

## Kubla Khan

By Samuel Taylor Coleridge 1772–1834  
Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.

### Of the Fragment of Kubla Khan<sup>2</sup>

[147] The following fragment<sup>3</sup> is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity,<sup>4</sup> and, as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merits.

In the summer of the year 1797,<sup>5</sup> the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne<sup>6</sup> had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in "Purchas's Pilgrimage":<sup>7</sup> "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall." The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep,<sup>8</sup> at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent [148] expressions, without any sensation of consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!

Then all the charm  
Is broken -- all that phantom-world so fair  
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,  
And each mis-shape's the other. Stay awhile,  
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes--

The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon  
The visions will return! And lo, he stays,  
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms  
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more  
The pool becomes a mirror.<sup>9</sup>

Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him. *Sameron [h]adion asô*:<sup>10</sup> but the to-morrow is yet to come.

As a contrast to this vision, I have annexed a fragment of a very different character, describing with equal fidelity the dream of pain and disease.<sup>11</sup>

(CPW i 295-7)

### Notes

[Click on asterisk (\*) at the end of a note to return to the point you left in Coleridge's text]

1. In 1934 the Marquis of Crewe loaned a manuscript copy of *Kubla Khan* to the National Portrait Gallery in London for a centenary exhibition commemorating Coleridge and Lamb. The manuscript, previously unknown to scholars, was in fact an autograph in STC's handwriting. Since its disclosure in 1934, the Crewe Manuscript (as it has come to be known) has very seriously affected critical assessment of [149] *Kubla Khan* for two reasons: first, it contains a number of variants, some of which are extremely significant, not present in the poem as published in 1816 or thereafter (cf. [Extract 3](#) nn); secondly, it gives a very different and much shorter account than the 1816 Preface of the date and circumstances of the composition of *Kubla Khan*: "This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797". It needs to be added that this statement appears as a *postscript* to the poem in the Crewe Manuscript and not, as in 1816, as a preface introducing it.

A number of scholars have described and discussed the textual variants in the Crewe Manuscript; in addition to Chapter 3 of my [Coleridge Companion](#), see the following: A.D. Snyder, "The Manuscript of *Kubla Khan*," *TLS* (2 August 1934) 541; E.H.W. Meyerstein, "A Manuscript of *Kubla Khan*," *TLS* (12 January 1951) 21; J. Shelton, "The Autograph Manuscript of *Kubla Khan* and an Interpretation," *REL* 7 (1966) 30-42.

In the 1834 edition of STC's poems the title reads: "KUBLA KHAN: Or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment." \*

2. The issue of whether or not *Kubla Khan* is a fragment has been often raised: see, for example, Lowes (1930) 363, 409; House (1953) 114-16; Beer (1959) 275; Schulz (1963) 114. Since the disclosure of the Crewe Manuscript, the relevance and value of the 1816 Preface have been hotly (sometimes acrimoniously) disputed. Lowes (1930) took the Preface at face value, but he was writing before the Crewe Manuscript came to light. Beer, however, writing in 1959 argues that, although the prefatory account "has sometimes been criticized, in substance or in detail," it yet remains true that "the accumulation of various pieces of evidence has tended to confirm many features of it" (200). Bostetter (1963), on the other hand, sees the Preface as "one of [STC's] apologies for uncompleted work" (85); and W.U. Ober summarily dismisses it as a "Coleridgean hoax, albeit a harmless one" ("Southey, Coleridge, and *Kubla Khan*," *JEGP* 58 [1959] 414). In a more positive vein, Chayes (1966) argues that "the 1816 headnote to *Kubla Khan* is . . . largely a prose imitation of the poem it introduces, also serving in part as argument and gloss" (4). \*
3. In the spring of 1816 STC had recited *Kubla Khan* to Lord Byron, who shortly thereafter (through the agency of the publisher John Murray) offered him 80 pounds for *Christabel* and 20 pounds for *Kubla Khan*; these two poems, together with *The Pains of Sleep*, were published by Murray towards the end of May 1816. \*
4. On the date of *Kubla Khan*, see [Extract 3, n 1](#). \*

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5. As we know from the Crewe Manuscript, the *anodyne* was "two grains of Opium": cf. n 1 above. For the possible effects of opium on *Kubla Khan*, see chapter 3 of my [Coleridge Companion](#) and the following: M.H. Abrams, *The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium Visions on the Works of DeQuincey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge* (London: Milford, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1934); Schneider (1953) esp. 21-109; Hayter (1968) 214-24. \*
6. For Purchas's exact words, see [Extract 3, n 4](#). \*
7. The disparity between "a sort of Reverie" (*Crewe MS*) and a vision occurring during "a profound sleep" (*1816 Preface*) is an important critical crux, and is discussed by many of the critics listed in nn 3 and 6 above, as well as those listed in [Extract 3, n 1](#). \*
8. Lines 91-100 of STC's *The Picture; or, The Lover's Resolution* (1802): *CPW* i 372. \*

9. *sameron hadion aisô*: "Today I'll sing a sweeter song". The error was corrected in the 1834 edition, when *sameron* was altered to *aurion*: *Aurion hadion aisô*, i.e. "Tomorrow I'll sing a sweeter song". (Variant of Theocritus, *Idylls* i 145: *Chairet', egô d' hummin kai es husteron hadion aisô*, "Farewell, and I'll sing you even a sweeter song tomorrow".) \*
10. I.e. *The Pains of Sleep* (cf. n 4 above), a poem describing the nightmares brought on by opium. \*

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan<sup>2</sup>  
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
 Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
 Through caverns measureless to man  
                   Down to a sunless sea. .... 5  
 So twice five<sup>3</sup> miles of fertile ground  
 With walls and towers were girdled round:<sup>4</sup>  
 And there<sup>5</sup> were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
 Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
 And here were forests ancient as the hills, ..... 10  
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.<sup>6</sup>

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted<sup>7</sup>  
 Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
 A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted ..... 15  
 By woman wailing for her demon-lover!  
 And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,<sup>8</sup>  
 As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
 A mighty fountain momently was forced;  
 Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst ..... 20  
 Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
 Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
 And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
 It flung up momently the sacred river.  
 Five miles meandering with a mazy motion ..... 25  
 Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
 Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
 And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:<sup>9</sup>  
 And 'mid this tumult Kubla<sup>10</sup> heard from far

Ancestral voices prophesying war! ..... 30  
 The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
 Floated midway on the waves;  
 Where was heard the mingled measure  
 From the fountain and the caves.  
 It was a miracle of rare device, ..... 35  
 A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!<sup>11</sup>

A damsel with a dulcimer  
 In a vision once I saw:  
 [32] It was an Abyssinian maid,  
 And on her dulcimer she played, ..... 40  
       Singing of Mount Abora.<sup>12</sup>  
       Could I revive within me  
       Her symphony and song,  
       To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
 That with music loud and long, ..... 45  
 I would build that dome in air,  
 That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
 And all who heard should see them there,  
 And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
 His flashing eyes, his floating hair! ..... 50  
 Weave a circle round him thrice,  
 And close your eyes with holy dread,<sup>13</sup>  
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
 And drunk<sup>14</sup> the milk of Paradise.<sup>15</sup>  
 (CPW i 297-8)

### Notes

[Click on asterisk (\*) at the end of a note to return to the point you left in Coleridge's text]

1. The version of the poem here reprinted is the *textus receptus*, i.e., with three alterations (listed below in the notes) the text of the first edition of the poem (1816). I have also listed in the notes the more important variants in the Crewe Manuscript text. (For the Crewe Manuscript, see [Extract 34, n 1](#); or click here to see a [photographic reproduction of the Crewe Manuscript](#).) *Kubla Khan* is the one great poem that STC wrote *directly* on the nature of poetry and the power of Imagination. The date of composition of *Kubla Khan* has been widely

disputed: see my *Coleridge Companion*, [chapter 3](#). In the 1816 Preface STC says it was written in "the summer of the year 1797," but the Crewe Manuscript gives the date as "the fall of the year, 1797". E.K. Chambers after a careful examination of the question settled on a date in October 1797: "The Date of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*," *RES* 11 (1935) 78-80, and *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Biographical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938) 100-3. EHC assigns the poem to the summer of 1798: *CPWi* 295, n 2; L. Hanson argues for May 1798: *The Life of S.T. Coleridge: The Early Years* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938) 259-60; and E. Schneider (after an exhaustive review) pushes the date to October 1799 or sometime in the spring of 1800: *Coleridge, Opium and "Kubla Khan"* (1953) 153-237. In general, however, scholarly opinion now seems to lean toward a date in the autumn of 1797.

In 1963 Richard Gerber suggested that "It is fairly safe to say that no poem in the English language has provided more pages of comment per line than *Kubla Khan*." The intervening years serve to [\[33\]](#) confirm this guess yet further. See, for example, the [Bibliography](#) entries under Lowes (1930), Bodkin (1934), House (1953), Beer (1959), Chayes (1966), Watson (1966) and Brisman (1975). Other recent studies (less directly concerned with STC's theory of Imagination in the poem) include the following: S.K. Heninger, Jr., "A Jungian Reading of *Kubla Khan*" *JAAC* 18 (1959-60) 358-67; R.H. Fogle, "The Romantic Unity of *Kubla Khan*" *CE* 22 (1960-1) 112-16; G. Watson, "The Meaning of *Kubla Khan*" *REL* 2 (1961) 21-9; A.C. Purves, "Formal Structure in *Kubla Khan*" *SIR* 1 (1962) 187-91; E.E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963) 84-91; R. Gerber, "Keys to *Kubla Khan*" *ES* 44 (1963) 321-41; M.F. Schulz (1963) 114-24; K. Raine, "Traditional Symbolism in *Kubla Khan*" *SR* 72 (1964) 626-42; R. Gerber, "Cybele, *Kubla Khan*, and Keats" *ES* 46 (1965) 369-89; Bate (1968) 75-84; Fruman (1971) 334-49 and 392-402; H.W. Piper, "The Two Paradises in *Kubla Khan*" *RES* n.s. 27 (1976) 148-58.

A number of scholars have engaged in tracking down the sources of STC's imagery in *Kubla Khan*: see especially Lowes (1930), Beer (1959) and W.W. Beyer, *The Enchanted Forest* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963) 118-43. I have cited one or two of the best known (and generally accepted) instances in the notes below. \*

2. *Crewe MS*: "In Xannadù did Cubla Khan". The changes in spelling are discussed by Beer (1959) 216-17. \*
3. *Crewe MS*: "six". \*
4. *Crewe MS*: "compass'd round". The imagery of these opening lines was inspired, as STC notes in his 1816 Preface ([Extract 34](#)), by a



sentence in Samuel Purchas's *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1617): "In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, excompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meddowes, pleasant Springs, delightfull Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the midst thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure, which may be removed from place to place." \*

5. *Crewe MS* and *1816 edition*: "And here." \*
6. *Crewe MS*: "Enfolding". *1816 edition*: "And folding". For similar imagery, see [Extract 47-B](#) and n 10. \*
7. The *Crewe MS* does not begin a new verse paragraph with this line. In the *Crewe MS* there are only two stanzas in the poem: lines 1-36 and lines 37-54. \*
8. *Crewe MS*: "From forth this Chasm with hideous Turmoil seething". \*
9. With lines 25-9 compare the opening stanzas of STC's early poem, *A Wish* (1792):

Lo! through the dusky silence of the groves,  
Thro' vales irriguous, and thro' green retreats,  
[34] With languid murmur creeps the placid stream  
And works its secret way.

Awhile meand'ring round its native fields  
It rolls the playful wave and winds its flight:  
Then downward flowing with awaken'd speed  
Embosoms in the Deep!  
(*CPW* i 33)\*

10. *Crewe MS*: "Cubla". \*
11. It was probably sometime in 1796 or early 1797 when STC jotted the following sentence down in his Gutch Memorandum Note Book: "In a cave in the mountains of Cashmere an Image of Ice, which makes its appearance thus -- [']two days before the new *moon* there appears a bubble of Ice which increases in size every day till the 15th day, at which it is an ell or more in height: then as the moon decreases, the Image ['] does also till it vanishes" (*CN* i 240). The section in inverted commas ['] is transcribed from Thomas Maurice's *The History of Hindostan* (1795); for STC's use of Maurice, see Lowes (1930) 379-83 and Beer (1959) 224-5, 246-7.

On the "reconciliation of opposites," see [Extract 33-G](#) and n 11. A number of critics have examined the reconciliation of opposites in the imagery of *Kubla Khan*: e.g., C. Moorman, "The Imagery of *Kubla Khan*" *N&Q* 204 (1959) 321-4; R.H. Fogle, "The Romantic Unity

of *Kubla Khan*" *CE* 22 (1960-1) 112-16; D.B. Schneider, "The Structure of *Kubla Khan*" *AN&Q* 1 (1963) 68-70. \*

12. *Crewe MS*: "Amora" altered to "Amara". Cf. Milton, *Paradise Lost* iv 280-4:

Nor where Abassin kings their issue guard,  
Mount Amara, though this by some supposed  
True Paradise under the Ethiop line  
By Nilus' head, enclosed with shining rock,  
A whole day's journey high . . .

For the significance of STC's alterations (Amora -- Amara -- Abora), see Beer (1959) 256; Gerber, "Keys to *Kubla Khan*" (n 1 above) 323; Brisman (1975) 472-4; H.W. Piper, "Mount Abora" *AN&Q* n.s. 20 (1973) 286-9. \*

13. *Crewe MS*: "in holy Dread". \*

14. *Crewe MS* and *1816 edition*: "drank". \*

15. While there are a number of literary echoes in the last seven lines (e.g., Exodus 3:8 and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* i 111-2), the most striking parallel occurs in Plato's description of the inspired poet in *Ion* 533e-34. \*