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Cristina Salcedo

"Victorian Fantasy: A Comparative Analysis of George MacDonald and Christina Rossetti"

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Abstract: Además de caracterizarse por numerosos progresos científicos y tecnológicos, la época victoriana fue también un momento de injusticias y desigualdades sociales. Ante la opresión y el exceso de confianza en la razón como única forma de interpretar el mundo, muchos autores recurrieron a la fantasía como medio a través del cual relacionarse con esta realidad convulsa y cambiante. La comparación de las obras de George MacDonald (*Lilith* y *Phantastes*), y Christina Rossetti ('Goblin Market'), permitirá ilustrar dos diferentes usos sociales de lo fantástico victoriano: la instrucción moral y la crítica social, por un lado, y la subversión, por otro. A través de estos dos ejemplos se mostrará cómo, lejos de constituir un modo de escapismo, la literatura fantástica victoriana adquiere un carácter subversivo (en el sentido en que lo han interpretado autoras como Irene Bessiere y Rosemary Jackson), y llega a ser empleada como crítica social. Se observará cómo ambos autores recurren a la liminalidad de lo fantástico, que apunta al carácter fronterizo y marginal del género. Al servicio de esta liminalidad se encuentran motivos como el espejo y la puerta, que, gracias a

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su poderosa simbología, desarrollan una larga tradición en la literatura fantástica. Esta comparación, finalmente, ayudará a demostrar cómo en muchas ocasiones los diferentes usos subversivos de lo fantástico se nutren de las mismas estrategias literarias.

Keywords: literatura fantástica, época victoriana, George MacDonald, Christina Rossetti, comparatismo.

Cristina SALCEDO GONZÁLEZ

Victorian Fantasy: A Comparative Analysis of George MacDonald and Christina Rossetti

0. Introduction

Over the last two hundred years fantasy has shown the way towards new forms of thinking, feeling and imagining. It has created other worlds by which we have been able to hold a mirror to the inscrutable and more tenebrous sides of our own, and see reflected perplexing mysteries not otherwise to be detected at any rate. Following the reflections of the professor Stephen Prickett, 'it is well for the soul to contemplate as in a picture the image of a larger and better world, lest the mind, habituated to the small concerns of daily life, sink entirely into trivial thinking' (2005: 2). The fantastic created this larger and better world. In this essay, I intend to provide a general overview of the role that fantastic elements play in the writing of the High Victorian period. In order to achieve this, I will analyse some of the most significant factors that led to the proliferation of fantastic literature in the late nineteenth century and compare the works of George MacDonald (*Phantastes*, 1858, and *Lilith*, 1895) and Rossetti ('Goblin Market', 1862) in an attempt to reveal two different social uses of Victorian fantasy: while George MacDonald deploys fantasy as a tool for moral instruction and social criticism, Christina Rossetti uses fantasy as a means of subverting reality. The comparative analysis will illustrate how, far from being a way of escapism, Victorian fantasy plays a subversive role—in the sense in which authors such as Irene Bessiere in her study *The Fantasy Tale, the Poetry of the Uncertain* (1974) and Rosemary Jackson in her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981) have interpreted it—and is eventually deployed as a tool for social criticism¹. We will also examine how both authors resort to the liminality of the fantastic, which highlights the marginal and cross-border nature of the genre. This liminality is represented by the motifs of the mirror and the door, whose powerful symbolism (see Theodore Ziolkowski's *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology*, 1977) has helped create a long tradition in fantasy literature (remember the central role that these elements play in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass* and C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*). Finally, this comparison will illustrate how different subversive uses of the fantastic draw on the same literary strategies.

1. The emergence of fantasy: leading factors

High Victorian Fantasy arises from social disillusionment and discontent, providing sensible social and cultural criticism combined efficaciously with visionary constructs of a future society in which the injustices, inequalities and oppressions of the past have been

¹ Other literary critics have previously studied the manner in which fantasy is, throughout the long nineteenth century, employed as a tool for social criticism—i.e. Timothy L. Carens' 'Idolatrous Reading Subversive Fantasy and Domestic Ideology' and Robert T. Tally's *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature: Satire, Fantasy, Critique*. Such studies have served as the theoretical foundation for the present analysis, their methodology and concepts being applied to the literary works that I will be examining in this paper.

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overcome². Far from being escapist, High Victorian fantasy confronts readers with harrowing truths about the repressive social and intellectual conditions of Victorianism, thus jeopardising the sustaining pillars of the Victorian social order. Following the reflections of the fantasy author Le Guin, adults are afraid of fantasy because they know that 'its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phoney, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living' (1979: 44). Fantasy is also conceived as the reaction to the excess of rationalism and unambiguous interpretation of reality³. Therefore, the incorporation of fantasy as a structuring element of the world involves some transgression of the schemes of conventional logic and, at the same time, enables the examination of what is possible and real. According to Rosemary Jackson (1981: 58), 'the fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced invisible made, covered over and made 'absent''.

It is of interest to point out that a parallelism can be observed between the appearance of the Gothic genre in the mid-eighteenth century and the emergence of Fantasy literature in the late nineteenth-century. Throughout the eighteenth century the excess of rationalism eventually resulted in a profound interest for the supernatural, which is represented in Gothic literature. High Victorian Fantasy, drawing on the Romantic dissatisfaction with the rational explanation of the world, was established as an alternative to realistic fiction, performing, in addition, an important social function (Houghton, 1957: 31). As a result, magical and supernatural novels such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which had been condemned by notable authorities such as Rousseau⁴, were rediscovered in the Victorian era as a fountain of spiritual insight in what Carlyle criticised as a 'mechanical' (1870: 150) and 'prudential' (1870: 162) age. Subsequently, Victorian fantasy constituted a prolific art form that flourished in opposition to the mainstream of realistic fiction, achieving 'a kind of separate existence, an autonomy, even a "real life" of its own' (Prickett, 2005: 6). Writers such as Christina Rossetti, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald and Rudyard Kipling deployed a great variety of non-realistic techniques—dreams, nonsense, visions—in an attempt to extend the understanding of this world and gain an insight into the richness and complexity of human experience. Fantasy, being the most philosophic form of fiction, offered the Victorian authors a unique opportunity to express their deepest dreams and most compelling ideas.

2. George MacDonald. Fantasy as a tool for social criticism and moral instruction

George MacDonald's adult fairy-stories *Phantastes* and *Lilith* constitute two paradigmatic examples of High Victorian fantasy literature. Such fantasy novels emerged from the author's personal anxieties and preoccupations in a period of social repression, lack of moral values and constant fears for the fate of the Victorian community⁵. Not only was MacDonald

² Stephen Prickett in his *Victorian fantasy*—a book that remains one of the most authoritative studies of the emergence of fantasy as a distinct genre of literature in the nineteenth century—establishes that social dissatisfaction constitutes one of the most significant factors that contributed to the surfacing of Fantasy literature in the second half of the nineteenth century (2005: 12-13).

³ It is interesting to note that the excess of rationalism also justified the appearance of the Gothic genre in the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, as stated by Prickett, High Victorian Fantasy was deeply influenced by the idea of the "Gothick" (2005: 13).

⁴ In his 'Essay on the Origins of Languages and Writings Related to Music' (1781), Rousseau postulated that writing was perverse, a product of civilization, a treacherous addendum to natural speech 'to embellish, to fictionalize, to dress up the original, natural truth detaches human beings from a happier existence' (2009: 86).

⁵ Numerous historians regard the Victorian period as a time of many contradictions. This can be illustrated with the widespread cultivation of an external appearance of dignity and restraint combined with the pervasiveness of high rates of prostitution, child labour and crime. Further, the culture of the commodity became deeply rooted in Victorian England, thus originating an unbridgeable gulf between social classes. For more information on these issues, see Gordon Marsden's *Victorian Values*:

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discontent with the economic materialism that had overtaken the nineteenth-century society, but he was also at odds with the determinism of Calvinist theology⁶. In fact, he advocated for a Goddess who would maternally protect all Her children and redeem even the heathen. As a consequence of his ideas, his already meagre salary was significantly reduced by a wealthy Church Board which was offended by his 'heresy' that salvation would be extended to the heathen (Wolff, 1961: 372). These circumstances underlie the development of his fiction; a fiction that is built around the experiences of his own life and the numerous preoccupations that disturbed him.

The fantasy novel *Lilith* constitutes a model example of MacDonald's use of fantasy as a tool for social criticism. *Lilith* narrates the story of a young student, Mr Vane, who is led by Mr Raven, a birdlike entity, into a mirror-world. Mr Raven invites Mr Vane to die the good death, that is, to renounce the narcissistic, avaricious Self and surrender control of his autonomy to God. On a social level, 'good death' involves renouncing the greed, acquisitiveness and avarice which defined Victorian capitalism. In his exploration of the Other World, Mr Vane finds that the power-hungry Lilith rules Bulika, a city of stagnation and moral depravity whose equivalent in the real world is the Victorian society. The angel-vampire Lilith is a capitalist who perverts the values of her people forcing them to 'give up tillage and pasturage and build a city' (MacDonald, 1964: 74). Other fantasy creatures such as the giants and the Little Ones contribute to the foundation of the fantasy world of Bulika. Notwithstanding the apparent remoteness of such world, the reader is able to recognise correspondences with the Victorian reality since, as Le Guin (1979: 50) has suggested, by locating essential truths in Bulika the very presence of dissimilarities awakens readers to essential similarities⁷. In addition, behind the imagery of a story so detached from real life, the author feels free to preach his sermon: if a new social order is to be ushered in by those who—like Lilith—refuse to die the good death, tyranny will again prevail over justice; therefore, Victorian society must be in charge of those who vow their entire lives to God. In summary, the fantasy novel *Lilith* constitutes a paradigmatic example of fantasy as a projection of MacDonald's concerns about the real world.

MacDonald deeply believed in the potential of fantasy to fill with magical and divine plenitude the emptiness and disillusionment of an age haunted by the pressures of Victorian materialism. Following the author's own reflections, 'there is always more in a work of art than the producer himself perceived while he produced it'; therefore, it seems reasonable to attribute to it 'a larger origin than the man alone—to say at last, that the inspiration of the Almighty shaped its ends' (MacDonald, 1989: 15). MacDonald goes on to assert that by searching for the words, the symbols, the parables that the Lord has placed in every work of art, human beings would find spiritual solace and consolation in an age of darkness (MacDonald, 1989: 20). In the magic library of the mysterious palace, the protagonist of *Phantastes*, Anodos, scrutinises 'the great old volume' (MacDonald, 1964: 65) for something deeper and immutable that underlies it. Likewise, the Victorian reader is encouraged to scan MacDonald's fairy-stories in an attempt to gain an insight into nature, into truth, into God. MacDonald's fantasies were not attempts to "escape" reality but he was asking readers to look deeply into his world to realise the eternal through the temporal or, as he says, to think things 'as God thinks them' (1996: 27). The only proper vehicle for seeing the eternal

Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth Century Society and Thomas Richards' *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*.

⁶ Calvinism, also commonly known as Reformed theology, was anchored in five basic premises, namely 'Total depravity', 'Unconditional election', 'Limited atonement', 'Irresistible grace' and 'Perseverance of the Saints'. For a more thorough account of the foundation and development of Calvinist theology, see John H. Leith's *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community* (1980).

⁷ Bulika is a remote, fantasy world; however, the existence of essential similarities between such fantasy world and the Victorian society, namely the capitalist values under which Bulika is ruled, allows the reader to recognise correspondences with the Victorian reality.

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through the temporal is the imagination, which for MacDonald is the best guide one may have:

For it is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us the most powerfully; undefined, yet vivid visions of something beyond, something which eye has not seen nor ear heard, have far more influence than any logical sequences whereby the same things may be demonstrated by the intellect (1996: 28).

Accordingly, from MacDonald's perspective, fantasy becomes the instrument through which human beings approach God.

3. Christina Rossetti. The subversive facet of fantasy

Literary fantasies are free from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts. Following the reflections of the critic Rosemary Jackson, fantasy is a mode that has 'refused to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with (...) rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death' (1981: 1). Fantasy literature is thus characterised by an overt infringement of long-established rules and conventions (Jackson, 1981: 1). In the words of Rosemary Jackson, literary fantasies 'open up for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems' (1981: 1).

Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' was part of a new tendency of fairy tales that emerged in the latter half of the century. As Irene Bessiere has claimed, these innovative, aesthetically sophisticated fantasies are 'situated in a relation of opposition to dominant orders' since they explore the 'unseen of culture' (1974: 50). 'Goblin Market' is a transgressive poem that subverts the Victorian cultural code by constructing a fantasy world in which women are not circumscribed strictly to the domestic sphere. Rossetti scrutinizes women's relationship to the marketplace in order to subsequently outline, in fantastic terms, a female economics. Following the line of reasoning of the literary critic Elizabeth Campbell, the subversive power of fantasy is skillfully exploited in 'Goblin Market' as a means of enhancing 'the vital socioeconomic function of women despite their marginalisation by the Victorian market economy' (1990: 394).

Rossetti in 'Goblin Market' creates a whimsical, fairy-tale world that is simultaneously seductive and alienating. Because of the apparent aloofness of such world, Rossetti has the possibility to explore real life issues and create alternatives in a freer way. The facility of rhyme and rhythm and the closing moral seem to define the poem as a children's song; nevertheless, the poem questions dominant assumptions, threatening to undermine Victorian rules and conventions. Its subversive power rests in its forging a reality in which women are not confined to the domestic sphere. Even though such economic world happens to be brutal and ferocious, the fact that Rossetti earnestly contemplates the possibility of its becoming a viable life option for women is subversive in its own right. In this sense, the poem presents itself as a force for change.

'Goblin Market' tells the story of an encounter between sisters Laura and Lizzie and evil goblin merchants. When Laura exchanges a lock of her golden hair for the chance to taste the goblins' forbidden fruit, she starts to languish. Her sister Lizzie offers to pay the goblins 'a silver penny' for more fruit, which she hopes will act as an antidote to Laura's malady. The goblins violently attack Lizzie in a vain attempt to make her eat. After the goblins are dilapidated by her resistance, Lizzie returns home, and Laura kisses the juices from her sister's face and is eventually restored. When Lizzie and Laura step from home into the market, they cross a long-time established boundary separating moral from economic space, private from public, and, most importantly, female from male. Laura's dearth of understanding of the rules of the market ultimately conduces to her making a fatal mistake: she lends a part of herself—becoming thus a commodity—in pursuance of the fulfillment of her desire to taste the goblins' fruit. The problem lies in that, as Elizabeth Helsinger (1991: 906) has suggested, the commodification of Laura's body only reinforces the traditional

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assumption that 'women like money, represent a power properly belonging to masculinity and are the objects, not the agents of exchange'. After having tasted the goblin fruits, Laura is no longer interested in the domestic tasks and all her thoughts are directed towards obtaining more fruit. However, notwithstanding her continuous loitering at the riverbank, the goblins do not return to her since they have already attained what they desired from her. Slowly, Laura, decimated by 'passionate yearning' (l. 266) and 'balked desire' (l. 267), begins to deteriorate.

It is only due to her concern about Laura's languishing state that Lizzie decides to approach the goblins. Unlike Laura, Lizzie makes sure to bring money with her: she has learnt from her sister's fall that one must not 'pay too dear' (l. 311), that is, offer oneself as money. When Lizzie extends the goblins her 'penny' (l. 367) and declares her intentions, they do not accept it but endeavour to convince Lizzie to purchase on their conditions alone. The goblins—expecting to exploit the ignorance of women—are outwitted by a woman who comprehends the rules of the marketplace as well as they do. Lizzie's understanding of the functioning of the market provides her with the strength to refuse the charm of the marketplace and surmount the goblins' effort to embroil her. Lizzie achieves what she pursues without surrendering to the pressure that a male marketplace exercises on women to become commodities. Ultimately, Lizzie bestows upon Laura the experience that she, in turn, is able to bequeath to her offspring. The message that lies beneath the seemingly innocent fairy tale is highly subversive: women must educate each other as to the rules of the market in a male-dominated consumer economy. The deceptive appearance of 'Goblin Market' as timeless and remote grants Rossetti freedom to reflect upon the fortitude and capability of women in the marketplace, despite patriarchal attempts to retain women within the confines of the home.

4. Liminality and the fantastic: the mirror and the door as thresholds to alternative worlds

The word *liminal* is derived from Latin *limen* meaning "threshold" and has been employed by anthropologists van Gennep and Turner to refer to a 'transitory, in-between state or space', which is characterised by 'indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change' (Turner, 1974: 84; Gennep, 1960: 30-58). As a transitory space, in narrative it is frequently associated with life-changing events or border situations⁸. This liminal, 'third space' constitutes intrinsically uncanny 'alien territory' (Turner, 1974: 56), which creates new meanings, social relations and identities, and also disrupts, challenges and subverts long-established entities and conceptions of the world. In literary fiction, such in-between zones can be represented by physical objects, such as the mirror or the door. In the literary works of this study, both the mirror that transports Mr. Vane to the region of the seven dimensions in George MacDonald's *Lilith* and the door leading to the goblin market in Christina Rossetti's masterpiece are external agents that create liminality. Such physical (and liminal) objects signal the entrance into something ambiguous, indeterminate, enigmatic and obscure, and make possible the transition to the fantastic.

MacDonald's *Lilith* constitutes a paradigmatic example of how a magical mirror positions itself as the physical object that signals the entrance into the fantastic, becoming therefore a symbol in its own right. As the protagonist is ushered into the Region of the Seven Dimensions, the reader is able to establish associations between the fantasy world (inside the mirror) and the Victorian world (outside the mirror). MacDonald's mirror constitutes the threshold that leads the protagonist (and the reader) to an alternative world, being the latter a changed representation of the Victorian world. According to Ziolkowski's reference work, *Disenchanted Images*, 'whereas the catoptronic mirror tends to remain

⁸ This border zone is closely connected to the idea of the "chronotope", a term taken over by Mikhail Bakhtin from 1920s science to describe the manner in which literature represents time and space. Bakhtin developed the term in his 1937 essay published in English as 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel'.

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at the level of a minor motif⁹, the doubling and the penetrable mirror easily develop into symbolic images: of the self and of an alternative world-model' (1977: 163). And in MacDonald's *Lilith* we find an instance of a 'doubling and penetrable mirror'¹⁰, a mirror that, on the one hand, creates a multiplicity of images and, hence, a multiplicity of meanings—images of the self, images of other worlds—and a mirror that grants the entrance into a fantasy world, on the other. Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' also presents, although not explicitly, a threshold to an alternative world. In that world, which had been traditionally thought for men, Rossetti locates women, thereby subverting the social code of the Victorian period. Rossetti makes use of the fantastic to display a world in which women are no longer the objects of transactions, but the people who overlook those transactions. Rossetti uses an external agent that creates liminality, namely the door, to signal the entrance into a subversive world in which women are not circumscribed to the domestic sphere.

As presented in Ziolkowski's study, the doubling mirror, in particular, is susceptible of creating other selves. In other words, not only does the mirror create liminality but it also helps to create duplicity, introducing a double or a *Doppelgänger*¹¹ effect. It is, in fact, a metaphor for the production of other selves. The image beyond the mirror is a reversed reflection of the real world, a sort of negative that highlights the darkest side of the world we live in. The motif of the double gained popularity in the Romantic period and the mirror became the perfect image to explore the newly-discovered unconscious and, along with it, the dark and repressed aspects of the individual self. The growing interest in the *Doppelgänger* effect reveals a society that was highly interested in exploring the individual conscience, which appeared to be far more threatening than external fears, which had kept people awake for decades. The mind was thus conceived as a dangerous force that had the potential to ruin people's lives (see Poe's 'William Wilson'). The fantastic, therefore, helped to explore all these dangers, and warned about them. In summary, both MacDonald in his *Lilith* and Rossetti in her 'Goblin Market' resort to the concept of the threshold and introduce two physical objects, namely the mirror and the door, that signal the entrance into an alternative, transitory, in-between, third space; a space susceptible to subversion and change.

5. Conclusions

As we have observed in the previous analysis, both MacDonald and Rossetti utilize fantasy in an attempt to challenge the reader's construction of the real, endeavoring to deconstruct that reality, realign and reform it. Their dissatisfaction with the Victorian value system impelled them to forge a world of fantasy through which readers could extend and enrich their way of perceiving reality, gaining consciousness thereafter. Both MacDonald and Rossetti exploit the non-mimetic nature of fantasy and create circumstances and characters unimaginable in real life which, nonetheless, remind us of real events and real individuals. Far from being a way of escapism, Victorian fantasy plays a subversive role and is eventually deployed as a tool for social criticism. MacDonald and Rossetti present the fantastic as a tool to face reality; fantasy is thus at the service of the same social function, that is, to confront the reality in which they lived. These authors differ, however, in the manner in which they face reality and in the target of their social criticism. MacDonald employs fantasy both to subvert the prevailing myth of a prosperous capitalist system and to show the way to a better society. In addition, under MacDonald's interpretation, fantasy becomes the vehicle

⁹ That is, at the level of a motif merely appropriated for literary purposes, e.g. to create atmosphere, and which is devoid of a 'deeper meaning' (Ziolkowski, 1977: 168).

¹⁰ According to Ziolkowski's terminology (*Disenchanted Images*, 1977).

¹¹ The *Doppelgänger*, an expression coined by the German writer Jean Paul (*Siebenkäs*, 1796), or 'Double' is a recurrent nineteenth-century motif in Gothic and horror literature ultimately originating from the anthropological belief in an inherent duality in human beings (Ballesteros González, 2009: 264). As stated by Ballesteros González, 'the presence of this second self or *alter ego*, an archetype of otherness and narcissistic specularly indissolubly linked to the individual, haunts innumerable literary works of Gothic and fantasy' (2009: 264).

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through which human beings approach God. Conversely, Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' imaginatively explores traditional notions of female economic submissiveness in order to subsequently propose a new social order in which women preserve their own bodily and economic autonomy. Ultimately, MacDonald and Rossetti's fantasy writings reveal the social and spiritual concerns of a period hallmarked by permanent fears for the fate of the Victorian community. On balance, the discussion of MacDonald and Rossetti's use of fantasy allows us to gain an understanding of the role that fantastic elements play in the writing of the High Victorian period.

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Bioprofile of the autor:

Cristina Salcedo es graduada en Lenguas Modernas Cultura y Comunicación por la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, y actualmente cursa el Máster Universitario en Estudios Literarios y Culturales Británicos y de los Países de Habla Inglesa (Literatura, Cultura, Comunicación y Traducción). Ha sido colaboradora en el proyecto de cooperación interuniversitaria "Superdiversity, multilingualism and the translocalization of higher education: Network trajectories of students in Madrid and Hong Kong", dirigido por la profesora Dra. Luisa Martín Rojo (UAM, curso 2013-2014) y en el proyecto de innovación docente "El aprendizaje interactivo de la literatura a través del espacio Wiki" (Código FyL-L1.10.14), dirigido por la profesora Dra. Ana González-Rivas Fernández (UAM, curso 2014-2015). Su Trabajo de Fin de Grado *Persephone throughout the long 19th century: the evolution of a literary myth*, dirigido por la Dra. Ana González-Rivas Fernández, obtuvo la calificación de Matrícula de Honor. Sus intereses académicos se centran fundamentalmente en los estudios sobre Romanticismo, lo fantástico y la mitología.

Contact: cristina.salcedo@estudiante.uam.es