

Goblin Market as a Cross-Audienced Poem: Children's Fairy Tale, Adult Erotic Fantasy.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Goblin Market as a Cross-Audienced Poem: Children's Fairy Tale, Adult Erotic Fantasy

Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (bio)

Writing about the *Alice* books, W. H. Auden articulated a commonly held critical position: "There are good books which are only for adults, because their comprehension presupposes adult experiences, but there are no good books which are only for children" (Auden 11). This point of view is implicit in our categorization of many "classics" that are cross-audience either because, like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, they began as adult books and were later adapted for children; or because, like *Alice* and *The Rose and the Ring* (and indeed like many Victorian fantasies), they began as children's books but are now read almost exclusively by adults. The idea seems to be that "classics" are those works that are not only simple enough, adventurous enough, and fantastic enough to appeal to children, but also have an underlying depth of meaning that is satisfying to a mature sensibility. Although cross-audience prose classics may originate in either the adult or the juvenile literary system, this is much less true for poetry. Most anthologies of children's poetry are in fact composed of poems written for adults but later thought suitable for children—such as Scott's "Proud Maisie," Arnold's "The Forsaken Mermaid," and Yeats's "The Song of Wandering Aengus."¹ [End Page 181]



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Figure 1.

Poster for Nick Hedges's production of *Goblin Market* (Battersea Arts Centre,

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is one such poem for grown-ups that has been appropriated for a juvenile audience in anthologies, school texts, plays, and picture books. It has also been commandeered for "adults only" in magazines and books, as well as on the stage. For this reason, *Goblin Market* is not only a cross-audience poem; it also dramatically enacts the truism that good children's literature has no age restrictions, whereas some adult literature is accessible only to mature readers. In the course of *Goblin Market*'s long history of production, the children's fairy tale has remained open to dual readerships, but the textual boundaries of the erotic adult fantasy have been actively policed. Thus a typical blurb on a juvenile **[End Page 182]** picture book claims that "Christina Rossetti's narrative poem can be read with pleasure by youngsters and adults alike" (*Goblin Market*, 1981). On the other hand, the poster advertising a recent Battersea Arts Center production of *Goblin Market* describes the work as "an erotic, adult fairytale" and warns: "This performance contains nudity and is unsuitable for children"²(fig. 1).

As both a children's fairy tale and an adult erotic fantasy, *Goblin Market* has managed to invoke particularly polarized audiences. Yet there are perhaps more similarities between juvenile literature and sexual fantasy than there might at first appear. Both rely on contextual constraints—modes of production and distribution as well as nonverbal visual signs—to construct their implied audiences. And each takes its definition from implicit assumptions about sexuality. Because childhood is often defined as that period of life before sexual maturation, the topic of sexuality is generally deemed either inappropriate or incomprehensible to child readers. Erotic fantasy, on the other hand, designates its "adults only" readership precisely by featuring explicit sexual content. Christina Rossetti's poem offers a fascinating study in the politics of audience

formation, for *Goblin Market* crossed all these boundaries from the outset: it was written for adults; it used the form of the children's fairy tale; and it was about sex.

Although *Goblin Market*'s internal audience is indeed "the little ones" to whom Laura tells her story,³ it is important to remember that the poem's first known public audience was not children but adults. In October 1861, publisher Alexander Macmillan read Rossetti's manuscript to a working-men's society in Cambridge. The workers' reception suggests that they recognized that *Goblin Market*'s simple style was actually a vehicle for its mature content: "They seemed at first to wonder whether I was making fun..."

DUBIOUS BOUNDARIES

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