

“Two Blossoms,” on a “Thistle-Stalk”

Beneficial Grotesque in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland”

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From its opening mix of deliberately incongruous images (“mossy glens,” “substances like boils,” and “glowworm winks”) to its deft use of Victorian and modern theories of the grotesque, to its innovative concluding gambit, Taylor LeMaire’s essay maps its own way through two exceptionally complex poems and the rich terrain of the aesthetics of the grotesque. The essay is notably original first of all in comparing two classic Victorian texts very seldom considered in conjunction, though they were published within five years of each other. Secondly, LeMaire focuses not on the ugliness, lapses, and incongruity conventionally associated with the grotesque, but on its “positive” functions in both Browning’s “Childe Roland” and Rossetti’s “Goblin Market.” After a close and convincing analysis of strategically chosen textual details, combining consideration of poetic form with metaphoric and thematic content, LeMaire concludes with a surprising but apt shift from visual to sonic modes of the grotesque. She pairs the blast of the “slug-horn” that occurs at the end of Childe Roland’s quest when he reaches the “dark tower” with the animal-human goblin men’s seductive “cries” that ring enticingly in our ears in the opening of Rossetti’s poem. An exemplary essay. Whether one sound is ultimately more “positive” and beneficial than the other is left more open to question. As Browning’s Roland says of the mysterious appearance of the “dark tower,” “solve it, you!”

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The “mossy glen” (Rossetti 87) and its “substances like boils” (Browning 153), the “dismal flat” (107) and its “glowworm winks” (Rossetti 247) – each are more than mere “lapse[s]” (Bagehot 504) in nature. The concept of the grotesque has been greatly discussed in relation to Robert Browning’s poetry; however, the same cannot be said for Christina Rossetti’s work. In this essay, I will argue that both poets feature the grotesque within the form and content of their poetry in strikingly similar, and rather surprising, ways. Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” and Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” exhibit a symbiotic relationship between the grotesque and the “highest ... aspects of reality” (Nichols 166), and reveal the functions of the grotesque to be ultimately beneficial.

In order to explore the grotesque in “Goblin Market” and “Childe Roland,” one must understand what the grotesque entails. Walter Bagehot explains in his essay, “Browning’s Grotesque Art,” that the grotesque represents its subject

in its minimum development, amid circumstances least favorable to it, just while it is struggling with obstacles, just where it is encumbered with incongruities. [The grotesque] deals, to use the language of science, not with normal types but with abnormal specimens; to use the language of old philosophy, not with what nature is striving to be, but with what by some lapse she has happened to become (504).

In his essay, "'Will Sprawl' in the 'Ugly Actual': The Positive Grotesque in Browning" Ashton Nichols cites Wolfgang Kayser, who describes the grotesque in similar terms to Bagehot. Kayser "insists that 'in genuinely grotesque art the everyday world is *suddenly* changed into a strange and unpleasant place'" (Nichols 160). Like Bagehot's definition, Kayser's grotesque necessitates a "lapse" (Bagehot 504) of sorts. Nature or, "'the everyday world'" (Nichols 160), becomes "*suddenly* ... strange" and riddled with "incongruities" (Bagehot 504).

"Goblin Market" and "Childe Roland" embody this interpretation of the grotesque. In stanza XII of "Childe Roland," the speaker describes the landscape he encounters on his quest. The vegetation that grows in this land is "ragged" (Browning 67), "bruised" (70), and "pash[ed]" (72). Adhering to Bagehot and Kayser's definitions of the grotesque, the speaker confronts a vision of nature "encumbered with incongruities" (Bagehot 504) - it's "ragged[ness]" (Browning 67) making it "*suddenly* ... strange" (Nichols 160). This description is not one that envisions what "nature is striving to be, but what by some lapse she has happened to become" (Bagehot 504). This "lapse" in nature is evident in the speaker's description of the grass that grows "as scant as hair / In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud / Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood" (Browning 73-75). The grass grows, not as it should, but "abnormal[ly]" (Bagehot 504), as though plagued by disease. Similarly, in stanza XIII the speaker comes across a horse, "stiff [,] blind" (Browning 76)

and halfway between this life and the next. Given this description, the horse does not belong to a “normal type” (Bagehot 504) but rather, to Bagehot’s “abnormal specimens,” thus making it grotesque.

Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” also displays Bagehot and Kayser’s understanding of the grotesque. Heather McAlpine points out in her essay “‘Would Not Open Lip from Lip’: Sacred Orality and the Christian Grotesque in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market,’” that “it is surprising how few scholars have explored the poem’s wealth of grotesque imagery” (McAlpine 114). While I agree with McAlpine’s recognition of the poem’s grotesque “wealth,” for the purposes of this essay I will focus specifically on the physical nature of the “goblin men” (Rossetti 49) as the most striking instance of Bagehot’s grotesque. Unlike Lizzie, who “thrust[s] a dimpled finger / In each ear” (67-68) at the sound of the goblin men, “[c]urious Laura” (69) lingers to catch a glimpse of “each merchant man” (70).

One had a cat’s face,
 One whisk’d a tail,
 One tramp’d at a rat’s pace,
 One crawl’d like a snail,
 One like a wombat prow’d obtuse and furry,
 One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry (71-76).

This passage illustrates the goblin men as chimeric; they are creatures composed of the parts of several different animals. The goblin men are “abnormal specimens” (Bagehot 504) by virtue of their hybridity. These are not creatures born out of an ideal state of nature, but from “some lapse [nature] has

happened to become," qualifying them as grotesque. Though both poems reflect the presence of the grotesque, as understood by Bagehot and Kayser, it is pertinent to note that the grotesque, despite the "complex series of negative senses of the term" (Nichols 158) and its "unpleasant" (160) and "abnormal" (Bagehot 504) character, does not always perform negative functions.

As Nichols remarks, the grotesque "originated as a purely descriptive term and yet came to be associated with a cluster of pejorative applications" (157-158). Nichols focuses his research on a positive interpretation of the grotesque and Browning's recognition of this "positive power" (166). Nichols notes that, in Browning's poetry, "[t]he grotesque comes to be accepted as a means of encompassing all of life, of seeing the connection between the highest and the lowest aspects of reality ... [T]he dualism between ugliness and beauty in Browning collapses [and] [u]gliness becomes merely a form of beauty." He goes on to state that the positive grotesque "accept[s] the poetic and imaginative power of the lowly to exalt its beholder" (169). The "exalt[ing]" power of the positive grotesque recalls Bakhtin's theory of "the grotesque [as] represent[ing] a triumphant erasure of limitations and hierarchies" (McAlpine 114). Moreover, the "all-embracing" (Nichols 169) nature of Nichols' positive grotesque necessitates a symbiosis between "the highest and lowest aspects of reality" (166). The juxtaposition of form and content in both "Goblin Market" and "Childe Roland" embodies this symbiotic relationship.

The contrasting form and content of lines 199-214 in “Goblin Market” exemplifies the symbiotic relationship inherent in Nichols’ theory of the positive grotesque. This section of Rossetti’s poem details the morning after Laura indulges in the goblins’ “[f]ruits ... [of] unknown orchard” (Rossetti 135) and stands in sharp contrast with the preceding content. The morning is calm and the sisters go about their chores “Neat like bees” (201). They

...milk’d the cows,
 Air’d and set to rights the house,
 Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
 Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
 Next churned the butter, whipp’d up cream,
 Fed their poultry, sat and sew’d;
 Talk’d as modest maidens should: (203-209).

In contrast with the decadent events of the previous day, these bucolic moments represent “the highest ... aspects of reality” (Nichols 166) in Nichols’ theory of the positive grotesque. The striking difference in the tone and content of this section, in comparison to the preceding section, emphasizes “the dualism between ugliness and beauty.” However, this “dualism ... collapses,” an effect Nichols remarks of the positive grotesque, when one examines the form of lines 199-214. While the content of this section behaves as “the highest ... aspects of reality,” its form and meter behave as “the lowest aspects of reality” by comparison. In her book, *Poetics en Passant: Redefining the Relationship Between Victorian and Modern Poetry*, Anne Jamison comments that “Goblin Market” is “composed of

many prosodic systems interspersed, this collage of structures resolves itself into no single style, system, or story ... [and] adheres to no set metrical pattern or rhyme scheme" (146). Unlike its content, the form, or non-form, of this section is not "[n]eat like bees" (Rossetti 201). On the contrary, the form is compared to "collage" (Jamison 146) – a "violent," hybrid construction that lacks a certain "[n]eat[ness]" (Rossetti 201). This comparison echoes the hybridity of the goblin men. Like the chimeric fruit merchants, the form of the poem is an "abnormal specimen" (Bagehot 504). Thus, the form of "Goblin Market" can be considered grotesque. Given this comparison, the form and content of lines 199-214 illustrate the symbiosis between "the highest and lowest aspects of reality" (Nichols 166) and the collapse of "the dualism between ugliness and beauty" that the positive grotesque achieves.

Browning's "Childe Roland" also displays the symbiotic relationship between "the highest and lowest aspects of reality" in the opposing natures of its form and content. Where "Goblin Market" represents "the highest ... aspects" in its content, and "the lowest" in its form, "Childe Roland" does the opposite. In stanza XIV, the speaker continues to detail the "stiff blind horse" (76), which I have previously established as belonging to Bagehot's grotesque and "abnormal specimens" (504). However, in this stanza, the speaker himself points to the "grotesqueness ... [of the] brute" (Browning 82-83). Thus, the content of this stanza behaves as "the lowest aspects of reality" (Nichols 166). The meter of stanza XIV, as well as the rest of the poem, is in

iambic pentameter and its rhyme scheme is ABBAAB. This highly organized and refined form behaves as a striking contrast to the lack of “metrical pattern or rhyme scheme” (Jamison 146) in “Goblin Market.” Unlike the “violent” “collage of structures” in “Goblin Market,” the form of stanza XIV behaves as “the highest ...[aspect] of reality” (Nichols 166). This juxtaposition between form and content, though inverted in this instance, displays the symbiotic relationship between “the highest and lowest aspects of reality” that the positive grotesque necessitates, and consequently dissolves “the dualism between ugliness and beauty.”

The symbiotic relationship between “the highest and lowest aspects of reality” that Nichols’ positive grotesque necessitates suggests that the grotesque may prove useful in either poem. Having collapsed “the dualism between ugliness and beauty,” and “eras[ing inherent] ... limitations and hierarchies” (McAlpine 114), the grotesque goes on to perform positive functions within both poems. In “Childe Roland” the grotesque behaves as a guide for the speaker, leading him to his final destination; “the *Dark Tower*” (204). In stanza XV, the speaker shuts his eyes to the “grotesqueness” (82) he encounters on his journey, “turn[ing] them on [his] heart” (85) instead. However, in stanza XVIII he opens his eyes again, in favour of this “grotesqueness” (82), and states: “Better this present than a past like that” (103). In “accept[ing] ... the lowly and ugly” (Nichols 165) he allows “for a new form of connection between the self and the world,” therefore permitting the

grotesque to guide him on his journey. It is the "sudden little river ... unexpected as a serpent" (Browning 109-110) that leads the speaker to "the other bank" (127). Though this "other bank" is equally as grotesque, filled with "clay and rubble, sand and stark black dearth (150), it is the "hills, like giants at a hunting" (190) that enlighten the speaker as to the location of the tower. After spotting the "ugly heights" (166), he states: "Burningly it came on me all at once, / This was the place" (175-176)! This grotesque guidance resembles Nichols' theory regarding "the lowliness of [a] scene allow[ing] us to believe what we see because we know that at least these objects must be real" (164). This "lowliness" behaves as a marker of reality that keeps the speaker on course, hence proving useful. Nichols also states that "[t]he existence of the imperfect does not compromise the perfect; it guarantees it" (166). Given this guarantee, perhaps victory awaits the speaker in the tower.

The grotesque also performs a positive function in Rossetti's "Goblin Market" - it is the key to Laura's salvation. After the initial encounter with the goblin men, Lizzie and Laura lie down for the night. Rossetti describes the sisters as "Like two blossoms on one stem" (188); this description is reminiscent of Bagehot's "abnormal specimens" (Bagehot 504) because it denotes botanical deformity. Rossetti affirms the positive nature of the grotesque by describing the sisters' nurturing relationship in grotesque terms. While this grotesque relationship is beneficial, it is not until Lizzie accepts the grotesque and confronts these "abnormal specimens" (Bagehot 504) that

Laura can be truly saved. Unable to watch her sister continue in a sickly state any longer, Lizzie concludes that she must visit the goblin men and retrieve the antidotal fruit for Laura. Nearing the merchants, Rossetti states that “for the first time in her life [Lizzie] / Began to listen and look” (327-328). This pivotal moment is reminiscent of Nichols’ idea that “the acceptance of the lowly and ugly ... allow[s] for a new form of connection between the self and the world” (165). Lizzie begins to “listen and look” (Rossetti 328), thus accepting “the lowly and ugly” (Nichols 165). Not only does this acceptance of, and engagement with, the grotesque prove to “exalt its beholder” (169), it is also what propels Laura’s ultimate salvation.

The positive functions of the grotesque and its “triumphant erasure of limitations and hierarchies” (McAlpine 114), is also evident in the cyclical nature of the “calls” in either poem. Interestingly, “Childe Roland” ends with the call of the slug-horn, and “Goblin Market” begins with the call of the goblin men. It is a grotesque instrument that issues both calls – the mouths of the goblin men and the slug-horn. The footnote that addresses the slug-horn states that it is “an archaic form of *slogan* ... [or] a stunted or deformed cow’s horn” (Loucks & Stauffer 188). Both of these definitions establish the slug-horn as an incongruity of sorts, a “deformed” and “abnormal specimen” (Bagehot 504). Given the nature of this description, the slug-horn is certainly a grotesque object. Additionally, McAlpine states: “for Rossetti, as for theorists Mikhail Bakhtin, John Ruskin, David Williams, and Julia Kristeva, the ... ears ... are [one

of the] points at which the self and the world interpenetrate" (McAlpine 114). This shared belief, held by several theorists of the grotesque, makes the fact that these are audible calls even more significant. Hearing these calls will open up and "exalt" (Nichols 169) "the self" (McAlpine 114). Whereas the grotesque call in "Childe Roland" ends, it begins again in "Goblin Market," thus emphasizing the cyclical nature of the grotesque, its definitive "erasure of limitations and hierarchies," as well as the sweeping positivity it is capable of.

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" both exhibit the symbiotic relationship between the grotesque and the "highest ... aspects of reality" (Nichols 166), and reveal the grotesque to be ultimately positive. Despite the "complex series of negative senses" (158) that surround the grotesque, both poems assert that the concept functions in beneficial manners, in ways that ultimately "exalt [the] beholder" (169). One's acceptance of the "dismal flat[s]" (Browning 107) and "glowworm winks" (Rossetti 247) of the grotesque "form[s] ... [a new] connection between the self and the world" (Nichols 165), asserting that one need only "listen and look" (Rossetti 328) to find guidance and salvation.

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