ABSTRACT

HOWSAM, MELISSA ANNE. Reading through Abjection. (Under the direction of Deborah B. Wyrick).

In this thesis, I read through Kristeva’s theory of the abject as a way of interpreting Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1993) and interrogating common psychoanalytic readings of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1859) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). The purpose of each of these readings has been to gauge the usefulness of Kristeva’s theory as a critical tool and to determine what it allows us to achieve as literary critics and, even, as readers. Although Kristeva is clear about her desire to see women liberate themselves from the confining roles ascribed to them by psychoanalytic theory and patriarchal norms, she is not clear about how her theory can be used. Therefore, I apply her theory, specifically that of the abject, to these three fundamentally different texts in order to both investigate its usefulness and to determine what is, if anything, the triumphant result of its application (in terms of feminism).
BIOGRAPHY

Melissa A. Howsam was born on September 7, 1977 in Atlanta, Georgia. Her youth was divided between Irmo, South Carolina, where she grew up until her family moved to Raleigh, North Carolina in June of 1988. After receiving her diploma from Sanderson High School in 1995, Melissa earned Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and Mass Communications from North Carolina State University in 1999, graduating Cum Laude, with English Honors, and as a member of the Lambda Pi Eta Honor Society. After spending two years working at a local publishing company, Melissa was accepted into the Master of Arts program at North Carolina State University, where she will graduate with an MA in English in December 2003. She has brought her theoretic interest in gender constructs to bear upon a wide variety of genres and periods, namely Victorian, modern, and postmodern. Currently, she plans to pursue a doctoral degree in English with an emphasis in Gender Studies.
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INTRODUCTION

Reading through Abjection

This thesis will focus on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, most fully articulated in her *Powers of Horror* (1982). By using this theory to read disparate literary texts – Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1993), Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1859), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) – I hope to accomplish two objectives. First is to read through (by means of) abjection: that is, to explore how the Kristevan abject can function as a flexible interpretive strategy. Second is to read through (from one side to the other) abjection: that is, to interrogate Kristeva’s theory in terms of the interpretive results it produces.

Kelly Oliver explains the usefulness of applying Kristeva’s theory to literary texts, particularly to women-centered ones, in “Kristeva and Feminism.” Oliver specifies three aspects of Kristeva’s work that have proven significant in contributing to feminist theory: “One, her attempt to bring the body back into discourses in the human sciences; two, her focus on the significance of the maternal and preoedipal constitution of subjectivity; and three, her notion of abjection as an explanation for oppression and discrimination” (Oliver 1). For purposes of this thesis, I will focus primarily on the second aspect Oliver highlights – how the maternal and preoedipal constitute female subjectivity – and ultimately investigate whether the space created by these readings is a space that is empowering for women. In order to do so, I will discuss elements of the body and oppression, but most specifically, I will focus on maternal space and preoedipal constructs.
Kristeva first articulates her problems with classic psychoanalytic theory in “Women’s Time” (1979), where she argues that “the reality of castration is no more real than the hypothesis of an explosion which, according to modern astrophysics, is at the origin of the universe: nothing proves it…. It is an article of faith” (197). Kristeva later expands on this diminution of psychoanalysis to an element of faith in Tales of Love (1983) – as is recalled by Kathleen O’Grady in her 1998 interview with her – by reducing the Freudian paradigm to “In the beginning was hatred” (O’Grady 5). In attempting to deconstruct this psychoanalytic theory that she sees as based largely on faith (and little on evidence), Kristeva develops her notion of the abject and its connection to the maternal primal scene as a way of revising and rewriting psychoanalytic theory. As Oliver clarifies, “in contrast to Freud and Lacan, Kristeva emphasizes the maternal function and its importance in the development of subjectivity…. Kristeva is interested in the earliest development of subjectivity, prior to Freud’s oedipal situation or Lacan’s mirror stage” (2).

In light of that interest, in Powers of Horror (1982), Kristeva focuses upon her theory of abjection. She identifies the initial place of abjection as birth, during which the fetus becomes baby by being brutally expelled from the mother’s uterine canal, a “violent, clumsy breaking away” that initiates a lasting sense of separation and loss (13). Because birth is the primal abjection, all other forms of abjection represent that initial abjection. Whether it be death (or images of the cadaver), crime, excrement, degradation, or incest, the abject is essentially characterized by a ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaningfulness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which
crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (2)

Kristeva does not suggest this exclusion of the abject as authentic, but as attempted, for inevitably, it will loom in the psyche, thus disrupting identity, order, and self. As clarified by Kathryn Chenoweth, “the abject ceaselessly confronts and undermines the attempts of our discursive border-creations to form clear definitions and stable identities” (2), confronting and disrupting our efforts to become fully independent subjects. Chenoweth further explains that “the formation and maintenance of our own subjectivity continues to be haunted by this monster – [the abjected/rejected] body of the mother, the dissolution of the self” (2). Thus the space of the abject is, according to Kristeva, what “misleads, corrupts…lives at the behest of death,” and our exclusion of the abject “disturbs identity, system, order,” calling our attention to the space where meaning collapses (15).

**Within Powers of Horror**, Kristeva characterizes the abject at length with what might be classified as semi-synonyms for abjection – *filth, defilement, impure victuals, the chora, the improper/unclean, the cadaver, etc.* Identifying the abject through these significations of abjection recalls Lacan’s “chain of signifiers” in which a signifier does not point to a signified, but to another signifier.¹ For Kristeva, classifying abjection through signifiers that never promise to identify with the signified focuses attention on the larger process of signification that she attempts theoretically to redefine. Kristeva explains this process of signification in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), in which she divides all acts of communication that arrive at signification into two modalities, the *symbolic* and the *semiotic*. The *symbolic* provides the foundation and scheme requisite to
communicate, which allows us to make sense of the *semiotic* – its rhythms, tones and movements (i.e. the rambling, laughter, humming, etc.) – which precede, and exist as a necessary precondition for the *symbolic*. As Oliver clarifies, “without the *symbolic*, all signification would be babble or delirium. But, without the *semiotic*, all signification would be empty and have no importance for our lives. Ultimately, signification requires both *semiotic* and *symbolic*; there is no signification without some combination of both” (2). In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva ultimately correlates the relationship between the *semiotic* and *symbolic* to its association with the mother/infant union and the *chora*: “an enclosed space or womb” (7). In terms of the “mother-infant dyad,” the space of the *chora* is the space of signification, and the *semiotic* is the pre-verbal realm of signification (Barnett 5).

The application of these aspects of Kristeva’s theories – specifically of subjectivity, signification and abjection - to art and literature is not unprecedented. Clifford Davis uses Kristeva’s notion of the abject as a way of reinterpreting “primary oppositions… and reflect[ing] the psychological tension between nascent patriarchal institutions and the excluded, but sanctified, feminine Other” in Sophocles’s *Antigone* (Davis 1). Pennina Barnett reads through Kristeva as a way of exploring the relationships between “materiality, subjectivity and abjection” in the artwork of Chohreh Feyzdjou, Nina Saunders and Cathy de Monchaux (Barnett 1). Similarly, my application of Kristeva’s theory to the following texts explores the way abjection can redefine patriarchal constructs and the space of the female/maternal. As a result, these analyses provide not only a new way to read and interpret these particular works, but the means to interrogate the usefulness of Kristeva’s theory.
I begin with *Dreaming in Cuban*. By reading the novel through abject theory, I can see how this contemporary novel ultimately ascribes to the female a more complicated type of empowerment than the one that simply emphasizes the power inherent in female sexuality. For example, although both Lourdes and Felicia hold sexual dominion over their lovers, both begin and end as subjects of abjection. In their attempts to purify themselves, they illustrate the female capacity for regeneration and purification, but as both sisters ultimately sink back into abjection, we are left with the knowledge that unraveling patriarchal constructions of sex (in which male has assumed power) will not necessarily result in redirecting power to the female. Left, then, with questions about how power might otherwise be achieved – if not through sexual dominion – we look to Lourdes’s daughter Pilar who is able to avoid the abjectification into which her elders slide by relying on artistic and religious expression. As a result, we learn that female empowerment is something that can only be achieved by a sort of meta-awareness of “her” own creative and spiritual energies.

My second chapter concerns Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*. This poem, although often read as celebratory of women in terms of sisterhood, is not wholly triumphant, as the sisters are first assaulted, commodified, and debased by the goblin men. Although some previous critics have pointed out the absence of men in the poem (as the goblins are not literally men), most interpretations focus in one way or another on these women in terms of the presence or absence of men. Furthermore, many readings that see Rossetti’s text as triumphant for women focus upon the relationship of sisters, and in many cases do not see a suggestion of motherhood in the text at all. Reading through the Kristevan abject, however, reveals the possibility of seeing Laura and Lizzie
as “mothers,” and suggests that the female’s ability to assume the role of the maternal, and find fulfillment in that role, does not necessarily require a male.

Finally, in my third chapter, I conclude by reading through the abject to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. This strategy helps unravel the normative Freudian (patriarchal) interpretations of the text, just as Kristeva’s theory attempts to unravel the primacy that has been attached to psychoanalytic paradigms. Ultimately, I find Dracula is not necessarily the powerful father, but may instead be symbolic of the fear of the “monstrous woman.” Through abjection, we see the face of the epitome of male-powerful oedipal constructs (Dracula) fade into the possibility of womanhood. This possibility of Dracula as a woman only actualizes the male-less communities that Garcia and Rossetti sketch out: the men in *Dreaming in Cuban* serve no other function beyond satiating the maternal and female sexual appetite, and *Goblin Market*, if we understand it as including men at all, includes them merely as bubble men.\(^3\) Together, my readings configure the abject woman as something that takes the place of Lacan’s notion of the *phallus* – that girls cannot achieve the *phallus* because they are, as Freud argued, constituted by lack.\(^4\)

Applying abject theory to these (classic) texts seems to undo the patriarchal conventions that have normally been applied to and associated with these texts, replacing them with readings in which women are empowered and liberated in and through their sexuality and materiality, and ultimately their capacity for motherhood.\(^5\) But because Kristeva herself testifies in an interview with Josefina Ayerza that her theories are not necessarily feminist – perhaps in as much as her work doesn’t convey a “feminist attitude in the dogmatic sense of the word” (Kristeva)\(^6\) – we are left to question whether these
seemingly triumphant conclusions (from a feminist perspective), are really triumphant after all. If so, what is triumphant about them? What is it that Kristeva’s theory allows us to do? What do these readings reveal about the adequacy of Kristeva’s theory as a literary-critical tool? These are questions I will address in the conclusion to this thesis.
CHAPTER ONE

Calling for a Profound Self-Awareness

Reading Cristina Garcia’s Dreaming in Cuban

“...When food appears as a polluting object, it does so as oral object only to the extent that orality signifies a boundary of the self’s clean and proper body. Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories.... All food is liable to defile.... Food in this instance designates the other (the natural) that is opposed to the social condition of man and penetrates the self’s clean and proper body. In other respects, food is the oral object (the abject) that sets up archaic relationships between the human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce” --- Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror

Cristina García’s Dreaming in Cuban is a woman-centered text that combines epistolary conventions with shifts in narrative voice as a way of exploring the relationship between three generations of Cuban women, all of whom attempt to surmount patriarchal exploitation. Celia del Pino serves a cultural function as the matriarch who stays in Cuba and acts as a sort of narrative memory for her progeny. However, Garcia’s text, and accordingly this chapter, focuses on Celia’s two daughters – Lourdes, the elder daughter who has immigrated to the States, and Felicia, the younger daughter who has remained in Cuba – and Celia’s granddaughter Pilar, Lourdes’s teenaged daughter who aspires to be a painter. Together these three younger women represent different aspects of femininity and, ultimately, exemplify the abject in different ways. Lourdes and Felicia serve as liminal figures of abjection who teeter on the edge of consumption and sexual abuse. Representing the female possibility for self-regeneration, they rise above that abjectification by finding a way to cleanse and rebirth themselves.
Ultimately, however, they cannot sustain that purification and regress back into a defiled state. On the other hand, Pilar overcomes the threat of rape by drawing upon her artistic talent and belief in ritual. Her narrative exemplifies how women might sustain triumph over defilement by finding a way to draw on their own profound awareness and/or talent as a source of empowerment.

Reading this text through Kristeva’s theory of the abject, we begin with a woman (Lourdes) who is physically abjectifying herself as a way of compensating for a former defilement and subsequent abjectification that was forced on her both through miscarriage and in a brutal rape that she suffered just before immigrating to America. Two months before her move to the States, Lourdes had a riding accident that resulted in the miscarriage of her fetus (son): “She’d been galloping… when her horse reared suddenly, throwing her to the ground… [and after borrowing] a horse [and riding] at a breakneck pace back to the villa, …Lourdes felt the clot dislodge and liquefy beneath her breasts, float through her belly, and slide down her thighs. There was a pool of dark blood at her feet” (70). Immediately after suffering this loss of her *chora*, Lourdes is attacked by Cuban soldiers who proceed not only to rape her, but to beat, maim and brand her – “the soldier lifted the knife and began to scratch at Lourdes’s belly …a primeval scraping” (72). The trauma which Lourdes undergoes recalls Melanie Klein’s argument⁷ that the female’s “deepest fear is of having the inside of her body robbed and destroyed” (194). Jo Nash later expands on this statement by suggesting that it “describes a little girl’s fear of an uninvited colonization of her body and evokes images of rape, unwanted pregnancy, abortion and miscarriage” (7). What is particularly interesting about Nash’s grouping is his alignment of miscarriage and rape together in terms of their unifying
effect on the female body – or more specifically the *chora*. Considering these
unwelcome occurrences next to Kristeva’s notion of the abject, we notice how Lourdes
has been both inwardly and outwardly abjected as a result of the physical trauma. As
Kristeva clarifies, any contact with or infiltration and consumption of *filth* into the body
is “an objective evil undergone by the subject” (69) that causes defilement, and thereby
mutates the subject into a symbolic representation of the abject (69). As the body
undergoes this “objective evil,” this contamination by *filth*, the body is abjectified as it
becomes the “improper/unclean” body – now a separate element of *filth* – despoiled by
“polluting object[s]” (75).

After being raped, Lourdes seems innately aware of how the abjectification she
suffers from her rape is a symbolic reenactment of her initial abjection from her mother’s
womb. She yearns for the space of her own mother’s *chora*: “Lourdes could smell the air
before she breathed it, the air of her mother’s ocean nearby. She imagined herself alone
and shriveled in her mother’s womb” (74). This cerebral return to the space of her
mother’s *chora*, the only space in which she resided purely, arguably inspires Lourdes.
Having been outwardly sullied and carved, and inwardly plugged with the *filthy* penis and
ravaged of her fetus, Lourdes is left tainted and abjected as an empty shell. Perhaps
trying to compensate for her loss, Lourdes tries to cope with this defilement and refill the
empty, violated space by engorging in excess (both in consumption of sex and food).

Post-rape, Lourdes embodies an abject, monstrous woman, whose outward
incarnation of the grotesque mirrors her inward abjectification. In the guise of this
monstrous woman, Lourdes is introduced to the reader as a “size 26” bakery owner who
is “pleased” both “with her uniform’s implicit authority” and with the “vaguely
cyclopean air” of her right eye, which she “is convinced… enables her to see things others don’t” (17). In her size and “cyclopean air” Lourdes is the physical quintessence of the abject, in as much as she embodies the kinds of images that many critics have associated with the “monstrous woman.” In her discussion of the monstrous woman, Rosi Braidotti (1994) specifically aligns bodily “excess” (or fat) with female monstrosity: “Since the nineteenth century, following the classification system of monstrosity by Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, bodily malformations have been defined in terms of excess, lack, or displacement of organs.” (77-8). What is particularly interesting about Lourdes is the way the, as “the flesh amassed rapidly on her hips and buttocks, …collecting on her thighs, fusing them above the knees, […and] hung from her arms like hammocks” (20). As the ripples of fat overspill her bones, Lourdes is equated to the grotesque⁸ and exemplifies what Deborah Covino, in another context, has called “abject fleshiness” (14).

In the image of this abject body, Lourdes first awakens next to “her husband sleeping beside her,” and finds that she “has exhausted poor Rufino again” (Garcia 17). At this early juncture in the text, Lourdes’s incessant appetite for sex is likened to her appetite for “baked goods” (20). She attempts to feed her desire to be “full” orally – through what she consumes in between the lips of her mouth and the lips of her vagina – recalling Kristeva’s classification of consumption as a filth that abjectifies the body. The more Lourdes aims to “fill” herself, the more her appetite grows: Lourdes’s “appetite for sex and baked goods increased dramatically…. The more she reached for the pecan sticky buns, and for Rufino” (20). Unable to receive satisfaction from either, she continues to engorge herself, but the more she consumes, the more “abject” and “ruinous” her body becomes. Whether padding her fat-rippled body with a surplus of
118 pounds (20), or “loop[ing] and rotat[ing]” her legs and “swivel[ing]” her neck as if it had “extra ball bearings” (21), she aligns that cyclopean air with a kind of circus freak – a rather large one – who suffocates and wholly consumes its prey.

The heavier and more grotesque Lourdes becomes, the more her appetite intensifies, as she moves from exhausting her husband to having a sort of ownership over him. For Lourdes, “it was not a question of control” (21), but a question of fulfillment:

[She] summoned her husband…by pulling vigorously on a ship’s bell he had rigged up for this purpose, unpinned her hair, and led him by the wrist to their bedroom.

Lourdes’s agility astounded [her husband] Rufino. The heavier she got, the more supple her body became….

Rufino’s body ached from the exertions. His joints swelled like an arthritic’s. He begged his wife for a few nights’ peace but Lourdes’s peals only became more urgent, her glossy black eyes more importunate. (21)

Cast as a sort of dominatrix, Lourdes is in complete control of what the sex is and will be, but as she is unable to receive fulfillment from that sex, her “peals only became more urgent” (21). No matter how often she pulls the cord for the ship’s bell, she is not satiated, and the more she consumes, the more empty and “urgent” she begins to feel: “Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her, she wasn’t sure what” (21). Abjected, Lourdes has lost sight of what it is she wants – what will quench her appetite – and has given into the cravings that only fulfill her need for excess, whether that excess be sex or food: “Lourdes did not battle her cravings; rather, she submitted to them like a somnambulist to a dream” (21). Although Lourdes is quite
obviously in sexual control, that power – as it is fed by her need for excess – is not presented as fundamentally fulfilling.

Lourdes’s desire to feed herself, as we discover, is arguably an attempt to fill or replace what was lost to her as a result of the abjection her body underwent in Cuba. When she cannot find fulfillment in excess/consumption, Lourdes tries to purify her chora by starving her body:

Lourdes… welcomes the purity, the hollowness of her stomach. It’s been a month since she stopped eating…. She envisions the muscled walls of her stomach… slickly clean from the absence of food and the gallons of springwater she drinks, […] and] longs for a profound emptiness, to be clean and hollow. (169)

As Kristeva explains, the exclusion of that filth is what maintains the clean self, a body free from abjection. Lourdes – now symbolically empowered by her attempts to purify her chora – enacts the transformation that Kristeva describes by generating power specifically from the space of the womb. As a way of cleansing it of entry and occupation by the male that defiled her, Lourdes purifies her chora by starving herself both of the sticky buns and of her husband’s penis that she had so often formerly devoured.

In her ritual of cleansing, Lourdes recognizes the difference between her newly “purified” body and the monstrous woman she previously embodied: “It’s as if another woman had possessed [me] in those days, a life-craving whore who fed on her husband’s nauseating clots of yellowish milk” (169). Here, Lourdes seems oddly tuned in to the language of Kristeva’s abjection. In her reduction of herself to “a life-craving whore”
who feeds on “nauseating clots” of her husband’s abject semenic juices\textsuperscript{10} – which she likens to “yellowish milk” – she apparently recognizes her formerly grotesque state and compares the union to a form of lactation that recalls and reaffirms the initial state of abjection. In her diminution of sex to a sickened sort of life-craving and giving that can be likened to a grotesque representation of the cycle of life that a mother produces with lactation, Lourdes arguably recognizes that, until now, she had looked to outside sources (semen, sticky buns) for sustenance. Thus, what she has discovered as a result of her rape is that her former state of grotesquerie was self-induced, and now, in light of her self-recognition, is one that she can and does overcome; starving herself of her sticky buns and sex, she experiences “purity within her, a careful enzymatic balance she does not wish to disturb” (Garcia 172).

Having attained this balance, Lourdes achieves a “resurrection” that presents what Kristeva calls the “narcissistic crisis,” through which woman can finally arrive at “…[a] self-sufficient haven” (14). However, for Lourdes, this purified state is not one she is able to maintain. Lourdes ultimately sinks back into the physical embodiment of abjection by allowing her starvation to escalate into a kind of food loathing that results in an abject state that opposes her former personification of the grotesque (in excess) – as she now appears a semblance of the emaciated corpse. Having starved herself too long, Lourdes “feels transparent, as if the hard lines of her hulking form were disintegrating” (Garcia 167). Because “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (Powers 2), Lourdes sinks further into a state of abjection through her self-induced starvation by wasting away into a sort of living corpse,\textsuperscript{11} and thereby existing in a liminal state between life and death. As a result, the border has been
dissipated through the abject (death), as the living-being shares the flesh of the corpse. In Kristeva’s terms, the corpse is “what I permanently thrust aside in order to live;” it further shifts and disjoints the balance between identity and order, “simultaneously beseech[ing] and pulveriz[ing] the subject” (Powers 3, 5).

As she teeters on the edge of a new, perhaps more abysmal form of abjection, Lourdes eventually falls to the temptation of her original cravings, allowing herself to “consume” the filth again, and thereby returns to her former abjected state in the image of the monstrous woman. When told by her doctor that she must “wean” herself back on to food in order to survive, she cannot control herself: “Lourdes eats, eats, eats, like a Hindu goddess with eight arms, eats, eats, eats, as if famine were imminent” (174), and finally ends in the same abject form as she began. First abjected in her own right, and then likewise resurrected, before she again abjectifies herself and finally recasts herself in the image of a monstrous woman, Lourdes represents the self-retributive power of the female. She clearly has the ability to cleanse and resurrect herself – to “feel pure, absolutely clean” (173) – in this case via starvation and chastity. But as Lourdes teaches us, that resurrection is not automatically sustaining; it is one that must be nurtured by the woman, without falling to external forms of temptation.

Aiming to regenerate her own subjectivity, Lourdes’s sister Felicia also attempts to purify herself – in this case by returning to the state of the maternal. As a way of calming madness and satiating her hungry spirit, Felicia first seeks and begins her initiation into the Santeriá religion. Throughout the text, the initiation process is enacted as a sort of rebirth as she is taken through an “airless passageway lit on one side with red votive candles … [and] at the end of the corridor, long strands of shells hang in an arched
doorway” (13). Here, the shape of the passage, offset by the light that waits at the end – into which she enters a new space where she is reborn – is likened to the uterine canal through which a fetus passes toward a doorway (vagina) and into the light. For Felicia, this rebirth is intended to “cleanse [her] of [her] infelicities” and “bring [her…] a peace [she] never knew” (14). Her best friend Herminia, who introduced her to Santería, later explains how Felicia’s initiation – an ongoing process – becomes final: “sixteen santeras tore Felicia’s clothes to shreds until she stood naked, then they bathed her in river water… treating her like a newborn child” (187). Begun through the sacrifice and bloodletting of a goat that emulates the bloody act of birth, and continuing with the ritualistic bath and head shaving that figuratively reduces her to baby in placenta, Felicia’s initiation is later complete, and she is spiritually reborn.

Counteracting her attempts to experience a rebirth through her religious practice, Felicia warps the maternal role and equates that role with feminine strength by exploiting and/or sexually dominating (and henceforth abjectifying) her husbands. Felicia mars her first husband Hugo’s face beyond recognition and kills her third (Otto) on a Ferris wheel, where Otto pushes his penis toward her in hopes that she will please him, and she ostensibly pushes him back, away from her and to his death. In these cases she forces both husbands into a physical or literal representation of the abject – Hugo in his scarred, grotesque appearance, and Otto, as a corpse. Perhaps the best example, though, of Felicia’s abjectification of men is her treatment of her second husband-to-be Ernesto, whom she strips of the conventional male role of penetrator and captor, and in so doing, ultimately reclaims the space of the maternal. As Felicia enacts the role of seductress, Ernesto’s body is reduced to a semblance of the abject in the image of a vulnerable,
virgin male who looks like a “bleached, crumpled heap” – a colorless worm, writhing on his stomach (149). “Smitten” by Ernesto’s vulnerability, Felicia proceeds to seduce him. She “takes [Ernesto] by the hand and leads him to her 1952 De Soto parked a few yards away… opens the rear door of her vintage American car and slides across the backseat, tugging him toward her” (150). Dragging her prey into a confined space from which he cannot escape, Felicia consumes him. In “coaxing” a male virgin, Felicia reverses the presumed archetypes associated with intercourse. Her later reflection of the exchange reveals how Felicia utilizes sex as a way to subjugate the male and return to the space of the maternal:

Felicia relived their brief time together. Ernesto’s pallid skin mottled with excitement, his tentative hands that quickly became assured under her encouragement, the way he laid his downy head between her breasts and slept contentedly, like a well-fed baby. Ernesto had been a virgin when Felicia coaxed him into the backseat of her car, and he displayed the profound gratitude of the unburdened. (150)

Here, Ernesto is “encouraged” under her movement, and she is empowered by the transformation of this unsexed, virgin *male* into a sexually gratified infantile male. Post-coitus, in accepting the guise of mother, Felicia embodies the ultimate role of *woman* as Ernesto lays “his downy head between her breast” and sleeps contentedly, recalling an infant with its mother. Through this maternalization, the 1952 De Soto seems to signify the receptacle of the womb that exists outside of the maternal body. In the confines of intercourse, woman regains maternal autonomy and her mate is reduced to the infant that must relive that “initial” abjectification. In the implication that the power of woman can
be maintained in sex and birth, Garcia assigns a type of newfound power to the role of the maternal by giving Felicia sexual dominion and fashioning the result of that reunion as unification between mother and son. This figuration succeeds in constructing Kristeva’s conception of the maternal state as originary – clean and powerful – and likewise challenges the psychoanalytic notion that women can achieve motherhood only through submission to male possession and occupation.

Further recalling the maternal, Felicia’s power seems specifically identified with her breasts. The image of Ernesto’s head between her breasts, and its semblance of breastfeeding, recalls Felicia’s obsession with breast-shaped coconuts, and the “milk” from which she feeds her bastard son Ivanito: “At home, [she] removes her tunic and slippers … [and] scrap[es] the blinding white, perfumed flesh from the shells” (85). Disrobing herself as she would in the act of lactation, Felicia removes her tunic and begins to prepare the “sweet white milk” with which she will nurture her child Ivanito (85). The breast-shaped coconuts from which she extracts the “blinding white” substance, and the comparison of the coconuts to “flesh,” combine to form a palpable allusion to lactation, which ultimately place Ivanito in position to be “re-abjectified” by his mother. By imbibing the life-giving, milk-like juice of the breast-shaped coconuts given to him by Felicia, Ivanito is forced symbolically to re-experience his initial separation from his mother. Non-breast milk, not surprisingly, is Kristeva’s first example of “abject foodstuff,” as it signals a loss of the chora and the quasi-chora state created through breastfeeding. As she explains, “when …the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk… I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, […] and
Howsam, “Calling for a Profound Self-Awareness”

it] separates me from the mother and father who proffer it” (*Powers* 3). In other words, by feeding Ivanito the “sweet white milk,” Felicia does not “purify” him (Garcia 85), but instead reenacts the separation and loss that he sustained when he was first expelled from her. As a result, the male remains the subject of abjection – and Felicia, like Lourdes, is purified: “Felicia’s spirits soar as the coconut ice cream diminishes…. When she presses Ivanito to her chest, he can feel her heart jumping like it wants to come out of its cage” (85).

Ultimately, however, none of Felicia’s attempts to purify her spirit – namely rejecting and abjectifying men, ingesting the milk cream, or her final initiation into *Santeria* – allows her heart to be liberated from its metaphorical cage. In fact, despite her capacity to reclaim the maternal and purify herself, she finally goes mad and dies: “Felicia’s obsessions grow like something botanical, dense and violent” (86), and as a result, her health deteriorates: “her eyes dried out like an old woman’s and her fingers curled like claws until she could hardly pick up her spoon. Even her hair, which had been as black as a crow’s, grew colorless in scruffy patches on her skull” (189).

Recalling her sister Lourdes’s starved “transparent” grotesquerie, Felicia ultimately fades into death, while she, too, has arguably suffered the profound loss that comes from an attempt to regenerate through outward methods.

Despite both Felicia’s and Lourdes’s final representation of the abject, their multiple attempts to purify and resurrect themselves anew represent the female capacity for self-regeneration. Thus it seems that it is Felicia’s niece Pilar (Lourdes’s daughter) who best represents the female capacity to overcome defilement and sustain a state of purification. Pilar is the only female in the text who faces defilement – here again in the
form of rape – and evades that abjectification. Pilar is threatened with rape in the park on her way home from a botánica (a Santería religious supply store) that she had “passed… before but… never gone inside. [Although] today, it seems, there’s nowhere else for [her] to go” (199). Drawn into the store, Pilar, who had up to this point claimed to be an atheist, finds herself newly invested in the idea of ritualistic worship (which recalls Felicia’s entrancement with the Santería). But for Pilar, losing oneself wholly to a cult is not appealing; instead, she feels that “it’s the simplest rituals, the ones that are integrated with the earth and its seasons, that are most profound” (199). While in the store, Pilar selects her own “red-and-white [beaded necklace] and place[s] it over [her] head. [She] lift[s] an ebony staff carved with the head of a woman balancing a double-edged ax” (200). Her necklace, a sign of Changó, the god of fire and lightening, recalls Saint Barbara, the Catholic representation of Changó, who serves as protector of chastity and home (or perhaps in this case, the *chora*). Grasping the beads, Pilar feels an immediate surge of energy, as she “rub[s] the beads in [her] left hand and feel[s] a warm current drifting down [her] arm, across [her] shoulders, down between [her] breasts” (200).

Before she leaves the store, she adds to her beads with the purchase of herbs and holy bath water in which she is told to bathe “for nine consecutive nights… on the last day [of which, she] will know what to do” (200).

As she hurries home to begin her ritual bathing, the terror of rape is imminent: “Three boys surround [her] suddenly in the park, locking [her] between their bodies…. The tallest one presses a blade to [her] throat…. They pull off [her] sweater and carefully unbutton [her] blouse” (202). But unlike her elders, in the threat of the same male-forced abjectification that exposed and defiled her mother, Pilar reaches inside herself and
“shielded by the herbs” and the symbol of Changó (200), finds a source of power that enables her to escape the peril of rape.

Having assumed the mantle of Saint Barbara, Pilar protects her maternal “home” and escapes the abject morass into which Felicia and Lourdes sink by expressing herself spiritually and artistically. As she returns home, she lights her candle and bathes herself in the herbs, and “at midnight [she] awake[ns] and paint[s] a large canvas ignited with reds and whites” – reminiscent of the beads that protected her – “each color betraying the other” (203). She continues the ritual of bathing and painting for eight nights before, on the ninth, she understands that she must return to Cuba. Pilar’s ability to triumph over abjection through her reliance on Saint Barbara – a self-driven holistic ritual – and her own art reinforces Kristeva’s notion that art and religion are attempts to purify the abject, through which the *semiotic* can be achieved: “The various means of *purifying* the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art” (*Powers* 17). In reaching inward, to her inner “artista” (*Garcia* 144), and bathing in the cleanliness that Saint Barbara has provided for her, Pilar has experienced the cathartic release that Kristeva predicted.

Ultimately, the reading that results from applying the theory of the abject to Garcia’s text exemplifies how Kristeva complicates what roles are finally empowering for women. What is interesting in the case of this novel is that if we were to examine it through a different critical lens, for example that of Irigaray, we might more easily read all three of these women as finally empowered, as each of them either overcomes patriarchal paradigms of female-occupied intercourse or expresses her own sexual plurality through the act of masturbation. In light of the abject, we see the penis as an
element of *filth*, and the male reduced to literal corpse (death of fetus), to a “writhing” abject body (Ernesto), and to a form of re-abjected breastfed infant (Ernesto and Ivanito). We see the sexual experience likened to the initial abjectification (Felicia as mother and her partner as infant), and the *semiotic* (achieved through Pilar’s art) as a way of overcoming the *filthy* penis that always threatens to abjectify the female.

Through abjection, Garcia’s women are able to “transform death drive into a start of life, of new significance” (*Powers* 15). They rise from the confines of the ‘sex which is not one,’ the absence, to the (w)holeness that *only* is, the necessity – acquiring pleasure by devouring the seduced male organ, or ideally, in deeming that organ obsolete (Pilar’s masturbation). However in their inability to sustain that “new significance,” Lourdes and Felicia problematize the notion of empowerment that common modes of feminism have suggested as fundamentally and/or ultimately fulfilling – the ability to overcome occupation, possession, force and control by the male. Thus, the space of female empowerment is complicated by reading through abjection, because although each of these women is able to triumph over patriarchal sexual paradigms that have long subjugated women, only Pilar is finally empowered in terms of Kristeva’s theory. Perhaps the most obvious difference between where Pilar and Lourdes end up is that Pilar communicates her womanhood through her artistic and religious expression. This analysis of the text seems to pose a new sort of feminist ideal – one in which the female cannot be wholly empowered by her exclusion or control of the male. Instead, she must gain her autonomy not only through her ability to find the sustenance for her most profound of appetites in the core of her own being, but in her ability to channel the
energy that is born of that appetite in spiritually fulfilling measures (i.e. - art and religion).
CHAPTER TWO

Defilement, Impurity and Resurrection:

Reading Christina Rossetti’s Goblin Market

--- “Bodies meet, touch, and trade losses, only to return to themselves continually, re-formed by the experience”--- Krista Lysack, “The Economics of Ecstasy in Christina Rossetti’s Monna Innominata”

Over time, the scholarship surrounding Goblin Market has dichotomized the critical topics under which this poem is addressed – either understanding the poem as a religious allegory (often compared to Genesis) or situating the text inside the “woman question” contemporary to its own time (focusing on either the absence of men or the element of sisterhood). What seems more interesting about Rossetti’s poem, however, are the questions that have yet to be asked: How are the images of the body and that which the body is anatomically intended to consume for sustenance (food) constructed in the text, and what effect do those images have?13 Because Goblin Market explicitly and undeniably focuses on the body’s (and mind’s) desire for exotic foodstuffs, and because the text emphasizes the female by the exclusion of the male, Kristeva’s theory of the abject, founded on the female body, provides a theoretical context within which to re-examine Rossetti’s images. In applying the theory of abjection to the misshapen bodies and polluting foodstuffs that saturate Goblin Market, we are able to establish a new way of reading the text. The demise of Laura and Lizzie, as well as their eventual resurrection, can be viewed as a means by which the female self, in her journey to return to state of virgin womb, rises out of oppressive (deadly) male patriarchy and becomes
empowered in her role as the sacred, purified, pre-abjection mother. We are thus able to see how, despite common interpretation of the text, which assumes a female reliance on the male at the poem’s end in the description of the sisters as “wives,” Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* can be read as an assertion that the livelihood and capacity for motherhood are not necessarily defined by or dependent upon a female’s relation to the male, but depend instead exclusively on her role as *woman*.

What first situates Rossetti’s women as abject subjects is their frenzied desire for the goblin fruits: the fruits represent abjection both in their whole and their juice form, while they simultaneously invoke recognition of the sisters’ oral fixation. In terms of the abject, the importance of the mouth can be traced back to the female sex organ, and the relation between food and the mouth symbolically points to consumption and boundary, bringing the outside world into the body. Kristeva clarifies this abjectifying dynamic: “When food appears as a polluting object, it does so as oral object only to the extent that orality signifies a boundary of the self’s clean and proper body” (*Powers* 75). Thus, by existing as “polluting object[s],” the food within *Goblin Market* serves to spoiled, to “abjectify” the body. For example, the “figs to fill your mouth” seemed at first to Laura as “sweet to tongue and sound to eye,” but were instead “poison,” the “fruit forbidden,” the abject (Rossetti 28, 30, 555, 479).

Within *Goblin Market* the “clean and proper” body is not only *penetrated* by these elements of *filth* (in its consumption of despoiled foodstuffs), but the abject also takes shape beyond that consumption in the body’s eventual diminution to a semblance of a corpse. Dino Felluga elaborates upon why the corpse well exemplifies the abject: “since it literalizes the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object that is
crucial for the establishment of identity and for our entrance into the *symbolic* order” (2).

Emulating this state of abjection – existing in the liminal space between life and death, between subject and object – after consumption of the fare that contaminates her, Laura decays into the abject as her pure, healthy body withers to an almost lifeless cadaver:

> Her tree of life drooped from the root
> …Her hair grew thin and grey;
> She dwindled
> … [a] swift decay
> … with sunk eyes and faded mouth.

(Rossetti 260, 277-8, 279, 288)

Putrefying in its own rot, Laura’s dwindling body recalls the corpse, and thus, “represents [this] fundamental pollution… a fount of impurity… *abomination* and/or prohibition… waste,” the abject (*Powers* 109). As Laura “dwindle[s]…knocking at Death’s door,” she simulates the body defiled, a “lifeless” cadaver, and thus becomes the “body without soul, a non-body, [of] disquieting matter” (Rossetti 320-1, *Powers* 109).

At this point in the text, abjectification is limited to Laura, who has both consumed the polluted foods and has herself become a literalized form of the abject in her simulation of the rancid body, the body *defiled*, a manifestation of the corpse. But in Lizzie’s subsequent efforts to resuscitate Laura from this state of decomposition, Lizzie’s face becomes the canvas upon which the original abject element of the text, the polluted fruits, takes on yet another form – serving as the foods’ remainders, its juices. Upon the face of Lizzie, the fruits have been reduced to mere “goblin pulp and goblin dew” (Rossetti 470). Kristeva elucidates this intrusion by food remainders as the nadir of
victual impurity: “food remainders... more defiling than any other food... are residues of something but especially of someone. They pollute on account of incompleteness” (Powers 76). Within Goblin Market, the initial elements of impurity, “fruits like honey to the throat/ But poison in the blood,” have not only been reduced to the most defiling element, a remainder, but these remainders yield a further abjectification, this time an external physical contamination of Lizzie (Rossetti 554-5). Because all forms of contamination are linked with defilement, the contamination of Lizzie’s face by these tainted juices follows as another form of defilement, through which “abjection [is] brought about by physical defect” (Powers 102). Thus, the body covered in despoiled juices, that residue of infectious, forbidden fruit which is itself abject, is a body abjectified. For, as Kristeva asserts,

the body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic. In order to confirm that, it should endure no gash other than that of circumcision, equivalent to sexual separation and/or separation from the mother. Any other mark would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic, the non-holy. (Powers 102)

Beyond defining what characterizes the “clean and proper body,” Kristeva adds a new element to the way the female body has historically been viewed as weak and tainted (Oliver). Oliver recapitulates Kristeva’s discussion (from Powers of Horror and Revolution of Poetic Language) of the symbolic and the process of signification: “operations of identification and differentiation necessary for signification are prefigured in the body’s incorporations and expulsions of food in particular.... These bodily
‘identifications’ and ‘differentiations’ are regulated by the maternal body before birth and the mother during infancy” (1). This notion of the tainted body as the necessary precursor to signification and the achievement of the *symbolic* gives meaning to Lizzie’s abjection, and prefigures the ensuing reading of a type of mutual resurrection of the sisters. Lizzie’s “gash[es]” – not acquired in either the act of sex or birth, nor in a emblematic allusion to either act, but acquired instead, in an abuse by “goblin men” – *defile* her, mark her *impure*, and impede her ability to reside in the *symbolic*. Her outer shell has been annihilated; the goblins:

…trod and hustled her,

Elbowed and jostled her,

Clawed with their nails,

Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,

Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,

Twitched her hair out by the roots,

Stamped upon her tender feet,

Held her hands and squeezed their fruits

Against her mouth to make her eat...

Scratched her, pinched her black as ink.

(Rossetti 399-407, 427)

Tattered and beaten, Lizzie has been “mauled and mocked,” “clawed” and “knocked,” no longer the “wand of ivory” who clung to her tainted sister in sleep, but now an abject body, an outward mirror image of her sister’s internal decay (429, 401, 428, 190).
Through Lizzie’s manifestation of the outward image of the abject, the sisters converge to represent a single abject body, corrupt both in soul and in veil. When Lizzie returns to Laura, her face bleeds with the remnants of the fruits: “…the drip/ Of juice that syrupped all her face,/ And lodged in dimples of her chin,/ And streaked her neck” (433-6). Her skin, swathed in “deadly peril,” is but “a fragile container, no longer guaranteed [in] the integrity of one’s ‘own and clean self’ but, scraped and transparent, invisible or taut, [having given] way before the dejection of its contents” (558, Powers 53).

Recognizing Lizzie’s sacrifice of her “clean and proper” body in an attempt to save her, Laura fears the mirrored abjection that stands before her in the face of her sister. Her fear is clarified as she asks Lizzie, might:

…your light like mine be hidden,
Your young life like mine be wasted,
Undone in mine undoing,
And ruined in my ruin,
Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden?

(Rossetti 480-4)

As Laura observes, together the sisters stand in “waste,” in “ruin,” the products of abjection. As Lizzie drinks the juices from the defiled face of her sister, the bodies intertwine in an exchange of the abject, becoming one complete or whole abject image from the inside out: “she clung about her sister,/ Kissed and kissed and kissed her… Shaking with anguish fear, and pain,/ She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth” (485-6, 491-2). The two diametrically opposed corporeal representations of the abject entwine as Lizzie’s externally abjectified body (by outward mauling) and Laura’s
internally abjectified body (by consumption) form one *wholly* abject body, full in its portrait of the complete abject body, defiled both inside and out.\textsuperscript{16}

This image of the girls as physically blended is elucidated by Dante Rossetti’s illustration of the scene, in which the sisters clutch one another in sleep, and we are unable to determine where one body ceases and the other begins (Figure 2).

![Figure 2](Detail) D. G. Rossetti, illustration from the 1865 London 2nd edition of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* published by Macmillan.

Thus, a reading of the sisters as a collective whole of the abject body aligns itself with the criticism that has argued that the sisters are “two parts of one whole” (Casey 68). Yet, Casey’s alternative understanding of this particular scene likewise strengthens an interpretation of the girls as ultimately fused in one identity. By reading this scene as she suggests, viewing each sister as “lacking the trait” of the other, the images of the sisters’ intermingled bodies create a literal representation of the abject image, in which the sisters unite as one abject body, each likewise *lacking the abject trait* of the other – the internally and externally abject bodies merging to form *one* abject body, and *one woman.*

These two sisters have converged in the abject through the experience of shared juice, a juice which is the utmost defilement, and thus, the image of mother (and child) is
invoked. As these bodies become one in abjection, the identities blend, recalling a semblance of the fetus in the womb of the mother, in which identities of mother and child are intertwined and connected through nourishment. Kristeva explains this sort of abject juice as a dietary prohibition, therefore, in which there is no question of blood, but in which abomination seems to proceed from another flow that mingles two identities and connotes the bond between the one and the other: milk. A medium that is common to mother and child, a food that does not separate but binds. (Powers 105)

Thus, the juices, which “flow” from or saturate Lizzie’s face, an “abomination” that Laura drinks as a means of sustenance and life, come to signify the mother’s milk. In effect, the sisters beg to be read on the one hand as mother and babe, Lizzie nurturing Laura by “feeding” her a juice emblematic of mother’s milk, and on the other hand as mother and fetus, the sisters blending to signify the image of one abject body, in which the only place for both would be for one to take harbor in the womb of the other. What follows parallels an actual birth, as out of abjection (death and decay) Laura rises up—“like a lightning-stricken mast,/ Like a wind uprooted tree/ Spun about,”—her life is renewed, and she is resurrected (Rossetti 516-8). This idea of Laura as re-birthed follows Kristeva’s outline of resurrection in the face of abjection: “if what remains of a sacrifice can be called abject, in another connection, consuming the leavings of a sacrifice can also be the cause of a series of good rebirths and can even lead to finding salvation” (Powers 76). Herein, what “remains” of a sacrifice, in which the sacrifice is the forbidden fruit, is literally the remains (the juices) of that fruit, and is abject both in its ability to be
classified as remnant and in its signification of the tainted fruit. Ultimately, consumption of the goblin dew leads to “rebirth” and “salvation” of Laura:

[She] beat her breast.

Her locks streamed like the torch

Borne by a racer at full speed…

Swift fire spread thro’ her veins, knocked at her heart

Met the fire smoldering there

And overbore its lesser flame…

That night long Lizzie watched by her,

Counted her pulse’s flagging stir,

Felt for her breath…

Laura awoke as from a dream,

(Rossetti 499-501, 507-9, 525-7, 537)

Through consumption of the most defiling of wastes, Laura’s dwindling body rises out of abjection, a “life out of death,” as a resurrected self (175). Kristeva clarifies how defilement and thus abjection can resurrect, or as is the case with Goblin Market, how the juices – or filth – serve ultimately as the “fiery antidote.” She asserts that because abjection itself is a “resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego),” it is thus “an alchemy that transforms the death drive into a start of life, of new significance” (Powers 15).

Lizzie provides Laura the sustenance she needs to achieve her re-birth by begging Laura to consume her:

Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura make much of me,

(Rossetti 466-72)

Proceeding to “drink” her, to lick the filth from her sister’s face, Laura’s consumption of the abject juices from Lizzie’s defiled face and neck, serves not only to rejuvenate her (“Her breath was sweet as May/ And light danced in her eyes”), but to signify a pregnancy and birth, in which the male is unnecessary, even obsolete (541-2). Consumption can be read as symbolic of sexual intercourse, as food penetrates the lips, and Kristeva deduces that “the importance of the mouth…may ultimately be traced back to the vaginal mouth from which life emerges.” 17 Thus, Laura’s initial consumption of the fruits and later consumption of the juices beg to be read sexually (Burlinson 293). The element of penetration – in which, here, the food specifically “penetrates the self’s clean and proper body” – is an issue feminism has long focused on as the primary element of patriarchal sex (Powers 75). The psychoanalytic notion of the female organ as one of “lack,” and more specifically as the “hole” meant for male penetration, is a notion that arguably lies at the root of the imbalance of power in patriarchal sex. Through her discussion of the female body, and the sexual organ which it bears as “plural,” Irigaray aims to dismantle the convention that “Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (351). She defines that sex
that establishes the imbalance of power as “The one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning…[which] supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of at least two (lips)…[wherein] woman is traditionally a use-value for man…in other words, a commodity” (352, 355).

Succumbing to this form of patriarchal sex, Laura’s first consumption is taken from the body of the male – as the fruits are offered by his hands – while the fruit itself signifies the male sex organ. Taken between her lips as external object, it “supplants, while separating and dividing,” as does the male sex organ in the act of intercourse. In her look at the poem, Casey further draws our attention to the fact that “Laura has to pay for the goblins’ fruit with part of her body” (Casey 66), as she “clipped a precious golden lock” (Rossetti 126), suggesting a bodily exchange synonymous with the act of intercourse. Carpenter adds that “when they tell her she does not need any money because they will be happy with a ‘golden curl,’ she hands over this emblem of her virginity with only a single tear,” further extending the image of the exchange as sexual encounter, one that literally transforms Laura from purified virgin to sullied wench (427). Because the act of drinking is also a form of consumption, Laura’s intake of the juices from her sister’s face still signifies the act of sex established by the former exchange. However, in its absence of the separation of the “lips” that takes place in male/female sex, the sex act is transformed. Now, bodies intertwine, juices are exchanged, and consumption takes place, but the juices do not “divide” the “lips” as would a penis in heterosexual intercourse – instead the exchange is symbolic of a union absent the male. Furthermore, by occurring within this state of abjection, this latter symbolic intercourse,
in which bodies intertwine to signify mother and child, reiterates the resurrection as a type of symbolic *birth*, by which Lizzie births Laura anew. For, as Kristeva asserts, abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be...the *abject* would thus be the ‘*object* of primal repression.’ *Powers* 10)

Because birth is the primal abjection, and because all other forms of the abject are a representation of that initial abjection, the resurrection resulting from a consumption of the abject delivered from and received by abject bodies signifies that initial birth. Thus, Laura’s consumption of the juices from the female body is wholly emblematic of sex, conception, and birth, but is also absent *penetration*, and is thus a conception and birth achieved without the male.\(^{18}\)

Upon this re-birth, the poem immediately shifts to the future in which Laura and Lizzie are now personified as mothers, and we, as readers, must decide whether these women finally require – as mothers – a male. Criticism has long read the ending of *Goblin Market* as indicative of an affirmed acceptance of men through an implication of the women as “wives” (Rossetti 544). But as critics such as Carpenter have stated, husbands are only “implied in the last paragraph” (430). Other critics understand the term “wives” as not merely an *implication* of marriage, but as a testimony of it, going even so far as to read the marriage as a happy alternative; Casey specifically asserts that “Lizzie and Laura seem contentedly married at the end of the work: [an interpretation which] would certainly be inappropriate if the fearful goblin men were intended to represent all members of the male sex” (67). Arguably, though, the text does not demand
a reading of the women as even married, and the poem certainly does not substantiate further claims for the relations between these sisters and their supposed spouses as fulfilling or even satisfactory. Instead of deducing that the goblin men could not possibly represent all men because the sisters are *questionably* married at the poem’s end, we should recall – by looking at the lines of Rossetti’s text – that there is no literal reference to husbands at all. Although critics and readers have assumed that Rossetti’s label of the women as “wives” implies, or even attests, the presence of a male husband, this assumption is not necessarily valid. The word “wives,” the plural form of “wife,” is ambiguous, and may refer to an alternative definition than what we assume to be the most common, “a woman joined to man by marriage.”

In fact, the foremost definition for “wife” as given by the *OED* is instead: “A woman: formerly in general sense; in later use restricted to a woman of humble rank or ‘of low employment’ (J.), esp. one engaged in the sale of some commodity.”

Tennyson incorporates this use of the word in his text *Guinevere*, published in 1859, the same year *Goblin Market* was written, and thus it is a use not only contemporary to the poem, but a use with which Victorian readers would have been familiar: “She… shuddered, as the village wife who cries, ‘I shudder, some one steps across my grave.”

As “village wife” indicates, perhaps the emphasis for Tennyson (and for this specific *OED* entry) lies upon the woman in relation to her community. Yet, beyond this definition “wife” is defined as “a woman, whether married or not,” (1825) suggesting that Rossetti’s reference to the sisters as wives may be a colloquial expression for single women. Still a possibility, although less convincingly, the word “wife” within the context of *Goblin Market* could allude to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, an image often used in literature of the time as a reference to the independent
woman, liberated by her “sexual appetite.” Arguably, Rossetti gives us no more cause to understand the term as definitive of a woman wed to a man than she does to read it as an allusion to Chaucer’s seductress; and of course, the latter estimation of the word better aligns the text with those critics who wish to read it as sexually liberating for the female, but who don’t quite know what to do with this unexpected shift at the poem’s end. Ultimately, no matter how we read the term “wives,” the text’s emphasis lies not on whether these women are married, but instead, on their role as mothers, for “with children of their own,” their “mother-hearts” are now “beset with fears,” their “lives” now “bound up in tender lives” (Rossetti 546, 547).

This ability to read these women simultaneously as sisters and mothers who are “bound up in” the lives of their children denotes a shift into Kristeva’s notion of cyclical “Women’s Time,” in as much as these women have arguably moved from the symbolic to the semiotic. Here, their subjectivity is linked specifically to their cyclical connection to their female kin (in terms of death, pregnancy, birth, overlap, repetition). Expanding on this image of the cyclical nature of “Women’s Time,” the poem even concludes with an explicit emphasis on both sisterhood and motherhood, and thus a discernable emphasis on the woman:

Then joining hands to little hands
Would bid them cling together,
For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,  
To strengthen whilst one stands.

(560-7)

This entire scene is void of male presence and symbolic language; the images draw no likeness of a male presence, not even in poetic allusion. Because the symbolic is post-Oedipal, it designates language that occurs in linear time, in patriarchal history, and is often repressed writing. As this passage is specifically interested in the cyclical nature of motherhood and sisterhood, it aligns itself with the semiotic – pre-Oedipal, cyclical, non-repressed. Here, even the word “wives” itself, having preceded these lines as a single inference, does not include the male, definitive exclusively of two women. Thus, the word “wives” certainly does not unravel the earlier illustration of patriarchal corruption, and ultimately, we are left with an affirmation of Kristeva’s assertion that the child’s only definitive purpose is to serve “its mother as token of her own authentication” (Powers 13).

Thus, Kristeva’s notion of the abject ultimately draws us to a truth that exists only in the loins of mother, and thus a truth that is literally born, and solely possessed, by the female, a truth that can be located in Goblin Market. The reality of the text lies in the varied bodily effects of consumption. For despite the ability of the abject to ultimately sanctify – “abjection, as much as high purity, [is an] obstacle at the same time as [an] incentive toward holiness…a non-object as polluting as it is reviving – defilement and genesis” (Powers 76) – truth will always reside in the mother or in the female, as is the case in this poem. Herein, the elements which abjectify Laura and Lizzie, the “evil gifts,” belong only to men23 (Rossetti 66). As critics often agree, “the specifically
feminine context that is established echoes the female world of *Goblin Market* – when male figures do appear they are always threatening, unpleasant, and preferably avoided” (Burlinson 297). A look at how the abject is transmitted and transferred further substantiates this assertion, for in both instances of defilement by the polluted foodstuffs, defiling Laura’s body (internal) and Lizzie’s face (external), the *filth* is taken from the hands of “curse[d]” men (Rossetti 457). Further, in reading *Goblin Market* through Kristeva’s theory of abjection, we can call into question the long assumed presence of fathers at the poem’s end. In so doing, we discover that the only definitive male presences in the text are those of the goblins, whose “evil gifts” serve to abjectify by consumption and touch (66). In the hands of women, these “evil gifts” are transformed into a “fiery antidote,” an antidote which literally results in birth – a birth absent patriarchal sex or male presence. Thus, *Goblin Market* asserts the female’s undeniable self-possession and self-control over her own capacity for motherhood, a role for which the male *just may be* unnecessary.
CHAPTER THREE

The Monstrous…Woman?:

Reading Bram Stoker’s Dracula

--“there looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects….” -- Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror

In pursing the sexual subtext that underlies Dracula, modern critics often turn to oedipal readings, basing their interpretations on the notion that Stoker’s monster is definitively male. This psychoanalytic approach explains both Dracula’s exclusive victimization of women and the significance of an all-male Gang of Light that seeks to track and slaughter him. According to John Stevenson, Dracula “hoard[s] all the available women, leaving the younger generation, his ‘sons,’ no recourse but to rise up and kill the wicked ‘father’” (139). The idea of Dracula as the “father” or ultimate male figure, and the parallel that has been drawn between blood and semen, have aided critics in interpreting Dracula’s victimization of women as both an indication of Stoker’s participation “in the anti-feminist backlash of the period” (Galperin 915), and as a “representation of paternal birthgiving (‘a feeling of personal pride’), pitched against natural decay, and implicitly against the maternal function” (Bronfen 317). However, by reading the Count as Stoker defines him – a “foul thing” (284) – we are able to reconsider Dracula as ambiguous, liminal – abject. In effect, we are left with new questions about
how Stoker’s text comments on the critical use of Freudian paradigms. By reconsidering
the illicit scenes of vampiric seduction through the abject and the images of the mother
that the text evokes (specifically within the scene where Mina is forced to suck the blood
from Dracula’s breast), we see that Stoker’s construction of Dracula does not necessarily
work to subjugate the female. Instead, by subverting the (assumed) power of the male,
and disguising a rampant female sexuality behind an unrecognizable, vampiric mask,
*Dracula* signifies the terror of the female in an era of anxiety about the “New Woman.”

From the onset, Dracula is cast as “strange” (Stoker 18), submerged in the bizarre
realm of Transylvania. Set in opposition to Jonathan Harker, Stoker’s vampire is “but a
stranger in a strange land, he is no one” (20). Dracula’s position as “stranger in a strange
land” recalls Kristeva’s notion of the “stray” – “The one by whom the abject exists [who]
is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and
therefore *strays*” (*Powers* 8). Thus, as the text progresses, we come to define the Count
not simply as a “stranger,” or *stray*, but as an uncanny sort of “other,” an antecedent for
the abject: “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that
smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it” (*Powers* 4). This
précis seems an “uncanny” reflection of Stoker’s late-nineteenth-century Count. In line
with Kristeva’s depiction of the abject, Dracula’s “bloated face [is] bloodstained and
fixed with a grin of malice which would have held its own in the nethermost hell” (Stoker
52). Compared to a “filthy leech” (Stoker 51), Dracula unremittingly evokes “repulsion
and terror” (*Powers* 34) from those who come in contact with him, causing Harker to
“shudder as [he] bent over to touch him, [as] every sense in [him] revolted at the contact”
(Stoker 51). Furthermore, Stoker’s “monster” (49) completes Kristeva’s aforementioned
characterization by literally exploiting the bodies of his female victims, using their blood as a kind of currency in exchange for his “renewed…youth” (51).

Beyond his wicked exploitation of his victims, Dracula further exemplifies the abject through his personification of the “Un-Dead” (371). His ambiguous station between life and death is announced by Harker’s discovery of him in the makeshift graveyard that lies deep in his castle:

He was either dead or asleep, I could not say which – for the eyes were open and stony, but without the glassiness of death – and the cheeks had the warmth of life through all their pallor, and the lips were as red as ever. But there was no sign of movement, no pulse, no breath, no beating of the heart. I bent over him, and tried to find any sign of life, but in vain. (48)27

With both “stony” eyes and cheeks warm with “pallor,” Dracula obscures the margins between life and death, and thus cannot be defined in human terms. He is instead an unclassifiable “monster” (49) of “waxen hue” (306), who could be likewise deemed “a devil” (348) or “a wild animal” (349), but who is, in either case, inexorably “something so unhuman” (305, italics mine). As a “living” being that shares the corporeal appearance of the cadaver, Dracula inevitably recalls the image of the corpse, that which Kristeva posits as “the most sickening of wastes…a border that has encroached upon everything” (Powers 3). As an effect of his “rank” breath, his “fixed and rather cruel-looking” mouth, and the uncontrollable “nausea” and repulsion his touch evokes (18), Dracula becomes “what [the] I permanently thrust[s] aside in order to live. Finally but a “foul thing” (Stoker 284), one that “is not human – not even beast” (228), Dracula epitomizes Kristeva’s characterization of the abject – he is a “‘something’ that [the] I
do[es] not recognize…on the edge of non-existence and hallucination…[that] does not respect borders, positions rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Powers 2, 4).

As a liminal figure, Dracula also destabilizes the traditional roles of sex and gender and allows us to raise new questions about “his” sexuality. Stoker’s critics have largely accepted Dracula’s sex as male, making “him” an apt candidate for traditional psychoanalytic readings that revolve around Freud’s notion of the penis. Yet despite the popular application of Freudian paradigms, we must consider that Stoker neither equips the Count with a penis, nor does the nature of the monster’s figurative sexual acts follow the method of the penis-laden male. “He” does not “supplant” and “divide…two lips” (Irigaray 352). Instead, Dracula’s consumption of the blood of his victims occurs as he ingests the fluid by way of “his” two lips into his mouth. Simultaneously extracting and swallowing bodily fluid, Dracula’s lips signify the vagina that consumes and sheathes in intercourse. In effect, the appearance and consumptive ability of Dracula’s lips do not recall the obtrusive male genitals, but instead, connote the vaginal lips and “hole” of the female sex organ, thus undermining the ascribed patriarchal sex roles.

These archetypal roles become further destabilized late in the text when Dracula seduces Mina, sucks her blood, and then forces her to consume blood from an open wound on his breast. Significant enough to have been narrated twice, the account of this scene is first proffered by Dr. Seward:

Kneeling on the near edge of the bed facing outwards was the white-clad figure of [Mina…]. The instant we saw [his face] we all recognized the Count – in every way, even to the scar on his forehead. With his left hand he held
Howsam, “The Monstrous…Woman?”

both Mrs Harker’s hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his
right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his
bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared in blood, and a thin stream trickled
down the man’s bare breast, which was shown by his torn-open dress. (282)
The forced female consumption of the presumably “male” fluid that occurs in this scene
has oft been read as a metaphor for fellatio. Christopher Craft, for example, has argued
that “Mina’s verbal ejaculation supplants the Count’s liquid one, leaving the fluid
unnamed and encouraging us to voice the substitution that the text implies – this blood is
semen too” (125). However, in Mina’s later retelling of the encounter, the site from
which she consumes Dracula’s blood seems more comparable to a slit in his breast: “‘he
pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast’” (Stoker
288, italics mine). In effect, the wound from which Mina extracts and consumes
Dracula’s blood – the open slit in his breast – is not reminiscent of the male organ, but is
instead an implicit representation of the slit between the legs of the female. Furthermore,
the placement of this slit upon the breast combines dual sites of female sexuality. Thus,
because consumption and exchange of bodily fluid can be understood as symbolic of
sexual intercourse, the semblance of the vagina on Dracula’s breast from which Mina
extracts bodily fluid with her own lips (also symbolic of the vagina), allows a female-
homoerotic reading of the scene, aligning the encounter quite specifically with the act of
cunnilingus. Furthermore, as Craft has acknowledged, the ejaculation that often defines
male-dominated intercourse is absent, “supplanted” by Mina’s voice (125): “‘[he] seized
my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow
some of the – O, my God, my God!...’” (288). Thus, for some readers, this “ejaculation”
is only assumed. For the blood that oozes from the slit on Dracula’s breast does not necessarily connote semen, and is arguably more synonymous with the bodily fluid that seeps from the female slit during sexual encounter.

Such recasting of sexual roles serves to feminize Dracula. This notion of Dracula as feminized is not necessarily a new one, but it is one that has, in the past, received its merit exclusively from the comparison the text draws between Dracula’s blood and milk. After seeing Dracula force Mina to suck from “his” teat, Dr. Seward records that: “the attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten’s nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink” (282). Here, Dracula is likened to mother (albeit the monstrous mother – the “sublime grotesque”), as he holds Mina’s head up to his chest, and she, to baby, as she takes the juice that bears sustenance from the (m)other’s breast. In effect, Dracula’s blood becomes reminiscent of the “lifeblood” that the mother provides in the act of breastfeeding. Seeking to reconcile this image of lactation with the popular fellatio interpretation, Stevenson quite rightly asks: “What is going on? Fellatio? Lactation? It seems that the vampire is sexually capable of everything” (146). Christopher Craft expands upon this interpretation, suggesting that the scene recalls a kind of “lurid nursing” that “thoroughly displace[s]” the act of fellatio:

We are at the Count’s breast…as blood becomes milk…. Such fluidity of substitution and displacement entails a confusion of Dracula’s sexual identity, or an interfusion of masculine and feminine functions, as Dracula here becomes the lurid mother offering not a breast but an open and bleeding wound. (125)
Considering this act of “nursing” within the context of the figurative act of cunnilingus (as opposed to fellatio) arguably permits us to understand the scene as a metaphor for the cycle of life that subverts the necessity of the male organ, and thus, allows an alternative interpretation to the popular psychoanalytic readings of the text. In essence, Dracula’s consumption of Mina’s blood can be translated as a sexual (cunnilingual) act that results in a “new life” for Mina by preventing the natural decay of her body. Mina is “reborn” as a more complete version of the Un-Dead, who in the process can only receive the sustenance she needs to survive – blood (or milk) – from her (m)other, Dracula. Her need for sustenance is met at once as Dracula “‘seize[s] [Mina’s] neck and presse[s] [her] mouth to the wound’” (288). Because this latter transfusion is paralleled to an act of lactation by which a feminized Dracula provides “daughter” Mina with the sustenance she needs to survive, the scene completes the metaphor for the full cycle of life. However, as it is a homosexual, cunnilingual sex act, absent the penis, which has resulted in this birth of a “new life” and the necessary lactation needed to sustain that life, the exchange subverts the role of the male. In effect, the assumed “power” of the penis is called into question as the sexual role of the male is superceded by the female.33

Criticism has often interpreted this vampiric exchange alternatively, as a gross perpetuation of the patriarchal roles established through male power and female commodification in heterosexual intercourse. Craft, for example, perceives the Count’s victimization of women as a way of masculinizing them, transforming them into “feminine demons equipped with masculine devices” (111). Elisabeth Bronfen similarly complains that Dracula’s exploitation of females is a “representation of paternal birthgiving…pitched against … the maternal function” (Bronfen 317). Yet, when read as
Dracula does not “masculinize” her female victims, nor does (s)he enact a sort of “paternalization” of them. Instead, the Count’s figurative acts of cunnilingus, birth, and lactation serve to maternalize “him.” Because Dracula is abject, and the vampiric exchange is analogous to a form of lesbian intercourse that results in new life, the image of the father is absent, and the image of the mother is more or less everywhere. For, beyond these ubiquitous images of the mother (female genitilia, “reproduction,” milk, etc.), the presence of the abject reinforces this maternal imagery by calling our attention to the place where Kristeva says meaning collapses - birth. Post-birth, images of the abject (death, blood, etc.) recall our innate repressed desire to return to the womb. Considering the images of the mother alongside the images of the abject allows us to interpret the exchange between Dracula and Mina as a homoerotic affair that results in a paranoid parody of the kinds of relationships that might exist in a feminist community where the figurative mother and daughter can nurture and nourish each other while occluding the male. Here, (m)other (Dracula) and daughter (specifically Mina) feed off one another, quite literally, and procreate through a cycle that doesn’t require the presence or insertion of the male reproductive organ.

As an effect, Stoker’s text would seem to recognize the mother/child relationship as primary, one that “threatens, [and] perhaps even disrupts patriarchy because it insists on an alliance of mother and child that is originary, more important than the child’s relation with the father” (Doane and Hodges 423).³⁴ Yet, because Stoker concludes his text by having a gang of men hunt and obliterate the “matriarch,” the text does not necessarily maintain this feminist community. Instead, the text exemplifies the late-nineteenth century male fear of the “New Woman,” a label given to middle-class
feminists who broke away from the archetypal role of the oppressed, domestic woman and became aware of their sexual and professional potential. Moreover, she represented the Victorian cultural male defense against the empowered “abject” female. Stoker’s notion of vampirism reiterates this fear of the New Woman “as a danger to the status quo: ruthless, promiscuous, and uncontrollable” (Ellmann xxv).35 Like the New Woman, Dracula (and her female victims) are ruthless (deadly), promiscuous (lesbian)36 and uncontrollable (can only be stopped by slaughter). In the case of Stoker’s monster, the New Woman is demonized, and her proliferation of this lesbian community is transcribed as a vampiric, gruesome exploitation and victimization of the domestic female ideal.

In line with the “danger” that Victorian society assumed the New Woman to pose, Stoker’s characters react to this vampiric image of “her” in horror and sickness. This parodied feminist community, maintained solely through figurative homosexual acts, so terrifies its bystanders that they cannot recognize it for what it is. This inability for society to recognize that which it fears, recalls Franco Moretti’s suggestion that

*Dracula*, written in the same year that saw Freud begin his self-analysis, is a refined attempt by the nineteenth-century mind not to recognize itself. This is symbolized by the character who--already in the grip of fear--finds himself by chance in front of a mirror. He looks at it and jumps: in the mirror is a reflection of his face. But the reader's attention is immediately distracted: the fear does not come from his having seen his *own* image, but from the fact that the *vampire* is not reflected in the mirror. Finding himself face to face with the simple, terrible truth, the author--and with him the character and the reader--draws back in horror. (87)
Drawing from Moretti’s explanation, we can consider that Stoker vampirizes this autonomous, erotic, matriarchal “woman” as a way of masking the social fear of the New Woman. “She” represents such a real threat to the homogeny of the Victorian patriarchy that she is deemed a horrid vampiric abnormality, and is cast as unrecognizable. Dracula’s multiplicity throughout the text is a testimony to the social inability to define her. She is “the wolf or bat” (351), the cadaver, the “faint vapour” (282), the “panther” (305), embodying many forms. The horrifying uncertainty Jonathan expresses when he first confronts this “foul thing” (284) further exemplifies this incredulity: “…in a sea of wonders I doubt; I fear; I think strange things which I dare not confess to my own soul” (18). This incapacity to classify Dracula, combined with the inability “to repress a shudder” (18), reinforces the notion that what society fears, the autonomous woman, is veiled and demonized so as to justify the horror it produces. These men “attempt…not to recognize” (Moretti 442) the rampant feminine desire that “Dracula” masks. Instead, they “draw back in horror” (442), and as a way of dissolving their fear, aim to obliterate that which they deem threatening – just as the subject responds to the abject: “apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects” (Powers 1).

Although their desire to annihilate Dracula is shrouded as an attempt to save Mina from “the monster” (Stoker 49), these men are, on the one hand, quite possibly trying to save woman from woman – from her own sexuality (a re-reading of the oedipal constructs where they try to save themselves from “the father”). Thus, the text could be read as a parabolic rescue of beautiful wom(e)n from the threat of lesbianism. Alternatively, Jonathan and crew may very well be trying to kill the “monstrous woman” as a way of preserving the patriarchy. Kristeva explains in Black Sun (1987) that “for
man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the \textit{sine qua non} condition of our individuation” (38). As Oliver further elucidates, “in order to become subjects (within a patriarchal culture) we must abject the maternal body” (3). Thus, once we are given the opportunity to read as a woman – and thus read Dracula as a woman – we might then read the murder of her as a form of “matricide” that the Gang must perform in order to preserve their own subjectivity (as men) in a patriarchal culture.

In either case, when approaching the text through the abject, we are able to, for the first time, consider the text as “women.” As a result, we find that Dracula does not necessarily represent the ultimate “father” who wants women for himself, but instead signifies the male fear of becoming obsolete and the terror of potential lesbian sexual autonomy. The “monstrous women” (111) Craft spoke of are no longer limited to Dracula’s victims. In reading through abjection, Dracula “herself” may even be read as a woman – albeit a monstrous woman – and her victims are no more “monstrous women” then they are “heterosexual displacements …[of] demonic heterosexuality” (Craft 111). Instead, the “vampirization” of these women represents the very \textit{real} fear of the dissolution of patriarchy into an edifice that women can exclusively maintain… an ideal community where “she” may thrive – powerful and sexually fulfilled – without the need for or the want of the male, or his (now powerless) penis.
CONCLUSION

To return to the question I raised in the introduction of this thesis: what is it about Kristeva’s theory that, when applied, seems to translate into textual interpretations that shift power from a text’s men to its women? Is the theory really inherently empowering for women?

The fact that Kristeva suggests that her theory is not intended as feminist complicates such questions, as it seems one might logically conclude that any theory that debunks male-centered psychoanalytic constructs is fundamentally and inherently affirming for women, and thereby feminist. That said, Kristeva defies the purpose she sets for herself of escaping Lacanian and Freudian models by thwarting attempts of other critics to classify her theory as feminist. Nonetheless, it seems that from the application of her concepts of abjection and signification to the texts I have covered, we might conclude that on some level, her work does support feminist models of thought. By reading through abjection, the women of Garcia, Rossetti and Stoker are stronger, and the men are left in the background, their necessity called into question. Thus, although the intention of Kristeva’s theory is nebulous, a very clear framework is constantly created through its application – a framework that doesn’t assume the primacy of male…everything.

Arguably, none of the texts I have interpreted is inherently empowering for women. Through the inclusion of such menacing acts as rape, miscarriage, death, and exploitation, Dreaming in Cuban acknowledges the threat of patriarchy as it still exists,
and the detrimental effects it can have on the female. In *Goblin Market*, Rossetti returns us to an Edenic garden where two women replace the Adam/Eve scenario and reiterate the desperate desire for the “forbidden fruit.” In this case, the fruit is held by “goblin men,” and the desire and fall still belong to the women (just as the original fall belonged to Eve/woman). In *Dracula*, it is likewise the women who are subjugated, as they are lured to the chest and throat of the monster, and then live in a sort of demonic, liminal state between life and death. These customary interpretations of the women as “fallen” are nestled quite nicely inside patriarchal conventions – where we read primarily as men. Once we try to understand these texts through the abject, however, we come to new conclusions. Through the vast efforts of Lourdes and Felicia and the triumph of Pilar, we learn that women – in the face of subjugation, exploitation and abjection – can rise above that subversion and gain autonomy, if only through spiritual and artistic expression. Through Lizzie and Laura, we can reinterpret the fall as a means of resurrection and purification that results in a meta-aware maternal liberation. Re-reading *Dracula* releases us from the “male gaze,” enabling us to reinvestigate the sex of Stoker’s monster, and in so doing, leaves us with the possibility that the monster is, after all, female. Thus, not only have we stripped Dracula of “his” masculine guise, but we have, in each of these reinterpretations, stripped this same guise – that of masculine reader – from our own reading personas.

So, as I interrogate what may finally be “triumphant” about the application of Kristeva’s theory, I come to the following conclusions. First, on some level, the kinds of female communities these texts project in light of the abject – ones in which the male is not requisite in order to procreate – are the “ultimate” achievement (according to some
proponents of feminism) in undoing patriarchal conventions. Kristeva argues in *About Chinese Women* that woman must refuse the dilemma that patriarchy poses for female identity:

If a woman identifies with the mother, she ensures her exclusion from and marginality in relation to the patriarchal order. If, on the other hand, she identifies with the father... then she ends up becoming ‘him’ and supporting the same patriarchal order which excludes and marginalizes her as a woman. (‘Feminism and the Politics of Marginality’ 1)

Thus, we should acknowledge that these critical analyses have resulted in our capacity to recognize the very real (male) fear of the dissolution of patriarchy into a female-exclusive, idealized community where “she” may thrive – powerful and sexually fulfilled and capable of bearing a child without the necessity of the penis.

Second, Kristeva unravels the socially constructed virgin/whore binary, and in effect, posits a space where both can exist at once. Laura serves as a good example of how the application of the abject allows us to collapse this binary, as she does not exclusively exist as one or the other. When Laura hands her golden lock over to the goblin men, she gives up a token of herself, emblematic of the loss of virginity. Likewise, when she shares the life-giving juices with her sister, she engages in another act representative of sexual exchange. But as she is never literally deflowered, she exists in a sort of liminal space between chaste virgin and despoiled whore. Further complicating this issue, in the exchange of liquids that preserve her, she is reborn as “baby,” and rises into the role of mother. Thus, Laura represents not only the dissolution of the binary between virgin and whore, but that of mother/child. As a representation of
all of these at once, Laura disintegrates the boundary between the maternal and that
virgin/whore binary (where mother cannot be a virgin, but neither should she be a
whore). Like Laura, Mina also assumes each of these roles. Although Mina is seduced
by Dracula while still a virgin, the ensuing transmission is symbolic of a sex act that
transforms and resurrects her (as abject). As a result, Mina is demonized and becomes
desperate to satiate her own “sexual” appetite (as transfusion is symbolic of sex) that
likewise positions Mina as embodying the virgin, the whore, the mother, and the baby in
a single space. Thus, each of these women speaks to the sameness that transcends these
patriarchal constructed “poles” of femininity. The abject erases separate female
identities; no longer must she be classified into one of these categories, but she is herself
– a woman who can be any and/or all of these things at once.

Finally, Kristeva has arguably given us a solution to her complaint – which she
articulated in such texts as “Stabat Mater” [1977], Tales of Love, and Desire in Language
[1977] – that “we don’t have adequate discourses of maternity” (Oliver 2). As these
interpretations have acknowledged, Kristeva’s theory not only gives us an apt “discourse
of maternity,” but a way by which to read as women. This sort of possibility seems to be
an answer to Patrocinio P. Schweickart’s complaint regarding the traditional androcentric
readings that both women and men are trained to perform: “feminist inquiry into the
activity of reading begins with the realization that the literary canon is androcentric, and
that this has a profoundly damaging effect on women readers” (Schweickart). In other
words, androcentric expectations tend to bleed into readings by women of women-
centered texts (e.g. Dreaming in Cuban and Goblin Market). Kristeva has not only
specifically acknowledged the problem Schweickart highlights, but has ultimately
mapped out space for gynocentric readings to occur for those readers interested in the reoccurrence of psychological and psychoanalytical motifs (growth, repression) that are not founded upon the Freudian and Lacanian models. These archetypes are problematic if we want to read as women, and Kristeva allows a lens through which we can peer as a way of stripping the masculine gaze and viewing texts as women.

So, yes, the application of Kristeva’s theory is triumphant for women. But let us not overlook what we have been left with – in terms of the specific texts I have discussed. Note that these texts do not empower women in the presence of men. Instead, these women apparently erase men as a way of affirming themselves – Pilar, both through masturbation and by assuming the mantle of Saint Barbara; Lizzie and Laura as representative of the cyclical time of sisters & mothers that exist in the space of the symbolic; and Dracula by becoming open to the possibility of being a “woman.” As Kristeva posits, however, erasing men cannot be the answer: “[women] must uphold… sexual difference within the patrilinear frame” and rise above the confines of patriarchal constructs that have long repressed them (“Feminism and…” 1). Thus, these texts may have allowed women to read as women, but by erasing men, they have not necessarily found a true source of empowerment. Furthermore, even in their construction of these female-sustained communities, these women have been abjectified (see Garcia and Rossetti) and even reduced to monsters (Stoker) in order to achieve this “ideal.”

In order to truly empower women characters and their reader-counterparts, we must ultimately find a way to read as women and seek power in a community where both sexes coexist without the resulting subversion of women. In “Women’s Time” Kristeva
clarifies her interest in the “space” of the woman, and the possibility of motherhood as one “for fulfillment” (206). Although fundamentally liberating, transcending female-ascribed binaries and creating the space for us to read as women is simply a “roadmap.” Kristeva has provided us with the necessary tool to find true empowerment. Now, as women, we must find our own way to balance the phallus and the chora – all in women’s time.\textsuperscript{37}
Notes

1 Signifier and signified are terms Lacan borrows from Saussure’s linguistic theory, in which the “signifier” is the acoustic or graphic image that represents a concept (signified).

2 In her essay “Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me,” Leila Silvana May asserts that “In ‘Goblin Market’ there appear to be no mothers and no brothers, only sisters and daughters” (136).

3 See the image of Dante Rossetti’s representation of the Goblin Men as entrapped in a bubble.

Figure 1 - (Detail) D. G. Rossetti, illustration from the 1865 London 2nd edition of Goblin Market and Other Poems published by Macmillan.

4 Freud viewed the female organ as insignificant – a warped reflection of the castrated male. In her state of castration, the female is accordingly forced to endure life in a perpetual state of penis-envy and is thus considered to be the lesser sex. Aiming to unravel this patriarchal archetype, in her text The Sex Which is Not One, feminist Luce Irigaray argues that women are not defined by lack, but by multiplicity (breasts, clitoris, etc.). Irigaray defines the sexuality of the female “always at least double…it is plural” (353). This notion of female plurality ‘inverts’ the balance of power, whereby males have a sex that is one, and females, a sex that is “more or less everywhere” (353).

5 This is a key point because Kristeva is explicitly interested throughout many of her texts (i.e. “Women’s Time”) in the idea of the woman’s ability to accept her role as mother and the possibility that this maternal role may very well be “the key to social change” (“Feminism and the Politics of Marginality” 2).

6 Kristeva makes this comment in response to a question about whether or not she would classify one of her novels as fundamentally feminist. As Kelly Oliver further reaffirms, Kristeva “does not refer to her own writing as feminist.”

7 Klein’s comment on female anxiety was taken from an earlier essay titled “The Effects of Early Anxiety Situations on the Sexual Development of the Girl” which she wrote in 1932. Klein is specifically interested in the idea that “the first external source of eternal anxiety can be found in the experience of birth” (61) – [1952] – an idea Kristeva later picks up as the foundation for much of her theory.
For further discussion of the monstrous woman and/or what has been classified as feminine images of the grotesque, see Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque*. Russo establishes "The images of the grotesque body [as] precisely those which are abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics" (8).

We should also note that in terms of patriarchal constructs of sex (male possession of the female) that by causing what Kristeva terms “the repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away” (2), Lourdes’s rape focuses our attention upon what has been lost: the male presence (vanquished through fetal death). In terms of Kristeva, this loss “transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance” (Kristeva 15), because the abjected subject is able to “mark out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as alter ego, points it out to me through loathing…. I experience abjection only if an Other… not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be” (10). In other words, through this “possession” by an Other, woman can symbolically, if not literally, rise up in defense of the importance of her womb. As a result, the rape is ultimately self-retributive. This semblance of the fetal cadaver transforms these abject images of defilement into an ironic shift in control. Although the male (rapist/dead baby) attempts to make the female subject to abjection, he ultimately awakens her to her own capacity to cleanse her chora, and as a result, resurrect herself anew.

Kristeva deems any fluid that is expelled from the orifices of the body as a juice that defiles and abjectifies.

Kristeva provides an explanation for the corpse as a representation of the abject: “Contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes, what goes out of the body, out of its pores and opening, point to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection. Fecal matter signifies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become autonomous, distinct from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it. That is the price the body must pay if it is to become clean and proper… but it is the corpse that takes on the abjection” (Powers 109).

Lourdes and Felicia both reverse the paradigms of patriarchal sex by taking on the role of the possessor during their sexual relations. (Recall Lourdes’s incessant need for and fatiguing of Rufino, and how she determined when and what the sex would be. Recall also Felicia’s use of sex to lure and kill Otto, or to reduce Ernesto back to an infantile state). Pilar fully excludes patriarchal conventions by being the first to discover that she does not need the “one” sex organ of penis for pleasure. Revering the insurmountable pleasure of the plural female, in what may be its ideal form, she experiences her single-handed orgasm (absent male contact) which she deems “great” and likens to “little explosions on a string” (27). Pilar’s masturbatory act exemplifies the female plurality that Irigaray envisioned: “the pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute to woman’s pleasure” (353). Ultimately, Pilar’s supine position in the tub, as the water falls upon her and she “moves her hips just right” to the manipulation of her own fingers, aligns her with Irigaray’s vision of “the only sex.” Pilar’s ability to overcome male-dominant sex and experience pleasure without male presence grants her a type of dominion unfamiliar to her female elders. For the first time, the dispensable sex has become the male sex, and the female is left pleased and safe, sanctified in her ability to reach the semiotic through her own artistic talent.
Less than a handful of articles have been written that focus specifically on the body in *Goblin Market*: Kathy Alexis Psomiades’s “Whose Body?: Christina Rossetti and Aestheticist Femininity” (1999), Mary Wilson Carpenter’s “‘Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me’: The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*” (1991), and Kathryn Burlinson’s “‘All Mouth and Trousers’: Christina Rossetti’s Grotesque and Abjected Bodies” (1999). Of these only Carpenter’s “Eat Me” focuses explicitly on *Goblin Market*, and in so doing, she looks at the presence of the female body and appetite, but instead of looking at the raw physicality of the body and its consumption, she suggests that the “poem articulates women’s common vulnerability to sexual and economic exploitation while affirming the bodies and appetites that are implicated in that exploitation” (430). Burlinson’s article gets closer to looking at the physical construction of the body in Rossetti’s works, using theories of the grotesque (Bakhtin) and abject (Kristeva) to define the body, but her focus is on Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses*. In her look at *Speaking Likenesses*, Burlinson uses *Goblin Market* as a means of comparing images of the grotesque: “as well as being identifiable as a work of Victorian fantasy, *Speaking Likenesses*, like *Goblin Market*, draws on the grotesque tradition in its emphasis on carnality, orality and appetite” (292). Having made this comparison, Burlinson then moves on to look at the “distorted, outsized or undersized, deformed or obscene human figures… pertinent to Rossetti’s and Hughes’s most obviously ‘grotesque’ depictions of bodies in *Speaking Likenesses*” (292). In essence, none of these articles looks specifically at the construction of the misshapen bodies of *Goblin Market* as an element of the abject, nor do they consider the presence of defiled food and the effect that food takes upon the grotesque body (unless considering the argument inside the religiously focused, in which Rossetti’s fruit is compared to the forbidden fruit of Eden).

Even critics such as Carpenter who view the “market” as a female exclusive world take the sisters’ implied marriages at the end of the poem to mean that Rossetti ultimately includes men in this female world. Carpenter thus asserts that Rossetti pushes the heterosexual world only “to its margins” (430). Casey uses this assumed shift at the end to support her claims that reading the poem as excluding the male or reading the male as predominantly evil is a mistake. In either case, critics of Rossetti’s work seem to have taken this assumption of marriage for granted.

The abjectification of the body by despoiled food here is reminiscent of the *filth* that penetrated and desecrated Lourdes via rape.

Criticism of the poem has often looked at the identity of the sisters as shared, suggesting that Rossetti blends the physical borders and even social roles between them to suggest that the “girls represent two halves of one personality” (Casey 67). In disputing this claim, Casey first recalls the passage that critics have used to validate this blended identity, in which the girls share “domestic activities” (67): “Laura rose with Lizzie:/ Fetched in honey; milked in cows,/ Aired and set to rights the house/ …Next churned butter, whipped up cream,/ Fed their poultry, sat and sewed;/ Talked as modest maidens should” (Rossetti 167). Casey further illustrates the sisters’ physical closeness; as they fall asleep, their bodies are entwined: “Golden head by golden head,/ …Folded in each other’s wings” (167). Yet Casey asserts that despite this blending of their identities, “it is more correct to view them as two distinct individuals who are equally incomplete…each lack[ing] the trait that is dominant in the other” (68). Reading the text through the lens of abject theory opens up room for both of these views of the poem.

Burlinson makes this claim in using Kristeva and Bakhtin to look at Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses*.
This image of woman as shut off from the male, in which the male is obsolete is elucidated by Dante’s illustration of the text, depicting the goblin men as enclosed in a bubble, encaged in a world apart from the female. See figure included in Note 2.

19 *OED*, “wife” (n., 2a)

20 *Ibid* (n, 1a)

21 Qtd. *OED*, “wife” (n., 1a)

22 *Ibid* (n, 1c)

Carpenter agrees with this reading, suggesting that the sisters’ “pain,” or as I maintain, their abjection, “seems always to originate from the ‘goblin merchant me’” (429).

24 See, for example, Ernest Jones’s *On the Nightmare*.

In his essay “Recent Studies in Nineteenth Century,” Galperin’s discussion of Stoker as a participant in “the backlash” is attributed to a reading by David Glover in his text *Vampires, Mummies, and Liberals: Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction* (1996).

26 Critics such as Craft and Kathleen L. Spencer have mentioned anxiety about the New Woman, but typically equate it with Lucy rather than Dracula.

This image of Dracula entombed recalls Holbein’s *Dead Christ in the Tomb* (See Figure 3 below) which “depicts a rotting corpse, appearing to be Christ, but in an uncharacteristic form: decaying on the draped slab of a desolate tomb – his fingers bony, green, some clenched… mouth agape, eyes rolled up into the head, the man’s face bespeaks aggrieved resignation to an excruciating end” (Covino 15). In her discussion of Holbein’s image – one that captivated Kristeva – Deborah Covino deems the picture as one “of abjection in its barest form, a picture of common, ugly mortality” (12). In her interview with Ayerza, Kristeva acknowledges that she is “very interested” in Holbein’s *Dead Christ* – so much so that the image she has selected for the cover of *Black Sun* is “a child in one of Holbein's paintings” (Ayerza 4).

![FIGURE 3, Holbein’s Dead Christ in the Tomb (1521-1522)](image)

28 Although Dracula is largely referred to as “he” throughout the text, instances arise in which Seward, Mina, Jonathan, etc. refer to Dracula as not “he,” but “it.” This contradiction supports the notion of Dracula’s sexual/gender ambiguity, especially since it would have been common in the nineteenth century for an “it” to be assigned the gender of “he.”
Irigaray’s re-characterization of Freud’s notion of the ‘powerful’ penis proves particularly useful in considering the sex and power of Stoker’s monster.

Note that Craft’s inclination to read this scene as “fellatio” as opposed to “cunnilingus” suggests his own investment in psychoanalytic, androcentric reading tendencies – especially in terms of Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich* (the unhomely, the uncanny, ultimately the repressed fear of female genitalia – first explained in his essay “The Uncanny” [1919]). Because the slit more likely denotes the vagina, it is interesting that many *male* readers have likened the sucking from the slit as fellatio.

Recall Irigaray’s discussion of the female as *plural*.

The act of cunnilingus can, of course, be performed by a male, but in this case, the text seems to point to the possibility of a homosexual cunnilingual encounter.

Mina’s consumption of and subsequent contamination by Dracula’s blood recalls Laura’s consumption of the goblin juices – as in both cases the nectar is a defiling element that abjectifies the women and leaves them in an impure, abject state.

In their article “Undoing Feminism…,” Doane and Hodges consider how gothic fiction, specifically Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*, represents the mother. Within their discussion, they briefly recall an unpublished paper given by William Veeder at the 1986 MLA Convention. Doane and Hodges allude to Veeder’s reading of Stoker, who he says, “like Freud, tells a tale about male conflict to screen a more threatening preoedipal drama in which the mother is all too powerful” (423) as a way of introducing similar ideas in Rice’s texts. For these critics, Stoker’s *Dracula* is “the popular Victorian antecedent to Rice’s books” (423).


This idea of the vampiric exchange as a type of lesbian encounter is even more interesting when we consider the suppressed homoerotic desire that exists between Lucy and Mina in the text.

Ultimately Kristeva’s theory is also useful on a pedagogical level. We often teach from an atomic list of texts that are arbitrarily connected and for which, as a result, we can never provide full context (cultural, historical, philosophical). Abject theory makes for a fine pedagogical tool in that it makes sensible and illuminating connections between texts that might not otherwise be easy to connect on a pedagogical level.
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