

CHAPTER 9



“CHRISTABEL”

“Christabel,” Coleridge wrote in *Biographia Literaria*, “pretended to be nothing more than a common Faery Tale” (BL II 238), but his equivocation suggests that whatever it “pretended” to be, it was always more than that. In *Biographia* itself, Coleridge declared the poem fundamental to his project on the “shadows of imagination”: following “The Ancient Mariner,” “Christabel” was the poem “in which I should have more nearly realized my ideal, than I had done in my first attempt” (BL II 6, 7). After its exclusion from the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, the poem took on the underground quality of “Kubla Khan,” though with less of the peculiar secrecy that surrounded that poem. As Mays notes, Coleridge “allowed copies to be made and circulate” from an early stage, before Part II had been written—or even, possibly, conceived—and recited the poem regularly (PW I.1 479, II.1 607), so that it became his signature poem when in company. The poem is intensely personal in other ways. Despite exhaustive efforts, scholars have found its literary fabric less amenable to “source” studies than the other mystery poems.¹ Holmes writes that of all Coleridge’s major poems, “it is most difficult to see what inspired ‘Christabel,’ where it came from in his imagination” (Holmes 288). In this final chapter, I read in the poem the drama of daemonic becoming that has been my theme. In “Christabel,” moreover, Coleridge’s mythopoesis takes another provocative turn: here, the transnatural consummation assumes the explicit form of sexual union, and the ambiguous iconography of the serpent.

Following the pattern of the other mystery poems, the action revolves around a transfiguring gnosis, which rewrites Christabel’s knowledge as it realizes its occult form. Geraldine embodies both

the gnosis and the power of its language. She is the transnatural form whose eroticized allure fascinates the sexual and experiential roots of Christabel's spirituality, and the entire poem centres upon the mystery of her encounter with Christabel in Part I. In Part II, Coleridge translates the imaginative energy of that event into serpent-imagery.

As I have shown in previous chapters, the serpent was far from being a stock image of "evil," for Coleridge. On the contrary, he used it as the symbolic nexus of language, knowledge, and power throughout his life: as an image of "a writer of Genius" (CN I 609); Shakespeare's language (LL II 278); the "principle of the imagination" (Howe XVIII 371); poetic form and intellectual power (BL II 14); and the Hebraic equivalent to the Promethean agency that lured humanity to "the Nous, or divine principle" in itself (SWF II 1287, 1285). Moreover, in one of his most telling notebook entries, belonging to 1825, Coleridge used it as an image of his authentic self. He recalls (or imagines) being consoled by a friend—perhaps Anne Gillman—who assures him that he is "an *innocent* man." After some doubts, Coleridge concedes that he does have an essential "innocency" and a "child-like Heart," but qualifies this:

Ah but even in boyhood there was a cold hollow spot, an aching in that heart, when I said my prayers—that prevented my entire union with God—that I could not *give up*, or that would not give *me* up—as if a snake had wreathed around my heart, and at this one spot its Mouth touched at & inbreathed a weak incapability of willing it away— . . . that *spot* in my heart even my <remaining &> unleavened *Self*—all else the Love of Christ in and thro' Christ's Love of me! (CN IV 5275)

Coleridge figures his inward resistance to customary Christian discourse in terms that recall Bracy's dream of the "bright green Snake / Coil'd around" the dove in "Christabel" Part II (PW I.1 500): the image of Christabel's congress with Geraldine. Coleridge is ambiguous over whether he could not give up his innate resistance to Christianity, or whether "it" would not give him up, and this extends to the image of the serpent wreathed around his heart, which, with the disturbingly intimate touch of its mouth and the influence of its breath, appeared to vanquish the will to reject its embrace. The point is, however, that Coleridge *could not* and *did not* will it away, and the spot where the serpent kissed was and remained, in his own words, his "unleavened *Self*": his original and essential being.²

Discerning an autobiographical element in the poem, Paglia concludes that "Christabel is the Christian Coleridge, the hopeful moralist perpetually defeated by the daemonic" (Paglia 345). The poem suggests,

however, that Christabel is not so innocent of herself, or the forces that she courts—just as I have maintained that Coleridge was not the hapless victim of the daemonic, but a self-conscious devotee of the transnatural. In this chapter, I argue that Christabel, too, is driven “to leave the appointed Station” she inhabits in the castle, and, through her willing exposure to the transnatural, to “become Δαίμων” (CN III 4166). Just as Coleridge acknowledged the serpent of his “unleavened *Self*,” so Christabel is not merely a passive victim of hostile ophidian powers; for Geraldine is the serpent in the silence of her prayers, and Christabel gives her life.

My reading therefore questions that line of criticism—by far the most pervasive—which sees the poem as a study in evil.³ Such interpretations find a binary opposition between the “innocence” of Christabel and the “evil” of Geraldine, whose serpentine prowess is understood in conventional Christian terms, as the sign of Satanic intent; an approach that tends to reduce the poem to an exercise in the preconceptions of abstract theology, and its characters to one-dimensional chess-pieces. Harding’s variation on this theme draws upon a Pauline dualism of flesh and spirit. Christabel, made vulnerable to the temptations of the flesh by the absence of mother-love, “sins” by succumbing to “the embodiment of carnality” in the form of Geraldine, as a result of which, according to “the justice of the imagination,” she forfeits her “spiritual wholeness” and transmutes into a merely fleshly thing, symbolized by the snake (Harding 1985, 215). For Harding, Christabel has lost her moral and spiritual faculty, and by extension, the poem becomes a version of the Biblical Fall from grace, as traditionally conceived (a disaster for humanity).

Despite the loss of her mother, however, interpretations like these suggest that Christabel enjoyed a degree of serenity and contentment prior to her encounter with Geraldine, which the opening, setting, and progress of the poem itself do not support. Secondly, they preclude the possibility that Christabel’s communion with Geraldine is, precisely, an act and expression of her own spirit, however alien and disturbing in the sight of prevailing religious mores. After all, the poem is not composed in the manner of a moral lesson: the seductive rhythms in which it “sings” of Christabel’s daemonic becoming, together with its implicit critique on the authority of Christian discourse, do not suggest spiritual annihilation, but the exhilaration of mystery. As Harding acknowledges, “Christabel” is a “mythopoesis,” whose “events and characters are polysemous in the way we usually expect myth to be polysemous” (1985, 207–8).

The received view that the poem is intended “to deal with the problem of evil” has also led critics to entertain the reconciliatory,

sentimental ending described by Derwent Coleridge after his father's death, in which Christabel is to "restore her absent lover" by her own innocent suffering (Beer 1959, 177, 185).⁴ Both Derwent and James Gillman give accounts (two in Gillman's case) of how they believed Coleridge planned to complete the poem along these lines.⁵ As Mays remarks, however, these plans "do not square with one another or with the poem we have" (PW I.1 479). Derwent went so far as to suggest that the poem was "founded on the Roman Catholic notion of expiation for others' sins," which if nothing else, shows a lack of insight into his father's intellectual history.⁶ The shorter Gillman account, largely accordant with Derwent's, turns the poem into a rather bland morality tale, with no authentic connection to its imaginative detail and orchestration, while the more detailed Gillman plan, "probably a fabrication produced for Gillman years after Coleridge finished the second part" (Magnuson 1974, 96), turns the poem into a "trivial Gothic Romance" (House 128). It seems most likely, then, that these later plans, insofar as Coleridge was directly responsible for them (which is questionable), are sops to the curious but conventional; in 1820, Coleridge confided to Allsop "an increasing dislike to appear out of the common & natural mode of thinking & acting," which "is, I own, s[ad] weakness—but I am weary of *Dyspathy*" (CL V 40).

Coleridge always maintained that "Christabel" was unfinished, however. In 1833, he said that "I have, as I always had, the whole plan entire from beginning to end in my mind; but I fear I could not carry on with equal success the execution of the idea, an extremely subtle and difficult one" (TT II 245). Wordsworth was not so convinced, and told Crabb Robinson that he was sure Coleridge "never formed a plan or knew what was to be the end of 'Christabel'" (HCR II 487). Lamb, who knew the poem before Coleridge had written Part II, appears to have been surprised and dismayed by the thought of any continuation past Part I.⁷ Obliquely, however, the problematic relationship between the poem's various parts reveals how far the poem's central event—Geraldine's epiphany and fascination of Christabel—possessed a visionary authority for Coleridge. For House, "Christabel" is "inescapably a fragment"; "the two parts differ so much from each other, that they scarcely seem to belong to the same poem" (House 122). Bloom's insight, however, that "*Christabel* is more a series of poems than it is a single fragment" (1971, 212), enables an alternative reading, in which the two Parts of the poem offer two different ways of looking at the same event, in different contexts. Like the double vision of Xanadu and Abyssinia in "Kubla Khan," the two Parts of the poem focus, stereoscopically, upon one rapt experience.

Coleridge recalled his task in Part II as "witchery by daylight" (TT I 410), but as Mays observes, Part I is—paradoxically—"an essentially complete fragment" (PW I.1 479). However much Coleridge wished to move the narrative on, as a marketable "Legend, in five Books" (CL II 716), newly grounded in the Lake District, his attempt to do so in Part II raised "more difficulties than it added opportunities" (Mays: PW I.1 479). Despite its apparent narrative intentions regarding Lord Roland, Part II remains a meditation on the epiphany of Part I, dramatizing further its psychological, social, and spiritual impact. In places, Coleridge appears to have recognized that the poem was, in this sense, complete. Allsop records a remark around 1820 that suggests Coleridge's awareness that its originating vision had already been fulfilled: "If I should finish 'Christabel,' I shall certainly extend it and give new characters, and a greater number of incidents. This the reading public require" (Allsop I 94). There seems to be no plan here, beyond the texts as we have them. In 1823, Coleridge imagined Part III of "Christabel" as "the song of her desolation" (CN IV 5032), but again, this implies a focus on the same, singular, epiphanic event of which he had already written. Nelson suggests that the Conclusion to Part II, written separately in 1801, apparently with Hartley in mind (CL II 728), provides "closure" in the form of the "half-human child"—the poem's final eerie figure of "the elusive genesis of our being" (Nelson 375, 391, 388). Such closure, however, seals the poem off with a teasing obliquity that refuses conclusion, reproducing the open-endedness of a deliberate fragment. When Coleridge wrote that "in my very first conception of the tale, I had the whole present to my mind, with the wholeness, no less than with the liveliness of a vision" (PW II.1 625), he may, therefore, have been accurate, to the extent that he had conceived a poem of daemonic consummation. To Allsop, again, he indicates that his original inspiration had gone no further: "I had the whole of the two cantos in my mind before I began it; certainly, the first canto is more perfect, has more of the true wild weird spirit, than the last" (Allsop I 94–95).

"Christabel" surpasses the limitations of a morality tale, or the juggling of abstractions on the subject of evil. Coleridge's sense of the poem as an authentic embodiment of a "wild weird spirit" does not suggest a tale of psychological defeat and/or sentimental redemption, but the mythopoetic signature of his own transnatural appetite. Much criticism accepts the notion that Christabel is "forced into silence, robbed of the power of utterance," and "the consequences are fatal to poetry itself"; not least because Coleridge did not continue

the poem beyond Part II (Harding 1985, 216, 215–16). There is no necessary correlation, however, between Christabel's experience and the fact that Coleridge did not continue the poem; on the contrary, the evidence suggests that Coleridge's plans to extend the poem, insofar as they existed, were extraneous to its original conception. Furthermore, to suggest that Christabel is somehow annihilated by her experience supposes that prior to her encounter with Geraldine, Christabel enjoyed relatively free and untroubled self-expression. From the start, however, the poem makes it clear that that is palpably untrue: Christabel is *already* "silent," and the poem tells the story of the desire contained in that silence, by revealing its unspoken form. In "becoming" Geraldine, both actively and passively, Christabel realizes what she cannot speak, and becomes, literally, the body of her own transnatural knowledge.

From the beginning, Christabel's mysterious actions imply the content of her silence: what she knows, feels, desires, but for social, moral, and religious reasons does not have the capacity to speak of in the castle. Christabel has been disturbed by "dreams all yesternight / Of her own betrothed Knight" (PW I.1 484), and on first publication, these are "Dreams, that made her moan and leap, / As on her bed she lay in sleep" (PW II.1 627).⁸ This is the first in a series of instances that make dream-life central to the poem, and allows the narrator to offer an explanation that explains nothing. As with her sight of Geraldine later, the detail of her dream remains unspoken, "not to tell" (PW I.1 491); a truth private to Christabel. Even without the deleted lines, however, it is implied that these dreams have an erotic source: they involve thoughts and feelings for an absent lover. This must, therefore, inform Christabel's actions, but in itself, is not enough to account for her venture into the forest. Her disturbing dreams did not even occur that night: they happened "yesternight." The dreams have acted as a kind of summons, but the next day, Christabel has waited for the secrecy of a chill midnight to steal into the wood. Similarly, the suggestion that "She in the Midnight Wood will pray / For the Weal of her Lover, that's far away" (PW I.1 484), prompts more questions than it answers, in the disparity between the act it purports to be and the act itself. In other words, it merely draws attention to the silence latent in the fact that Christabel has, in stealth, gone into the "Midnight Wood" alone, under a full moon, to kneel beneath "the huge Oak Tree" (PW I.1 484): something more "suggestive of pagan worship" (Magnuson 1974, 98). The tension between the naming of the act and the act itself evokes the transgressive quality of Christabel's spiritual and sexual disturbance: her

"prayer" does not take the form of Christian piety, but an eroticized secret brought to the living totem of a moonlit oak.

The oak itself recalls the place the Hermit kneels to pray in "The Ancient Mariner," with the difference that there, the moss "wholly hides / The rotted old oak-stump" (PW I.1 413). As I described in [chapter 7](#), Coleridge takes care to state that the moss on which the Christian Hermit kneels has obscured the remains of the oak, which in context hints at the gap in the Hermit's spiritual awareness. In "Christabel," however, the oak is at once ancient and very much alive: a "huge broad-breasted old Oak Tree" (PW I.1 484). At this time of the year, however, its life has a double nature, as if both disclosing and withholding its latent vigor: it has no leaves but one, "That dances as often as dance it can," but it harbors "Moss and rarest Mistletoe" as it waits for the quickening touch of spring (PW I.1 484). These qualities anticipate those of the daemonic figure that will emerge from the tree: when Geraldine first appears, she is "a Damsel bright," "Beautiful exceedingly!," but pleads in a "faint" voice that she "scarce can speak for Weariness," and waits for Christabel to offer the hand that will grant her the power to flourish (PW I.1 485).

Christabel's mysterious act of devotion at the oak concentrates several Coleridgean figures: the lost youth of "The Foster-Mother's Tale," found under a tree, who grew to have "unlawful thoughts of many things: / And though he prayed, he never loved to pray / With holy men, or in a holy place" (PW I.1 331); his double in *Osorio*, Albert, who goes out "like a runaway Lunatic," to pick herbs for his "dark employments" in the moonlight (PW III.1 86); the wandering "Maid" of "The Nightingale," who ventures into the woods "hard by a castle huge," "like a Lady vow'd and dedicate / To something more than Nature in the grove" (PW I.1 518–19); and in "Kubla Khan," the woman who haunts the "holy and enchanted" woods of the chasm, "wailing for her demon-lover" (PW I.1 513). The wood and its oak are clearly sacred to Christabel in some way, but here, the invitation to her "demon-lover" is implicit: an act of occult contemplation that releases transnatural energies.

Coleridge draws particular attention to the silence of this act, impregnating it with hidden content: "She stole along, She nothing spoke, / ... She kneels beneath the huge Oak Tree, / And in Silence prayeth She" (PW I.1 484). Immediately, her silent "prayer" is answered:

The Lady sprang up suddenly,
The lovely Lady, Christabel!

It moan'd as near, as near can be,
 But what it is, She cannot tell—
 On the other Side it seems to be
 Of the huge broad-breasted old Oak Tree. (PW I.1 484)

Like the Mariner, Geraldine is announced as an “It,” but here there is no direct identification of what “it” is. Grammatically, the word implies that the reader might already know what “it” is, even as it highlights the fact that we do not; “syntactical disturbance heralds a narrative disturbance” (Eilenberg 1992, 103). Geraldine is spontaneously insinuated in the text, as she spontaneously self-generates in the story; suddenly present, but still obscure. With a deft piece of equivocation, Coleridge again suggests that Christabel already carries a latent self-knowledge in silence: “But what it is, She cannot tell” both states a plain fact of the narrative, and anticipates the language of her subsequent vision of Geraldine: “A Sight to dream of, not to tell!” (PW I.1 491). The oak, too, is suddenly “broad-breasted,” and the forest “bare” (PW I.1 484): language that foreshadows Geraldine’s “bare” neck and arms when she first appears, her later nakedness before Christabel, and the prominence of her breasts as the mark and medium of her sexual magic. As yet, however, Geraldine remains on “the other Side” of the oak. Coleridge creates an initiatory boundary, which Christabel must cross. As with the poet, the mystery urges her on, and the language of transgression continues: just as “She *stole* along” to the tree in the first place, now she “*stole* to the other side” (PW I.1 484, 485; my emphasis). Christabel willingly exposes herself to the hidden dimensions of her own curiosity.

Certain critics have discerned something of Christabel’s transgressiveness. For Eilenberg, Christabel “is too good a victim to be quite innocent” (1992, 100), while Newlyn notices “the beginnings of transgression” in Christabel’s dream-prompted wandering in the woods; like Milton’s Eve, “Christabel’s innocence is already qualified” (1993, 170). The pattern of Christabel’s furtive transgression continues and intensifies once she sees Geraldine, and shapes the whole movement of Part I. Geraldine’s stunning epiphany both alarms and fascinates Christabel: “‘Mary Mother, save me now!’ / Said Christabel ‘And who art thou?’” (PW I.1 485). As if recognizing a disturbing quality in Geraldine’s dazzling appearance, Christabel utters the Christian charm of protection she has been brought up with; immediately, however, she tries to know what she is facing. Geraldine evidently cannot force herself upon Christabel at this point: she twice asks Christabel to “Stretch forth thy hand, and have

no fear” (PW I.1 485), and only tries to convince her with the story of her abduction when Christabel, still wary, asks “‘How cam’st thou here?’” (PW I.1 484). For all her power, Geraldine needs Christabel to willingly accept her—and she does. Despite her intuitive recognition of the “Lady strange,” and the fusion of fear and desire she evokes—it was “frightful there to see / A Lady so richly clad, as She, / Beautiful Exceedingly!” (PW I.1 485)—Christabel lets her in.

When Christabel pledges the “Service of Sir Leoline,” in response to Geraldine’s story (PW I.1 486), another disparity between action and explanation opens up. Geraldine’s brilliant appearance “in a silken Robe of White” (PW I.1 485) plainly does not tally with her story of rough treatment, but Christabel—like the reader—lets that go by, for the sake of being in Geraldine’s luminous presence. Christabel volunteers her father’s “stout Chivalry,” but no sooner has she done so, than she announces that he “is weak in health,” and must not be woken (PW I.1 486, 487). Nor is she prepared to disturb any attendants: for that night, she wishes to keep Geraldine as secret as her trip to the forest. Christabel and Geraldine speak the language of chivalry, but use it as the conduit for a hidden desire that bypasses and subverts a hypocritical and inadequate patriarchal order.⁹

At every step through the castle, up to and including her sexual submission, Christabel indulges her fascination with Geraldine. After making excuses not to disturb anyone, she invites Geraldine to spend the night with her: “But we will move as if in stealth, / And I beseech your Courtesy, / This Night to share your Couch with me” (PW I.1 487). Again, Christabel pursues her impulses in “stealth,” conscious of the *frisson* of transgression. In the 1816 version of these lines, she is still more direct, even commanding Geraldine: “So to my Room we’ll creep in stealth, / And you to night must sleep with me” (PW II.1 630).¹⁰ When Geraldine faints at the entrance to the castle, “Christabel with Might and Main / Lifted her up, a weary Weight, / Over the Threshold of the Gate” (PW I.1 487): she performs the act of will necessary to empower her companion, without querying why, once inside, “the Lady rose again, / And mov’d, as She were not in Pain” (PW I.1 487). Rather, the narrator hints at their increasing pleasure as they get nearer to the heart of Christabel’s world: “right glad they were” (PW I.1 487). Christabel either misses or accepts without demur other signs of Geraldine’s otherworldly aura. She leads Geraldine past the ineffectual castle guard dog, the “toothless mastiff Bitch,” despite the fact that the mastiff made “an angry moan,” which she had never done “Beneath the eye of Christabel” (PW I.1 483, 488). More strikingly, when the dying brands of the castle emit “A

Tongue of Light, a Fit of Flame” as Geraldine passes them, Christabel merely remains fixated on “the Lady’s Eye” (PW I.1 488). As the torches reveal her father’s shield, it merely prompts her to remind Geraldine to tread softly, to maintain their secrecy; “jealous of the list’ning Air, / They steal their way from stair to stair” until, right outside the Baron’s room, they are “still as Death with stifled Breath!”, as they pass a further threshold (PW I.1 488). Coleridge constructs an inverse crescendo, in which their stealth reaches its climax as they reach their destination: Christabel’s chamber.

They are now sealed off from the world in Christabel’s personal dream-theater: a “Chamber carv’d so curiously, / Carv’d with figures strange and sweet” (PW I.1 488). When Geraldine sinks to the floor, Christabel rushes to revive her, this time with the “Wine of virtuous powers” her mother had made from “wild Flowers” (PW I.1 489), which, given that her mother has been dead for many years, is clearly both precious and rarely imbibed. Christabel kneels beside Geraldine; the wine has its desired effect, and with this final act of empowerment, Geraldine is suddenly revealed in hieratic splendor:

Again the wild flower Wine she drank,
Her fair large Eyes ’gan glitter bright,
And from the Floor, whereon she sank,
The lofty Lady stood upright:
She was most beautiful to see,
Like a Lady of a far Countreè. (PW I.1 490)

When Geraldine rises, then, Christabel is left kneeling before her. From this position, Geraldine now assumes command; she tells Christabel to undress, and Christabel obeys, with words of ritual willing: “Quoth Christabel, ‘So let it be!’ / And as the Lady bade, did she” (PW I.1 490). With her nakedness, Christabel’s exposure to Geraldine’s epiphany is figuratively complete: it marks her final act in the initiatory pattern of invitation and response that has been ongoing since her first contact with Geraldine. In bed, unsettled by her own thoughts, Christabel rises just enough to watch Geraldine disrobe (PW I.1 490), laid out before the “shame & power” (CN III 4166) of the daemon she is about to know.

Throughout Part I, then, Christabel’s fascination by Geraldine correlates to her own self-election; she has placed herself in Geraldine’s transnatural embrace. With psychological dynamics typical of Coleridge’s writing, an act of will has enabled the subject to be acted upon by forces beyond the will, uniting the process of knowing and becoming. In Geraldine, Christabel has found the object peculiarly compatible with her unspoken desire. Her stealth in venturing into

the wood, and bringing Geraldine back to sleep with her, corresponds to and expresses the withheld content of her silence. Geraldine's spell does not silence Christabel, therefore, any further than she already was. She is changed, however: by giving her silence form and reality, her midnight tryst with Geraldine lays bare the doubleness of her own experience, in which Christian discourse and chivalric sex-roles are inadequate to the spiritual, emotional, and sexual forces active within her. Part I of the poem shows how these forces shape her behavior in spite of her upbringing and cultural context; they constitute her secret life. At the close of Part I, the drama of that secret life reaches its climax. The ritual consummation of Christabel's night with Geraldine is the seal of her daemonic becoming.

Through her spell, Geraldine communicates her transnatural signature to Christabel, and binds that knowledge within her:

In the Touch of this Bosom there worketh a Spell,
Which is Lord of thy Utterance, Christabel!
Thou knowest to night and wilt know tomorrow
This Mark of my Shame, this Seal of my Sorrow;
 But vainly thou warrest,
 For this is alone in
 Thy Power to declare,
 That in the dim Forest
 Thou heard'st a low Moaning,
And found'st a bright Lady, surpassingly fair. (PW I.1 491)

Christabel sees, experiences, and knows more than the reader is told. When Geraldine undresses, she receives a revelation: "Behold! her Bosom and half her Side— / A Sight to dream of, not to tell! / O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!" (PW I.1 491). In manuscript, Coleridge included a description of her bosom and her side as "lean and old and foul of Hue" (PW II.1 634), and Hazlitt, aware of this, famously complained when it was omitted upon publication, on the basis that it was "necessary to make common sense of the first and second part" (Hazlitt IX 24).¹¹ As Perry observes, however, "the deletion is right precisely because it allows Geraldine's nature to remain obscure" (1999*b*, 140). That mystery is intrinsic to her appeal, and heightened by the scrupulously ambiguous qualities with which Coleridge invests her, several of which have already been mentioned. From her first appearance out of the oak, her presence warps natural laws. Her white silk robe "shadowy in the moonlight shone," blending light with darkness, radiance with shadow, and her jewels seem part of her: "wildly glitter'd here and there / The Gems entangled in her Hair" (PW I.1 485). That glittering quality—and her response to the wild-flower wine, in which her

eyes “’gan glitter bright” (PW I.1 490)—is one of several features that recall the mariner’s powers of fascination. Just as “The Mariner hath his will,” so does Geraldine: “One Hour was thine— / Thou’st had thy Will!” (PW I.1 373, 492). In Part II of the poem, Christabel remembers “The Vision of Fear, the Touch and Pain!”, which suggests something of Geraldine’s eldritch vitality: “Again she saw that Bosom old, / Again she felt that Bosom cold” (PW I.1 497). Similarly, she sees Geraldine as a lamia with “shrunken serpent Eyes” (PW I.1 501). Holmes rightly observes that no single one of these features, but their cumulative blend gives Geraldine her mythic stature: “A damsel in distress, witch, sorceress, lamia-snake, nature goddess, daemonic spirit, (and something of a boudoir vamp)—she depends completely for her power on this protean ambiguity” (Holmes 288). Besides the evidence of the poem itself, Coleridge’s insight into Shakespeare’s *Weird Sisters* give the best clue to his conception of Geraldine: “They were awful beings: and blended in themselves the Fates and Furies of the ancients with the sorceresses of Gothic and popular superstition”; they “have the power of tempting those, who have been the tempters of themselves” (LL I 531).¹²

Like the *Weird Sisters*, Geraldine is a “wonderful admixture of Witch Fate and Fairy” (TT I 573), and operates upon Christabel as such, teasing out her own desire, and fulfilling it with the force of magic. Geraldine realizes the “unlawful thoughts” (PW I.1 331) of Christabel’s hidden being: in the touch of her bosom and the power of her spell, Christabel exchanges normality for occult knowledge. She is initiated into an “intelligence blended with a darker power, deeper, mightier, and more universal than the conscious intellect of man” (BL II 117). Geraldine’s magical words do not merely affect Christabel’s mind; they alter her entire being, and Coleridge reinforces this by dramatizing her daemonic consummation through sexual contact and its subsequent dream-filled sleep. Coleridge also eroticizes spiritual transgression in “The Eolian Harp” and “Kubla Khan,” but in “Christabel” it is more explicit: Geraldine is, literally, a “demon-lover,” who answers Christabel’s silent call. Christabel’s sexual receptivity to Geraldine signals the depth of her receptivity to all that Geraldine represents. She experiences Geraldine’s otherworldly power in the most complete and palpable form of human intimacy.

The Conclusion to Part I traces the effects of Geraldine’s sexual magic in Christabel’s dreaming body, as she sleeps in Geraldine’s arms:

With open eyes (ah woe is me!)
Asleep, and dreaming fearfully,

Fearfully dreaming, yet, I wis,
 Dreaming that alone, which is—
 O Sorrow and Shame! (PW I.1 492)

Christabel’s open eyes register the impact of her disturbing new-found knowledge. The scene recalls the “unquiet silence” and “troubulous extacy” of Coleridge’s Joan of Arc, who sits “Ghastly as broad-eyed Slumber!” as she experiences her preternatural calling (PW I.1 291). Christabel’s haunted sleep is also foreshadowed in the dreaming woman of “Melancholy,” asleep with the “Adder’s Tongue” on her cheek, whose body expresses the “mystic tumult” and “fateful rhyme” that moves through her mind (PW I.1 335). As Part II of the poem makes clear, Christabel is psychologically and physiologically altered by what she has known: she has “become $\Delta\alpha\mu\omega\nu$ ” (CN III 4166), and her body will tell what her speech cannot. Bloom notices that the poem presents “a nightmare as if it were a fulfillment of desire” (1971, 213), but that is precisely the ambivalence Coleridge achieves. In the second phase of Christabel’s enchanted sleep, her eyes close, and she passes into a state of bliss:

Tears she sheds—
 Large Tears, that leave the Lashes bright!
 And oft the while she seems to smile
 As Infants at a sudden Light!

Yea, she doth smile and she doth weep,
 Like a youthful Hermitess
 Beauteous in a Wilderness,
 Who, praying always, prays in Sleep. (PW I.1 493)

The imagery not only suggests a new light dawning on a new mind, but also that Christabel has won a kind of sacred freedom, and has become like Geraldine, a woman of the woods: “Beauteous in a Wilderness.” Just as Geraldine was the answer to Christabel’s ambiguous “prayer” at the oak, so here, asleep in her daemonic embrace, she is said to be in prayer. Geraldine’s body is the shape of Christabel’s silence, and the form of her transnatural gnosis.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the representation of that gnosis through four key features of its mythopoesis: Coleridge’s ritual orchestration of Christabel’s union with Geraldine, the doubling of vision in the poem, the “shame & power” (CN III 4166) of Christabel’s daemonic becoming, and the significance of the serpent as an image of that process.

Several critics discern the metaphor of “demonic marriage” (Twitchell 41) in Christabel’s relationship with Geraldine; as Taylor observes, “Christabel actively courts Geraldine and invites, leads, and even carries her over the threshold as if she were her bride” (2002, 712).¹³ Mark Hennelly, without considering the erotic theme, reads the poem as a “celebration of (liminal) ambiguity,” and relates it to the concept of “liminality” expounded in Victor Turner’s work on the social dynamics of initiation experience, in which the liminal phase “debases and deprives the neophyte of all previous acculturated status before ‘rebuilding’ him or her according to more occult specifications” (Hennelly 221, 207). In practice, Coleridge combines these features, integrating the emotional, physical, and spiritual significance of the marriage metaphor into a larger, ritualized alignment upon Christabel’s initiation.

Coleridge uses two devices to distort time and space around Christabel’s night with Geraldine: the castle bell, and a disturbance of the natural order. The fact that the bell is cyclical and repetitive allows events separate in time and space to be represented—and imaginatively identified—with one sound. The poem opens with the bell sounding out “the middle of Night by the Castle Clock” (PW I.1 483). This marks the hour of Christabel’s secret venture into the forest, and Geraldine’s spontaneous self-generation: “I thought I heard, some minutes past, / Sounds as of a Castle Bell” (PW I.1 486). Christabel tells Geraldine that her mother “died the hour, that I was born,” which appears to have been during the night, because we learn that the Baron “rose and found his Lady dead” in the morning—so that he associates the bell with “a World of Death” (PW I.1 489, 493). Christabel also tells Geraldine a story about her mother that brings the marriage metaphor fully into play: “on her Death-bed she did say / That she should hear the Castle Bell / Strike twelve upon my Wedding Day” (PW I.1 489). In the poem, the clock has already struck twelve, when Christabel carries Geraldine over the threshold of the castle and takes her to bed, where their union is consummated. Coleridge’s careful orchestration implies that this *is* her wedding day—just as the poem suggests that her mother is somehow there, to hear the castle bell. She does not marry her “betrothed Knight,” however, but the object of her transnatural desire, Geraldine.

Her union with Geraldine involves a disturbance in nature, which begins with the opening lines: “the Owls have awaken’d the crowing Cock” (PW I.1 483). Just as the “One red Leaf” left on the oak in April suggests that it is both spring *and* winter (PW I.1 484), so the cock-crow suggests that it is both midnight *and* morning: a beginning

simultaneous with an ending. This is reiterated in the Conclusion to Part I:

A Star hath set, a Star hath risen,
 O Geraldine! since Arms of thine
 Have been the lovely Lady's Prison.
 O Geraldine! One Hour was thine—
 Thou'st had thy Will! By Tairn and Rill
 The Night-birds all that Hour were still. (PW I.1 492)

The disruption of time and space around her “marriage” to Geraldine lends a cosmic significance to Christabel’s transnatural consummation. The identification of birth and death in the setting and rising of a star echoes the identification of winter with spring, midnight with morning, and the fact that Christabel’s birth is already associated with death: specifically, her mother’s.¹⁴ Geraldine, who sleeps with Christabel “still and mild, / As a Mother with her Child” (PW I.1 492) has displaced the natural, maternal order, to become the agent of Christabel’s initiatory death and rebirth in daemonic form.

The blurring of the distinction between Geraldine and Christabel’s mother is one of the most suggestive aspects of the doubling of vision that occurs throughout the poem. Piper observes several instances of “some strange identity between the mother and Geraldine”: “Geraldine can summon the mother with a wish, dismiss her, take her place for an ‘hour,’ and be revived by the wine she has prepared” (1987, 76, 77). There are other ambiguous overlaps. The mastiff makes an “angry moan” as Geraldine passes, but we also know that when she howls, “Some say, she sees my Lady’s Shroud” meaning (presumably) Christabel’s mother (PW I.1 488, 483), subtly identifying the two. In the Conclusion to Part I, the narrator’s query about Christabel’s “Vision sweet”—“What if She knew her Mother near?” (PW I.1 493)—is particularly ambivalent, given that Christabel’s repose in Geraldine’s arms has just been compared to a child with her mother. Nothing in the poem clearly separates “that Vision blest, / Which comforted her After rest, / When in the Lady’s Arms she lay” from Geraldine (PW I.1 497). Rather, the poem brings them together, blending them in Christabel’s experience. This “hovering between two images” is part of the imaginative apparatus by which the poem productively disrupts the forms of human knowledge, in order to evoke “a strong working of the mind” (LL I 311)—a pattern that recurs from the first lines of the poem, with its fusion of midnight and morning, light and dark, a moon both veiled and

“at the Full”; Geraldine’s epiphany blends the “frightful” with the “Beautiful” (PW I.1 483, 485).¹⁵ In “The Pains of Sleep,” similar visions become the stuff of personal nightmare: “Desire with loathing strangely mixed”; “Deeds to be hid which were not hid”; “To know and loathe, yet wish and do!” (PW I.2 754). In “Christabel,” however, mythopoesis both anticipates and transcends Coleridge’s subsequent autobiography, and he is able to use the turbulence of his own imagination to potent effect. Christabel’s experiences expose the disparity between her inner life and the language available to her to express it, and that disparity is expressed in the paradoxical roles fulfilled by Geraldine’s body.¹⁶ She is both frightening and desirable, old and young, a daemon-lover and mother-figure; a challenge to any “presumptuous Philosophy which in its rage of explanation allows no xyz, no symbol representative of the vast Terra Incognita of Knowledge” (CN III 3825).

As part of this provocative doubling of vision, Coleridge subverts the possible assumption that Geraldine personifies “evil.” Coleridge may have later inserted lines 255–61, where Geraldine “eyes the Maid and seeks delay” before taking Christabel in her arms (PW I.1 491), in response to prudish criticism.¹⁷ However, the lines are in keeping with similar complications throughout the text;¹⁸ for example, her curious assurance that “All they, who live in th’ upper Sky, / Do love you, holy Christabel!”, and her enigmatic promise to repay Christabel’s welcome (PW I.1 490). Geraldine is burdened with a form of “dread” (PW I.1 494, 501), which adds a touch of authentic vulnerability behind her façade as “a Maiden most forlorn” (PW I.1 489). Nor does this dilute Coleridge’s original vision; from the earliest manuscripts, Geraldine’s power coincides with self-conscious awareness of her alienation, which she communicates to Christabel: “The Mark of my Shame, the Seal of my Sorrow” (PW II.1 634).

Geraldine therefore fits precisely the daemonic simultaneity of “shame & power” (CN III 4166) at the heart of my theme. Christabel’s fascination with Geraldine leads her to become what she has known. The obscure sense of shame in her new knowledge is made clear: she sleeps in Geraldine’s arms, “Dreaming that alone, which is— / O Sorrow and Shame!” (PW I.1 492). The next morning, the sight of Geraldine, “fairer yet! and yet more fair!” as “her girded Vests / Grew tight beneath her heaving Breasts,” stirs guilty feelings: “‘Sure I have sinn’d!’ said Christabel,” troubled “With such Perplexity of Mind / As Dreams too lively leave behind” (PW I.1 495). The *power* Christabel now possesses is less explicit, because it consists in the knowledge of Geraldine herself. After their night together, they share

a secret, and Christabel is made more conscious of the gap between truth and appearance in her life; "a higher, though more painful, consciousness," in the heterodox pattern of a *Fortunate Fall* (Newlyn 1993, 166).

This reading of Christabel's experience is obliquely supported by the older Coleridge's anecdote that lines from Richard Crashaw's "A Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable Saint Teresa" had been in his mind as he wrote Part II of "Christabel," "if, indeed, by some subtle process of the mind they did not suggest the first thought of the whole poem" (TT II 369). Piper notes that the central image of that poem involves "the defloration of a virgin as the mystical symbol" of her union with God, while finding the connection with Coleridge's poem in the fact that "Christabel has become in some sense a sharer in Geraldine's knowledge, experience, and condition" (1987, 79). The fuller implications of Coleridge's mercurial remark, however, relate Christabel's union with Geraldine to mystical consummation. The "shame" of Christabel's experience consists in her separation from those who do not share her occult knowledge: they may be unfallen, but they are ignorant of the ecstasy and mystery of her experience. As an avatar of the transnatural, Geraldine is both the tempter and the fruit of an occult knowledge: an ambiguity reinforced in her image as a serpent in Part II.

Like the mariner, Geraldine communicates the knowledge she embodies as a kind of contagion, infecting Christabel's entire being. Christabel is not merely the wedding-guest, however; she is the mariner too, fascinated by her own transnatural vision, in the form of Geraldine, and re-created by its hieratic force. Her knowledge now crosses sensory boundaries, but Christabel experiences her power to see what others do not as both a gift and a curse. The poem as it stands only covers the drama of her initiation into this state, and in Part II, her immediate crisis as a stunned witness to Geraldine's mastery and manipulation of those around her. In ways that again resemble the mariner, the Catholic, chivalric paradigm that Christabel has inhabited all her life is now a hollow and vestigial hangover from before her spiritual revolution. Nevertheless, it still surrounds her, and limits her capacity for verbal response: she prays "That He, who on the Cross did groan, / Might wash away her Sins unknown" (PW I.1 495), even though the poem has rendered every other Christian protective wish—encapsulated in the refrain of "Jesu Maria, shield her well!" (PW I.1 485)—ineffectual.¹⁹ Geraldine's language operates through the magical facility of many voices—"faint and sweet," "alter'd," "hollow," "low" (PW I.1 485, 489, 491)—while

Christabel is habituated to the language of “sin” and maidenly duty. It is implicit that, if Christabel is *becoming* Geraldine, she too might develop the magical power she has witnessed, but that would entail an entire acceptance of her gnosis through Geraldine that the poem never reaches. It is likely, then, if she *could* try and describe it, that in her fear and inability to articulate what she has known, Christabel would do violence to its truths and therefore to herself, by naming it as “evil.” As if recognizing that Christabel could not yet come to terms with her new-found state, the spell that makes Geraldine “Lord of [her] Utterance” (PW I.1 491) co-operates with the inadequacy of Christabel’s Christian discourse, to keep their secret consummation pre-verbal. This does not exactly curtail its expression, however; while Geraldine retains the magic of words, Christabel’s transnatural knowledge is realized physiologically.

In Part II, Christabel begins to become Geraldine in serpent form: recalling “The Vision of Fear, the Touch and Pain!”, she “drew in her Breath with a hissing Sound!”, and again, “Shudder’d aloud with a hissing Sound” when she saw the snake in Geraldine’s “Look askance” (PW I.1 497, 501, 502):

So deeply had she drunken in
That Look, those shrunken serpent Eyes,
That all her Features were resign’d
To this sole Image in her Mind (PW I.1 501)

Christabel’s alteration realizes the daemonic potential in Coleridge’s metaphors of becoming that I described in [chapter 3](#). Coleridge held that the “sublime faculty” of a “great mind” such as Shakespeare’s was to become what it contemplates, and hence “to become by power of Imagination another Thing” (CN II 3290, 3247). This involved an order of psychic exposure akin to love: “Love transforms the souls into a conformity with the object loved” (CN I 189). The object of contemplation and of love is therefore crucial: if it is “a something transnatural” (CN III 4166), the logic runs, he or she *becomes* “a something transnatural.” Fascinated by Geraldine, to whose power she has willingly exposed herself, this is precisely Christabel’s condition. For Coleridge, moreover, this model of becoming is a form of self-revelation. His work is filled with philosophical variations on the principle: “we *become* that which we understandly [*sic*] behold & hear, having . . . created part even of the Form” (CN II 2086); “‘Never could the eye have beheld the sun, had not its own essence been soliform,’ (*i.e. pre-configured to light by a similarity of essence with that of light*)” (BL I 115; quoting Plotinus);

"the act of contemplation makes the thing contemplated" (BL I 251–52; quoting Plotinus); the "contemplative act is creative and is one with the product of contemplation" (L 74). Anticipating these later formulations with poetic fiction, Christabel's daemonic becoming reveals her transnatural predilection. As Part I of the poem makes clear, Christabel's "forc'd unconscious Sympathy" with Geraldine (PW I.1 502) is not so forced after all. Making notes for a lecture in 1818, Coleridge wrote that "to know is to *resemble*" (CN III 4397); in Part II of the poem, Christabel's body resembles the form of her transnatural knowledge. In Geraldine, she sees her own daemonic imago.

In choosing the serpent as the physiological emblem of Christabel's knowledge, Coleridge clearly knew of its provocative associations; but it is equally clear that he invested the image with a value far removed from religious repugnance. Having used it to convey revelatory beauty in "The Ancient Mariner," when writing "Christabel" Coleridge drew on extensive notes on reptilian imagery that reflect his peculiarly strong interest.²⁰ Bard Bracy is more sensitive to the poem's strange events than Leoline, as his dream of the snake coiled round the dove at midnight shows (PW I.1 500). Nevertheless, he interprets the vision in conventional terms: the snake is un-Christian, as he understands it, and therefore it must be evil. In the light of what the reader knows, Bracy's intention the next morning, "With Music strong and saintly Song / To wander thro' the Forest bare, / Lest aught unholy loiter there" (PW I.1 500), reads almost as parodically ignorant and ineffectual: the snake is right in front of him. Coleridge also makes a point of Leoline's misinterpretation of the dream (PW I.1 500–1), so that its true import remains an unspoken secret between Geraldine, Christabel, and the reader. Even then, however, its true significance is locked into the obliquity of the poem itself. Coleridge builds the poem's double vision into the language with which Bracy describes what he sees: the snake's head is close to the dove's, "And with the Dove it heaves and stirs, / Swelling its Neck as she swell'd hers!" (PW I.1 500). Bracy sees it as the struggle of a victim, but in this eroticized image, the dove and the snake heave, stir, and swell in concert: the dynamics of will, of seducer and seduced, are interchangeable. This precisely anticipates Coleridge's later image of his "unleavened *Self*" (CN IV 5275): like Christabel, he is both unable and unwilling to wish away the kiss of the serpent wreathed around his heart. As well as the emblem of access to hidden knowledge, Coleridge also knew the entwined serpent as a symbol of healing. In July 1801, with "Christabel" fresh in his mind, Coleridge envisioned how the very temptations surrounding his friend, Davy, would become the mark of his triumph as a benefactor to humankind: "the

cold-blooded venom-toothed Snake, that winds around him, shall be only his Coat of Arms, as God of Healing” (CL II 745).²¹ It is in this ambiguous blend of knowledge, power, beauty, and transgression that the serpent functions as an icon of the “shame & power” at the center of the poem’s myth.

By the end of the poem, Christabel’s unspoken fascination with the transnatural has led her to become “a something transnatural” (CN III 4166), a daemonic being rejected by a father driven mad by her offence against a blind honor-system, which expected only her meekness and obedience (PW I.1 502-3). Again, Coleridge anticipates and figures the social consequences of what he has described. This time, however, the poem’s irresolution sets one of its daemonic agents free. Unlike Christabel, Leoline possesses no insight into Geraldine’s hidden nature, becoming besotted with her purely through a combination of sexual desire and its hypocritical sublimation into chivalry. Geraldine has successfully “escaped” and is at large in the world, surviving through her capacity to manipulate those around her, and making a fool of religious certainty and patriarchal authority as she does so. Moreover, the poem’s multi-layered subversion of contemporary religious, sexual, and political mores provoked a revealingly irrational, even superstitious, response, under the guise of civilized good sense. Karen Swann has shown that critics identified both the poem and its author with the witchery it enacted: upon publication, the poem was characterized as “immodest and improper, and its author, not simply ‘unmanly,’ but an ‘enchanted virgin,’ a ‘witch,’ and an ‘old nurse’” (Swann 398). Coleridge suspected that the poem would arouse “Disgust” as early as 1799 (CL I 545), and his prophecy was realized in the reviews of 1816. “There is something disgusting at the bottom of his subject,” Hazlitt declared, which Coleridge had dangerously combined with poetic magic: “The mind, in reading it, is spell-bound” (Hazlitt IX 25, 24). Coleridge had already had to deal with Wordsworthian counter-measures against that spell, of course, not in spite of but *because* of his friend’s susceptibility to his “bewitching words” (*Prelude* XIV. 400). Its reception history shows that the poem itself was treated as “a something transnatural.”

Readers both hostile and friendly to “Christabel,” then, have found that the poem bears a similarly unsettling relation to them as Geraldine does to Christabel: as Hennelly puts it, “the ultimate initiate in the poem is *not* Christabel, but *Christabel’s* reader” (Hennelly 215). “Christabel” aspires to an act of poetic seduction, later theorized as “poetic faith,” which stirs the mind into new orders of power and activity by irradiating the known world with the “shadows of imagination” (BL II 6).