both the Penitentiary Movement and "Goblin Market" suggest an alternative to this masculine influence, and their insistence upon the female community's potential to effect positive change in fallen women positions them squarely in opposition to Victorian anti-feminist notions that

"female communities embody a whirlpool of subhuman chaos which can only sap [the] strength" of the individual members of such a community (Auerbach, *Communities* 19). Communities of women were a problematic issue, as Pauline Nestor points out, because they "raised fundamental problems [such as] how far could women be trusted without male supervision? How healthy were relationships between women?" (4).

Even the Church Penitentiary Movement, which relied so heavily upon the transformative powers of women and which was instrumental in the rise of religious Sisterhoods throughout England at mid-century, did not allow the women within its female communities absolute power, and in communities such as Reverend Carter's at Clewer, insisted upon the presence of a male "warden" within the institution. Interestingly, in "Goblin Market" (which has been shown to be heavily influenced by the Church Penitentiary Movement) we do not encounter this male figure within the community, although the male figure has destabilized the female community and transformed authority within it from an egalitarian to an hierarchical organization of power. This transformation is merely temporary, though, and the poem's conclusion suggests that the female community has returned to its former bliss of undifferentiated sisterhood. But this absence suggests that, at the same time that Rossetti's treatment of the fallen woman theme is influenced by the Church Penitentiary Movement, her construction of the sister-relationship differs significantly from it, and it is in these differences Rossetti reveals her own answers to questions about the viability of relationships between women. Whereas the Church Penitentiary Movement insisted upon the special "power" of women to reclaim their fallen sisters, "Goblin Market" agrees. But the poem subverts the conservatism of the penitentiary by demonstrating

how communities of women are perfectly capable of existing independently of *any* masculine presence. Indeed, in "Goblin Market" the masculine influence *is* the source of trouble—not some inherent weakness on the part of the sister-community. These points of difference reveal much about Rossetti's attitude toward communities of women, and it is clear that both the similarities and the differences between "Goblin Market" and the Penitentiary Movement can help us more accurately explain why, exactly, "there is no friend like a sister."

CHAPTER THREE

SISTERHOOD, SCH(M)ISTERHOOD: TROUBLE AT HOME IN "NOBLE SISTERS" AND "SISTER MAUDE"

In 1860,[38] Christina Rossetti composed two sister-poems, "Noble Sisters" and "Sister Maude," both of which contain markedly different treatments of the sister-relationship than the one she had offered in "Goblin Market." These poems, with their sister-relationships characterized by antagonism and competitiveness, are a stark contrast to the utopian possibilities "Goblin Market" seems to envision for female communities, and as such they raise a series of questions about Rossetti's attitude toward sister-relationships, women's communities and women's potential for communal activity. Why is the treatment of the sister-relationship in "Noble Sisters" and "Sister Maude" so different from that in earlier sister-poems? What do these poems say about Rossetti's beliefs about women and women's relationships with one another? How do these poems

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[38] There are some inconsistencies in the dates attributed to this poem. In her standard edition of Rossetti's poetry, Rebecca Crump claims the dates of composition are unknown, and there is no manuscript available for "Sister Maude" (254). William Michael Rossetti's *Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti* (1904) includes both "Sister Maude" and "Noble Sisters" under the heading "General Poems" and considers both of them poems of 1860. Jan Marsh discusses the poem alongside "Goblin Market" and "Noble Sisters," suggesting the three poems were composed at roughly the same times, and Packer describes "Sister Maude" and "Noble Sisters" as "two ballads of 1860" (151). For the purposes of this study, I am following William Michael Rossetti's lead and assuming a date of composition sometime during 1860.

affect estimations of Rossetti's beliefs about women and women's relationships with one another?

What little critical attention these poems have drawn has been preoccupied with the antagonism between the sisters: Helena Michie argues that poetic treatments of antagonism between sisters carves out "a place for sisterhood in Victorian tropology that allows for the expression of hostility among women" ("Battle" 407), and Joseph Bristow explains how poems such as "Noble Sisters" explore "the competing demands placed upon her sisters to support one another, to marry, and to pledge one's heart to God" (259). Both of these readings are certainly intriguing, but neither examines why this change might have occurred, nor do they explore the ways these poems engage the public debate at mid-century about the viability of women's communities.

In a letter to Amelia Barnard Heimann from August 1859, Rossetti described how she "scarcely saw" William Bell Scott during his visit to London "as I was away almost the whole time at Highgate" (*Letters* 124-25). As the somewhat off-handed reference to Highgate indicates, by the time she composed this letter, Rossetti's involvement with Highgate had been going on long enough for her mention of her work there to require no explanation. In 1860, Christina became an "Associate Sister" at Highgate, which, as Diane D'Amico has pointed out, meant that she was involved in "promoting interests of the institution" (72). In a letter to Lady Pauline Trevelyan dated 14 August, 1860, Rossetti describes some aspects of her involvement with the Penitentiary:

> Do you remember once telling me about your visit to the Shipmeadow Sisters? About a month ago a general meeting was called at the Highgate Penitentiary and though the show of company was small, the influx of

> funds was I believe more liberal. I mustered a tolerable array of friends for the occasion, including our dear Mrs. Scott who gave us two days of her stay in London. The Bishop of London presided and shook hands with me; but I cannot help suspecting he may have taken me for some one [sic] else, which tempers my elation at the incident. (*Letters* 132).[39]

But Rossetti's connection with Highgate was not solely as a fundraiser, and she sometimes spent several days on end there taking part in the moral welfare work alongside other "Sisters."[40] While it is likely that Rossetti's experiences at Highgate played a significant part in this change in her treatment of the sister-relationship in 1860, I am not suggesting that this alteration was brought about by "confessional tales of personal experience" from the inmates. It is more likely that Rossetti's earlier treatments of the female community are informed by the "common idea" that women entering the penitentiary are openly repentant and are ready and willing to begin their reclamation. By the time Rossetti composed "Noble Sisters" and "Sister Maude," however, she had gained the "practical experience" which reveals such beliefs about the work of reclamation to be erroneous.

These "post-Penitentiary" poems are wholly unlike any of the earlier sister-poems engaged in this study, and their most obvious difference lies in their openly hostile sister-relationships. But in more subtle ways, these poems' difference is also marked by their entirely *internal* treatment of the sister-community—unlike "The Convent Threshold" (in

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[39]D'Amico discusses this letter in her study of Rossetti's involvement with Highgate, and describes the event as "a sort of open house at Highgate" (72). Unfortunately, at the time D'Amico conducted her investigation, the letter was unpublished and she was unable to supply a date for its composition.

which the treatment of the sister-community was projected from outside the convent wall) and "Goblin Market" (in which the sisterhood is juxtaposed with the brotherhood outside it), these poems of 1860 deal almost entirely with the inner workings of the sister-community and with the dynamics of relationships within the community.

"Noble Sisters" describes two sisters[41] who, as in "Goblin Market," live in a community apparently devoid of men. At no point in the poem do we directly encounter a male figure, although throughout the poem the protected-sister's lover attempts to contact her from outside the community. Each of these attempts at contact is intercepted by the protector-sister, and the poem is concerned almost entirely with these interceptions and their effects on the relationship between the two women. The sister-community is separated from the world outside it by a "window" (3), a "gate" (26), a "desolate sea" (41) and a "door" (53), and these barriers mark out the boundaries of the sister-community—each is, indeed, a place of entry into the community—and bar the lover's advances, separating the extra-sororal world from the sororal. Each encounter between the protector-sister and the lover (or his messengers) occurs at one of these points of entry into the sister-community, both animal messengers are traditional hunting beasts: when asked if she has seen "a falcon . . . Flying toward my window" (2-3), she responds "I marked a falcon swooping / At the break of day: / And for your love, my sister dove, I

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[40]D'Amico even suggests that parts of Rossetti's duties at Highgate might have also been "to pray for the fallen women," and that she "may well have been involved in the daily religious instruction of the inmates" (72-73).

[41]Any discussion of "Noble Sisters" is immediately hampered by the poem's lack of proper names for its two speakers. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to differentiate the sisters from one another, and I have chosen to differentiate the sisters according to the "roles" they assume in their relationship, and while my terms—"protector-sister" and "protected-sister"—are certainly as problematic as any other, they do echo the unequal distribution of authority between the two within the sister-community as well as the ways the sisters are defined both in terms of their relation to one another as well as to the male figure from whom "protection" may be required.

'frayed the thief away" (9-12); she intercepts the "ruddy hound" (13) and drives "him from [the protected-sister's] wall" (23); she meets the "pretty page" (25) at the gate and "packed him home to bed" (36); and finally, she encounters the "young man tall and strong" (38) loitering "round our door" (46). The protector-sister's actions are clearly attempts to exclude the lover's advances, and, as in Rossetti's treatment of the male figures outside the female community in "Goblin Market," the lover and the protected sister play out the conventional themes of seduction and profligacy as the falcon wears "jingling bells about her neck" (5), and either a ribbon or a ring "beneath her wing" (6-8); the "ruddy hound" (13) wears "a silken leash about his neck; / But in his mouth may be / A chain of gold and silver links" (17-19). As in "Goblin Market," the lover and his messengers are presented as purveyors of objects which might ultimately lure the sisters away from the community, and since the outcome of the lover's wooing would undoubtedly be to remove the protected-sister from the community, her actions can be read as an attempt to sustain the sister-community by forcefully asserting its isolation and separation from the outside world.

This kind of protectiveness is also characteristic of the relationship between the inmate and the Sisters in the Penitentiary, where, as I have discussed, it was assumed that fallen women were in need of constant watching,[42] and thus not only were "penitents . . . never left without a 'sister present,'" but each inmate's sleeping chamber was placed in such a way that it could be watched by a Sister "whose sleeping chamber [was] so arranged to command it" (qtd. in D'Amico 70). This close surveillance, though, carries

[42] See D'Amico, 69.

with it sinister undertones of imprisonment.[43] To a certain extent, the confinement of penitents to the house is not surprising; the penitentiary is, after all, an institution based on transgression. And because the nature of the penitents' transgression is simultaneously sexual, spiritual, and moral, it was believed that in order for an individual to commit such an horrendous break with standards of conduct, inmates must be "totally dead to all sense of right" (Skene 9) and, moreover, "physically and mentally impaired" (D'Amico 70), thus in need of direction and control during their time in the penitentiary.

As Skene's complaints suggest, the penitentiary's methods struck a dissonant chord among many Victorians, who saw them as "a system of conventual rule and severe religious observance, which the best-disposed novice that ever sought to be trained as a nun would find hard to bear" (Skene 10). The conjunction here of penitentiaries and convents points to an interesting phenomenon: even though the *nature* of the female communities is entirely different—one is based on transgression, the other piety and devotion—because Church Penitentiaries were often closely associated with religious sisterhoods (such as Carter's at Clewer), they were subject to many of the same arguments as those leveled against religious communities. Many of these arguments were anti-Catholic in nature and were connected to a tremendous anxiety surrounding the reinstitution of religious communities in the Church of England which began at mid-century.[44]

In *Female Friendships and Communities* (1985), Pauline Nestor identifies what she terms a "thriving anti-conventual fiction" (4) which either demonized nuns or

[43] See my discussion of surveillance in chapter 2, pages 28.
[44] See Allchin's discussion of the reinstation of Anglican religious communities at mid-century.

associated the conventual life with a kind of kidnapping.[45] As evidence, Nestor offers such titles as *Sister Agnes; or the Captive Nun: A Picture of Conventual Life* whose preface alludes to the profusion of "narratives of escaped nuns, and converted priests, and ex-confessors [which] are widely known" (4), and claims to expose

> the real character of that state of seclusion over whose deformities the golden veil of romance has been too successfully drawn; and have awakened a strong feeling of compassion for the victims of a delusion so terrible as that which is systematically practiced by the decoys of Rome, upon hundreds of the youthful and unsuspecting.
>
> It is in the desire of inducing some to pause before they enter a prison—of all prisons the most hopeless—that this little work is sent forth; and in the further desire of adding impetus to the movement now happily begun, for obtaining an efficient inspection and control of British nunneries. (3)

Clearly, *Agnes* appeals to both anti-feminist and anti-Catholic sentiments in its attempt to expose the "dark underbelly" of religious Sisterhoods, but its claims about the horrors of conventual life were played out (and perhaps even afforded *some* degree of legitimacy) by the case of *Saurin v. Starr and Others* which began in 1868 and alleged within the convent at Hull "charges of broken vows, undue attention to the chaplain and assignations with an elderly gentleman in the convent tower . . . claims of the tyranny of the Superior and of the energy she devoted to inventing more and more excessive penances" (Nestor 17-18). While many of these charges may have been purely fictitious, the "scandals"—whether real or imagined—surrounding Religious communities,

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[45] See 16-22 for a fuller discussion of the public debate about female religious Sisterhoods.

combined with attacks on the rigidity of life within the Penitentiary, fed a popular belief in the inherent instability of female communities and aggravated an already polarized debate about women's potential for communal activity.

Opposition to women's communal activities was not always based on gender, and writers such as Penelope Holland, Felicia Skene and Margaret Goodman focused on the methods and organizational structures operating within these communities in their discussions of the "problems" in women's communities. In *Experiences of an English Sister of Mercy* (1862), Margaret Goodman, a former member of the Sisters of Mercy at Devonport, remembers how she, "led chiefly by the wish to minister to the untended suffering, in the summer of 1852 . . . joined the Sisters of Mercy at Devonport. As time went on, Miss Sellon though fit to develop such conventual rules as pressed too heavily upon many of us; and, therefore, after a sojourn of six years . . . returned to [her] former occupation" (1). Penelope Holland offers a similar complaint against the conventual life, and in an article in *Macmillan's Magazine* of April 1869, asks "whether it be right for women who have attained the full maturity of their intellects to submit themselves to a system by which they are treated as we should scarcely treat an infant in these days, when fools' caps have gone out of fashion" (536-37). Holland has little argument with religious Sisterhoods unless

> they begin to adopt, as in too many cases they do, the old errors of the Roman Catholic Church, and practise a system which stints the mind by cutting off from it all the sources of intellectual growth, and wastes the bodily strength by excessive fasting and broken rest, in order to throw themselves into a state of spiritual nervous excitement. (538)

Against this type of Sisterhood, she states, "we earnestly protest" (538). Felicia Skene describes the Penitentiary's "wretched little stringent rules . . . arranged to goad and torment the unreasoning victims into utter disgust with the very idea of repentance or reform" (10). Many of the objections to the "conventual rules" applied to Houses of Mercy and Penitentiaries focus on the rigorous daily regimen prescribed to those involved with these institutions. Many penitents and refuge-seekers did find the rigor of such "conventual rules" difficult to bear, and although Highgate penitentiary's recidivism rate was relatively low while Rossetti volunteered there, its effectiveness was far from perfect, and out of 22 women discharged in 1862, only nine entered situations "preferred" by the penitentiary system.[46] Of the remaining thirteen, eight left "of their own accord and one was expelled for misconduct" (Richardson 132) while the rest either returned home or were forced to leave due to poor health.[47]

As Margaret Goodman's departure from Miss Sellon's Sisterhood indicates, just as there are forces outside the female community which might threaten the women within it, so too are there forces and structures *within* these communities which drive women *away* from the community. It is in this context that we can perhaps best understand the forces informing Rossetti's treatment of the sister-relationship in these poems of 1860, for certainly by this time she had gained sufficient experience to recognize that the work of reclamation was not always so successful as she had imagined in "Goblin Market." But more importantly, she had certainly gained insight into the internal structures

[46]The primary goal of the penitentiary system was to "reclaim" penitents morally and spiritually. Its secondary intention was the training of penitents, generally as domestic servants.

[47] By way of comparison, Finnegan describes how out of a total of 542 women associated with the Refuge at York, only 142 were actually placed in service.

organizing women's communal enterprises—and of the ways that those structures are sometimes counterproductive, as well.

These poems reflect that recognition by positing sister-communities wherein sisters are hardly "friends" at all, and instead seem to behave according to Margaret Goodman's description of the Sisters at Mrs. Sellon's House of Mercy at Devonport. These Sisters, Goodman describes, were expected to "walk loose to all human friendships: she must consider all ties of relationship severed" and, even more, "if a friendship between two of the members be discovered, they are at once carefully separated" (Goodman 12). In "Noble Sisters," the sisters are, indeed, far from being friends (although they may be superficially civil to one another for much of the poem), and the poem is concerned almost entirely with the struggle for authority within the community as the protected-sister desires to leave the community and the protector-sister endeavors to thwart her every attempt to abandon it. Their relationship becomes, then, a struggle on a number of different levels: it is a battle, to use Helena Michie's term,[48] over perceptions of the relationship between the sister-community and the world outside it, for autonomy within the community, and, for the protector-sister, a battle to maintain authority within the community.

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[48] Michie reads "Noble Sisters" as a poem wherein Rossetti imagines "energetic battles between near equals. . . [T]he female voice that is weaker at the beginning of the poem gains confidence in the course of poetic argument and passes from a position of helplessness to power, the one place where female voices can hear themselves argue, can 'talk' themselves into an assurance of control" ("Battle" 38). Michie is one of the few critics who has attended to these poems, and it should be noted that the reading strategies Michie is working out come more fully formed in her essay "'There is no friend like a sister:' Sisterhood as Sexual Difference" (401-21), wherein she examines the ways that "in positing a place for sisterhood in Victorian literary tropology that allows for the expression of hostility among women, I want to insist that such a place was historically necessary, and second that contemporary feminists need themselves to provide rhetorical and political room for the expression of female difference, for anger and mistrust between and among women" ("There" 407).

As Helena Michie has shown, "Noble Sisters" can be read as a "battle" between the two sisters over the direction and control of conversations,[49] and it is important to note here one of the ways that this is played out. In each of her inquiries, the protected-sister couches her descriptions of the extra-sororal world in the imagery of chivalric romance: the falcon, she believes, wears "jingling bells about her neck" (5) and carries what "may have been a ribbon, / Or it may have been a ring" (7-8), the "ruddy hound" (13) wears a "silken leash about his neck; / But in his mouth may be / A chain of gold and silver links, / Or a letter. . ." (17-20); the page wears "eaglets broidered on his cap, / And eaglets on his glove" (29-30); and the lover is "A young man tall and strong, / Swift-footed to uphold the right / And to uproot the wrong, / Come home across the desolate sea / To woo me for his wife" (38-42). The protector-sister's responses do not echo this imagery, and she consistently removes the luxury which the protected-sister associates with the extra-sororal world and replaces them with the banal, claiming to have seen only a falcon and a hound, making no mention of the page's clothing, and calling the lover merely "a nameless man . . . who loitered round our door" (45-46).

The protector-sister's attempts to control the conversation here parallel the Penitentiary Movement's insistence that "Fallen women 'need some such sisters to be ever at their side, watching them in weak moments, encouraging them in seasons of overwhelming gloom, checking outbreaks of temper and light words, directing and controlling their conversations. . ." (D'Amico 71). The object of this direction was largely to avoid the "unfallen Sisters'" working in the Penitentiary being affected by stories told by the inmates, but it also served another purpose. This rule reorients the penitents' perceptions

[49] Michie describes the speakers as "two competing voices which struggle to control the poem" ("Battle"

of the world outside the community, and "Noble Sisters" echoes this revision of the extra-sororal world in the protector-sister's inversion of the protected-sister's hackneyed descriptions of the lover's attempts at communication.[50] For the protector-sister, each masculine advance is a potential source of disruption: the falcon is a "thief" (12), the hound might "wake too soon" (24) the intended recipient of his message and the page is turned away "Lest the creaking gate should anger" (36) the protected-sister. For her, the lover's attempts to gain entry into the sister-community parallel what V. I. Propp describes as the folktale villain's "attempt at reconnaissance" with the "aim of finding out the location of children, or sometimes of precious objects" (28). The result of the information gained by this reconnaissance is almost always some type of abduction, and so for the protector-sister the lover's intention to woo one sister away from the community constitutes an overt attempt to disrupt the sister-community. The protector-sister, then, becomes the protector of the sister-community, and, in a sense, its "hero."[51]

Paradoxically, as the protector-sister challenges the protected-sister's assumptions about the relationship between the sororal and extra-sororal worlds, as she insists upon the disruptiveness of the "hero," she, too, emerges as a villain. By telling the lover that the protected-sister already has a husband who "loves her much, / And yet she loves him more" (47-48), and by cavalierly relating this encounter to the protected-sister, the protector-sister commits what Helena Michie describes as an "overt act of aggression"

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[50] The reading habits of the Rossetti children can perhaps help illuminate some of these references. Along with Thomas Keightly's collections of fairy tales, the Rossetti children read the *Arabian Nights* and Perrault's *Fairy Tales*. Christina was a great fan of Keats's *Eve of St. Agnes* and Shelley's *Skylark* (Marsh 26), while the Rossetti boys created "their own imaginative games based on the Waverly Novels, a bowdlerised Shakespeare . . . stirring *Stories from English History* . . . and illustrated forerunners of the comic book called *Tales of Chivalry* and *Legends of Terror*" (Marsh 30).

(45) against the protected-sister. The protector-sister's attempts to dominate the sister-relationship paint her as the "tyrannical woman" Eliza Lynn Linton predicted would emerge if women were granted excessive authority. In her 1898 essay "Nearing the Rapids," Linton predicted that "when we have added the perilous arm of political power to the restless love of interference . . . we shall pass under a despotism greater than any the world has ever seen since old Egypt gave the reins to women. . . . For how tyrannical women are we can see for ourselves any day in the week" (383). This attitude was not exclusive to anti-feminists, and according Pauline Nestor, "even women who took a more sanguine view of female capacity seemed unable to avoid similar conclusions" (21) about the potential problems facing communities of women. It would seem that Rossetti, too, reached a similar conclusion, for unlike "Goblin Market," where the primary threat to the sister-community lies in the seductiveness of the extra-sororal world, in "Noble Sisters" the threat stems from *within* the sister-community.

More precisely, though, the threat stems from structures organizing the community and the relationships within it. As Barbara Garlick has argued, Rossetti's use of folktale imagery carries with it an implicit "comment on its hierarchical impulse" (133). Interestingly, though, when Rossetti engages the traditional features of the folktale—the hero, the villain, the damsel in distress—none of these staples of the folktale seem to have currency. In "Noble Sisters," each figure—hero, villain, damsel in distress—becomes embroiled in a complex series of redefinitions wherein the hero may well be the villain, the villain the hero, and the damsel hardly in distress at all. What is at work here, I want to suggest, is an interrogation of the ways women's relationships, even

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[51] See Propp, 25-65.

within female communities, are constantly triangulated in terms of their relation to men.[52] No matter how we may permute the folktale structure present within "Noble Sisters," we cannot escape defining the sisters and their relationship somehow in terms of the male figure attempting to gain access to the sister-community; he is either to be defended against or longed for, and the sisters' relationship to one another, and our understanding of them, hinges upon a reading of their relationship which includes him. We cannot examine the sister-relationship on its own merits and can come to know it only in terms of the way that it responds to or is influenced by, men.[53]

The lover outside the female community in "Noble Sisters" is not the only male figure affecting the sisters' relationship in this poem, and we find another reference to the role of men in defining the sister-relationship, and the sisters' identities, in the protector-sister's final line: "If thus you shame our father's name / My curse go forth with you" (59-60). The protector-sister does not make her appeal to the protected-sister as an individual, but instead to the shame which she will bring their "father's name." This is a significant reference, for it is the name of the father—indeed, neither the shame nor the name are the protected-sister's in the end; they travel upwards along the patriarchal line toward the ultimate authority of the father. Moreover, the reference to a common "name" between the two sisters emphasizes their namelessness, and reminds us how the terms that we must supply in order to differentiate them from one another—protector, protected, jealous, interfering—only point out the male-centeredness of this sister

[52] Nestor describes this as a "continuing definition of women and women's friendships in relation to men" (Nestor 5).

[53] It is perhaps apposite here to remember Rossetti's treatment of the sister-community in "The Convent Threshold," where the value of the sister-community is understood (for the speaker) solely in terms of how

community. By invoking the patriarch, the protector-sister reveals the patriarchy which organizes the sister-relationship and makes clear how the most significant bond between these sisters is not a sororal one, but rather the bond resulting from their mutual place within a patriarchal structure, their subordination to the authority of that patriarchy and the helplessness or power resulting from those relationships.

The patriarchy organizing the sister-relationship in "Noble Sisters" has an analogue in the penitentiary system, for although the work of the penitentiary was carried out almost exclusively by the sisters working there, there was, in addition, a clergyman (who served as warden of the penitentiary) always available "to perform religious services and superintend religious instruction" (D'Amico 72). These wardens, while invested with the ultimate authority in the penitentiary, were nevertheless not always engaged in the day-to-day operations of penitentiary. Indeed, at the penitentiary at Clewer, warden Thomas Thellusson Carter was "often absorbed and absent, yet could be very practical. Bishop Samuel Wilberforce used to say of him, 'He is often *upstairs*;' and so he was. . ." (Hutchings 84). The figure of the warden in the penitentiary is a curious one: he is the "official" head of the hierarchy/patriarchy which organizes the penitentiary, and yet has very minimal direct interaction with the community. His "presence"—and his absence—therefore, constitute a sort of "hidden patriarchy" which organizes the community but which carries on little or no direct interaction with it.

This "hidden patriarchy" plays a significant role in the destabilization of the sister-relationship, just as does the constant triangulation of the "roles" within the sister-

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it will allow her and her lover to reunite in the afterlife.

community which insists that women within the community define themselves and their relationships to one another in terms of a masculine presence outside the sister-community. The hidden patriarchy runs just below the surface of the sister-relationship, exerting an influence upon it, organizing it, structuring the dispensation of authority within it, and yet the members of the sister-relationship seem perfectly capable of operating without its constant physical presence and invoke it only as a last resort. Its "presence," however, is felt most powerfully in the hierarchical dispensation of authority within the sister-relationship, and, as the difference between "Noble Sisters" and "Goblin Market" makes clear, in the ways that this patriarchy within the female community affects the internal dynamics of the sister-relationship.

What "Noble Sisters" offers us, then, is a glimpse into the ways women are "pushed" out of the female community by the internal dynamics at work within the community, in addition to being "lured" away by forces outside the community. The protector-sister's lie to the lover, for instance, exacerbates the troubles of the sister-relationship, and leads the protected-sister to leave the community and "seek him thro' the world / In sorrow till I die" (55-56). To be sure, there *is* a goblin lurking outside the community in the form of the lover, but it is not his efforts to woo the protected-sister with which Rossetti is concerned in "Noble Sisters," as she had been in "Goblin Market." In "Noble Sisters," the primary conflict in the poem is not located between the female community and the outside masculine forces which threaten it; the threat to the community lies, rather, within the community itself—but which is the result of the hidden patriarchy which organizes authority within the community.

The home is again a place of conflict between sisters in another ballad of 1860, "Sister Maude." The poem is spoken by a single, unnamed speaker, to her sister, Maude. Maude, we are told, has uncovered a relationship between the speaker and her lover, and has revealed this relationship to the sisters' parents: "Who told my mother of my shame," the speaker asks, "Who told my father of my dear? / Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude, / Who lurked to spy and peer" (1-4). There are certainly parallels here between the surveillance in "Noble Sisters," but in "Sister Maude," surveillance does not facilitate the protection (or the imprisonment) of a member of the sister-community. Instead, Maude's lurking, spying and peering, we are told, reveal her jealousy of the speaker's lover, for, as she claims, "Though I had not been born at all, / He'd never have looked at you" (11-12). The disruption of the sister-relationship caused by Maude's jealousy and competitiveness, the speaker's claims, will follow the sisters into the afterlife: "My father may wear a golden gown, / My mother a crown may win; / If my dear and I knocked at Heaven-gate / Perhaps they'd let us in: / But sister Maude, oh sister Maude, / Bide *you* with death and sin" (17-22). The use of singular possessives here suggests the familial relationship has broken down as well: the speaker admits no shared familial tie to their parents, and instead insists upon an exclusive relationship between herself and her mother and father.

In her attention to the ways that the relationship between the speaker's and her sister's relationship is ordered not around their sororal bond, but around their relation to both the hierarchical/patriarchal organization of the family and the speaker's lover who is outside the community, we can again see Rossetti exploring the organizing principles of the sister-relationship and how they are affected by forces outside the female community.

What is particularly interesting about this poem's treatment of the sister-community, though, is that while we can clearly see Rossetti's concern with the internal dynamics of the community, "Sister Maude," unlike any other sister-poem from this period, is so completely internalized that it offers no "location" for the sister-community: each poem that has come before it, "The Convent Threshold," "Goblin Market," and even "Noble Sisters," has described in some way where the sister-community is situated in the world around it. "Sister Maude" offers none of this; we do not even have the sense of a structure housing the community which is so prevalent in Rossetti's earlier treatments of the sister-community. But Rossetti does imbue it with the same patriarchy that had troubled the sister-relationship in "Noble Sisters." This interest in the patriarchy organizing the sister-community marks not only Rossetti's continued interest in the dynamics within the community, but also the transference of the threat from outside the community (where she had posited it in "Goblin Market") to completely *inside* the community.

Like "Noble Sisters," the sister-relationship in "Sister Maude" is troubled by the same triangulation of relationships within the community that plagued the sister-relationship in "Noble Sisters." If the speaker's accusations of jealousy and competitiveness are accurate, then the crux of the sister-relationship is not the common sororal bond shared by the sisters, but instead their relationship to the lover. If those accusations are incorrect, then the speaker's perception of jealousy forces again the lover to be an element in marking out the sister's relationship to one another. In either possibility, the sisters' relationship to one another hinges upon their relationship to the lover. We cannot, then, escape figuring in the lover in our estimation of the relationship

between the sisters. His presence—as we have seen in "Noble Sisters"—problematizes relationships between women by upsetting the "twinning" and equality Rossetti had imagined in "Goblin Market" and replacing it with the inequalities of have/have-not upon which jealousy is predicated.

As in "Noble Sisters," the lover is not the only male presence which troubles the sister-relationship in "Sister Maude." Maude's confession to the patriarch constitutes her explicit adherence to the patriarchal lines of authority which run through the sister-relationship, and the unseen father in the poem parallels the hidden patriarch we have seen in "Noble Sisters" (and in the Penitentiary Movement)—the appeal to him is an appeal to the ultimate authority within the sister-community. This appeal also echoes Reverend Armstrong's belief that in the Penitentiary "none but the Chaplain [the warden of the penitentiary] should be permitted to hear" (17) about the penitents' past sexual transgressions. As the ultimate authority—and the ultimate dispenser of punishment—within the sister-community, the patriarch (either within the Penitentiary or the home) is the proper "hearer" of the fallen woman's transgression. In this deference to the patriarch, we find again the same triangulation of relationships within the community that we have seen in "Noble Sisters," for rather than understand themselves solely through their sororal bond, they must always defer to the patriarch. The sisters understand themselves and their community not in terms of their sister-bond, but instead in terms of their relation to the patriarch.

When read in the context of Victorian debates about the viability of female communities, "Noble Sisters" and "Sister Maude" allow us to locate more accurately Rossetti's position on political and social issues facing women at mid-century, as well as

her relationship to other contemporary women engaging these issues. Like many critics of female communities, in these poems of 1860 Rossetti plays out the disastrous possibilities of investing women with power, and this, to a certain extent, places her alongside contemporaries such as Eliza Linton, Frances Cobbe, Anna Jameson and Dora Greenwell (Nestor 21), all of whom believed communities of women were inherently unstable and required strict control by men. Yet as Rossetti makes clear, that instability is not the result of some innate deficiency of gender, but stems instead from the ways that this popular belief in the necessity of a male presence in women's communities complicates relations within those communities. The insistence upon hierarchy in these communities of women, and, moreover, the insistence upon a male presence at the head of that hierarchy, forces women in these communities to define themselves and their place in those communities in terms of a patriarchal structure within which they can never be fully autonomous. By leveling such a complaint against the strictures commonly applied to women's communities, Rossetti can be aligned with writers such as Felicia Skene, Penelope Holland and Margaret Goodman, all of whom "refused to see the issue in terms of female incapacities, locating culpability, rather, in the system itself, which was blameworthy because it had built into it procedures which actually militated against the potential for true friendship and community of which women were ordinarily capable" (Nestor 18). Moreover, even though Rossetti does not firmly indicate that female communities are, in fact, "ordinarily capable" of "true friendship and community," these two ballads of 1860 go to great lengths to expose, at least, structures within female communities—whether in the Penitentiary or in the "forced" community of the home itself—which can account for the instabilities of female communities.

CONCLUSION

It is something of an irony that a poet who has, in the past 30 years, been under intense scrutiny by largely feminist critical studies should have had such remarkably little attention paid to her involvement with communities of women both in her poetry and her real life. Our awareness of Rossetti's involvement with Highgate is certainly not new; her work at Highgate has been documented in her biographies now for nearly a century. Attention to the relationship between Rossetti's poetry and her involvement with Highgate, I believe, allows us to trace Rossetti's engagement with one of the most significant socio-political questions facing women at mid-century: are women capable of communal activity or even friendship?

In poems such as "Goblin Market," Rossetti's answer would seem to be a resounding "yes," punctuated by an insistence that women's communities are not only viable, but that the instabilities which emerge within them are the direct result to male forces working outside the female community. Indeed, in each of the poems engaged in this study, masculine agency figures significantly in Rossetti's treatment of the sister-relationship. In "The Convent Threshold," Rossetti the speaker insists not only upon the complicity of the fall, but also upon the ways that she has been somehow infected by her encounter with her lover. By marking out the "stain" (whether physical or moral) as the result of the sexual encounter and the community of women as the place where that stain may be removed, Rossetti tacitly insists upon the male lover as the agent of and purveyor

of a corrupting force. As Rossetti makes clear in "The Convent Threshold," the process of purifying the female body/spirit is a significant one, requiring a complete self-abnegation and transformation into, quite literally, a new woman.

In "Goblin Market," Rossetti again treats this notion of masculine agency, this time positing the goblin men a the literal merchants of luxurious wares which, when consumed, infect the female body and corrupt it both physically and morally. In "Goblin Market," however, Rossetti offers us a glimpse into the ways the masculine forces outside the community transform the dynamics of authority within it from a egalitarian, autonomous community into a hierarchically organized one. This transformation, "Goblin Market" suggests, is not a permanent one, and once the masculine agents outside the sister-community have been thwarted in their efforts to infect the sisters and the sisters have been cured of their infection by the goblin-wares, the community once again returns to its former, seemingly utopian, existence.

In "Noble Sisters," Rossetti treats masculine agency and its effect upon the sister-community in much the same manner as she had in "Goblin Market": a man outside the sister-community seeks to lure one of the sisters inside the community away, and his attempts radically alter the relationship between the sisters. But here, unlike in "Goblin Market," the sister-community does not return to its (presumably) former autonomous utopian state, and instead the transformation of the power relationships within the community lead ultimately to the community's dissolution. Similarly, in "Sister Maude," Rossetti treats a sister-relationship troubled by a male figure outside the sister-community, whose presence troubles the sisters' relationship. Again, in this poem the tempted sister is neither purged of her desire to rendezvous with the lover outside the

community, nor does the community return to anything like the vision of the sister-community in "Goblin Market." Instead, in "Sister Maude" (as in "Noble Sisters") the sister-relationship is completely destabilized by the male figure's effect upon the internal dynamics of the sister-relationship.

What emerges from careful attention to these poems and their treatment of the relationship between the sister-community and the male agents outside those communities is a sense of Rossetti's complex beliefs about the viability of female communities, for in each poem (especially in "Goblin Market," "Noble Sisters," and "Sister Maude") she insists upon the role of the masculine agents outside the community in the destabilization of the female community. In addition, attending to the fuller context of Rossetti's treatments of sisters, sister-relationships, and sister-communities provides us a sense that the poem which has long stood as the central poem in Rossetti studies (and more specifically, in assertions of her proto-feminist beliefs)—"Goblin Market"—is truly an unusual poem for Rossetti. No other poem from this brief period surrounding its composition treats the sister-community in the same way, nor does any poem which immediately follows it.

As is generally the case with Rossetti's politics, it is incredibly difficult to locate her within any ideological group. If we were to ask the question of what, exactly, is Rossetti's position on the viability of female communities between 1858 and 1860, our answer can only be, at best, that it changes. But examining *why* and *how* her position on this issue changes is perhaps our best means of ascertaining the intricacies of Rossetti's position (or positions) on the issue. What emerges from such an examination is a movement increasingly "inward" in Rossetti's poetry which coincides with her obtaining

practical experience with a real community of women while working at Highgate Penitentiary. It is to Rossetti's treatment of the internal dynamics of the female community that we must look if we are to apprehend Rossetti's position on female communities, her place among her contemporary poets dealing with relationships between women, and why, in some cases, there is no friend like a sister, and in others, no enemy like one either. In this complicated process of examining the full range of Rossetti's treatments of sister-relationships and sister-communities, Rossetti scholarship must necessarily be shaken up, because this project requires at the outset one seminal recognition: "Goblin Market" is the exception and not the rule in her treatments of the sister-theme, and can no longer remain the central poem in assessments of her politics.

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