

Thematic Analysis of “Christabel”

Published in 1816, “Christabel” is a poem written in two parts, Part I written in 1798 and Part II in 1800. The poem was influenced by Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, a collection of medieval ballads—short, highly dramatic poems that originated in the folk tradition. These ballads were at one time transmitted orally among illiterate people, and they included pieces of Gothic horror such as vampirism, violence, eroticism, and strange, gloomy settings. The Gothic influence is plain in the work of novelist Matthew Lewis, whose book *The Monk* Coleridge discussed in an article for *The Critical Review* of February 1797. In his introduction to *The Monk*, John Berryman states that “this grotesque school helped usher in the English Romantic Movement and debauched taste without ever really participating in the glories of the movement unless in the book before us.”

These tales also contain elements of medieval literature, such as haunted castles, magic spells, and treacherous journeys. “Medievalism” was much concerned with stories of unrequited love as an essential part of the Middle Ages’ courtly love tradition. The poem’s central character, Christabel, who searches for her long-absent lover, is very much in the same tradition.

Part I begins with the tale of “the lovely lady” Christabel, the daughter of the rich but ineffectual Baron, Sir Leoline. (This name is ironic, for it implies all the attributes that the character lacks, namely the strength and courage of a lion.) In the poem’s opening scene, Christabel is in a dark and foreboding forest that is transformed into a unnatural landscape when the distinction between night and day is ominously disturbed. Though it is “the middle of night by the castle clock, . . . the owls have awakened the crowing cock.” An important part of this brooding setting is Sir Leoline’s dog, “a toothless mastiff bitch,” who howls at the clock. Some say the dog is haunted by “my lady’s shroud,” the symbol of Christabel’s deceased mother.

From the outset of the poem, we encounter a rhetorical device that is repeated several times. A narrative voice poses a question to the reader and then responds to its own question. In the first

occurrence, the narrator questions the “true” circumstances of the world of “Christabel”: “Is the night chilly and dark? / The night is chilly, but not dark.” In so doing, the narrative voice effectively heightens the suspense and drama about to unfold.

Within the forest is a huge oak covered with “moss and the rarest mistletoe,” a reference to a pre-medieval, Celtic system of belief that venerated this parasitic plant when it grew on an oak tree. The landscape of the poem is definitely feminine in nature, with a “huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree” and a “mastiff bitch”—and the nature of that femininity is dangerous and duplicitous, as will soon become apparent when Christabel encounters Lady Geraldine.

Indeed, the oak tree appears to take on the personality of Geraldine when it seems to be moaning. However, we soon learn that Geraldine herself is the one who cries out for help. In an important inversion of the medieval tradition, a woman is the one who comes to her rescue, none other than Christabel who is likewise in great distress. “There she sees a damsel bright / Dressed in a silken robe of white, / . . . A lady, so rich clad as she— / Beautiful exceedingly.” Christabel reassures the lady: “Then Christabel stretched forth her hand, / And comforted fair Geraldine.” Christabel is the substitution here for such valiant, legendary knights as Sir Lancelot and Gawain; she demonstrates feminine chivalry and courteous behavior toward Geraldine. “O well, bright dame! May you command / The service of Sir Leoline; / and gladly our stout chivalry / Will he send forth and friends withal.” The reference to “our stout chivalry,” especially indicates Christabel’s full participation in the chivalric code of honor.

However, her promise of Leoline’s protection is ironic, since in fact he is old and frail, in no position to offer anyone protection. Nor, for that matter, is the castle a place of safe haven. Christabel’s acknowledges as much when she tells Geraldine what to expect when they enter the castle: “Sir Leoline is weak in health, / And may not well awakened be, / But we will move as if in stealth, / and I beseech your courtesy, / This night, to share your couch with me.”

Our first subtle hint of Geraldine’s treachery is at the very point of her entrance into the castle. Christabel, in an inverted marriage-rite, lifts Geraldine, “a weary weight, / Over the threshold of the gate”; a legend is associated with the old marriage custom, namely

that a witch cannot cross the threshold on her own because it has been blessed against evil spirits. Once in the castle, their way to the bedroom is equally fraught with hints of danger; in “a fit of flame,” Christabel only sees “the lady’s eye, and nothing else.” The damsel in distress, Geraldine, has begun a process of transformation into an evil spirit. When they finally arrive at Christabel’s chamber, “carved with figures strange and sweet,” Christabel offers Geraldine “a wine of virtuous powers,” which her deceased mother made from wildflowers. But Geraldine rejects the offer and instead banishes the mother’s spirit from the room, presaging her evil intent to take possession of the innocent and unsuspecting Christabel. “Off, woman off! This hour is mine— / though thou her guardian spirit be, / . . . ’tis given to me.”

Geraldine does eventually drink the “virtuous” wine, but she still intends to take possession of Christabel. That possession, while primarily of spirit, may possibly be sexual as well, although the poet only hints at this. Once Christabel has undressed, Geraldine does the same and reveals her truly hideous nature. “In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell, / Which is lord of the utterance, Christabel!” The hideous aspect of Geraldine’s body is her “mark of shame,” which, she tells Christabel, will soon be fully disclosed. Geraldine indicates that she and Christabel are united in a connection where she exercises the most powerful of all control—a complete dominion over Christabel’s speech. Thus, her control over Christabel is not only magical, but rhetorical as well, a terrible and cruel fate of mythic dimensions such as that suffered by Echo, a figure from Greek mythology who was metamorphosed into stone and whose only speech was to echo someone else’s words.

Now under Geraldine’s awful spell, Christabel has become her captive, “the lovely lady’s prison,” and Part I concludes with Christabel’s wish for divine intervention against this evil spirit. “But this she knows, in joys and woes, / That saints will aid if men will call.” That remains to be seen.

Part 2 begins with a reminder of the spiritually and physically ineffectual Baron who lives in a world devoid of faith and any hope of salvation. “Each matin bell, the Baron saith, / ‘Knells us back to a world of death.” True to his fallen nature, the world within the castle is devoid of hope, filled with religious symbols that are mere

trappings, emptied of all spiritual significance. There is “the drowsy sacristan” who counts slowly, merely to fill up the time, and “[t]hree sinful sextons’ ghosts which hover about,” “[w]ho all give back, one after t’other, / The death note to their living brother,” suggesting that Sir Leoline carries the burden of their transgressions.

Christabel, who has awoken from her sleep at the conclusion of Part I, now feels refreshed because she “hath drunken deep / Of all the blessedness of sleep!” She is confused by Geraldine’s presence, and she erroneously believes herself to have committed a mortal sin. Christabel proceeds to lead the sorceress to Sir Leoline. True to his fallen status, he cannot see properly (the eyes traditionally believed to be the gateway to the soul), and because of this defect, he is blind to Geraldine’s evilness. “With cheerful wonder in his eyes / The lady, Geraldine, espies.”

He greets her with great respect and ceremony and, when he soon discovers that Geraldine is the daughter of his long-lost friend, Sir Roland, the tyranny of history repeating itself is revealed. We are told that the rupture in the friendship between Leoline and Roland was due to a particular form of rhetorical violence—it was the direct result of lies spread by malingering tongues—although we are not told the specific content of those lies. “But whispering tongues can poison truth; / And constancy lives in realms above.”

The “madness in the brain” caused by the loss of friendship resembles various accounts of King’s Arthur’s madness when the fellowship and trust of his roundtable was destroyed by deceit. “Each spake words of high disdain / And insult to his heart’s best brother.”

As Leoline remembers Roland, his inability to truly see Geraldine causes his specious regeneration at the expense of his daughter. “Sir Leoline, a moment’s space, / Stood gazing on the damsel’s face: And the youthful Lord of Tryermaine / Came back upon his heart again.”

However, not all the inhabitants of the castle are so easily deceived. The Bard Bracy, whom Leoline has commanded to spread the news of Geraldine’s rescue, has had a nightmare of his own, of “a bright green snake . . . Close by the dove’s [Christabel’s] head it crouched.” As a result of his dream, he refuses to embark on his journey. Meanwhile, the evil Geraldine with “[a] snake’s small eye blinks dull and shy . . . / And the lady’s eyes they shrunk in her head, / . . .

And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread, / At Christabel she looked askance! —”; Christabel can only passively reflect back “[t]hat look of dull and treacherous hate.”

But the trance ends abruptly, and Christabel begs that the Baron banish Geraldine, although Christabel, still under her curse, cannot speak of what she knows. But, alas, she cannot get Sir Leoline to see the truth. “And turning from his own sweet maid, / The agèd knight, Sir Leoline, / Led forth the lady Geraldine.”

The **last section** of the poem, Coleridge’s ending of Part 2, may seem wholly unconnected and irrelevant to the narrative that precedes it, but it makes sense if we understand it as a “companion” poem offering yet another version of the fundamental problem of “Christabel.” The poem’s references to a small child, “a limber elf, / Singing, dancing to itself” is thought to be Coleridge addressing his own infant Hartley, the “fairy thing with red round cheeks.” In this short poem, however, the father’s love is so excessive that it is transformed into its opposite: “And pleasures flow in so thick and fast / Upon his heart, that he at last / Must needs express his love’s excess / With words of unmeant bitterness.”

The lesson here—the same lesson lost on Sir Leoline—is that one must be vigilant of both words and thoughts, for though they may seem harmless enough, yet they will return with a deadly power. “Perhaps ’tis pretty to force together / Thoughts so all unlike each other . . . To dally with wrong that does no harm . . . Such giddiness of heart and brain / Comes seldom save from rage and pain, / So talks as it’s most used to do.” ❀

Critical Views on “Christabel”

DENNIS M. WELCH ON THE THEME OF INCEST IN
THE POEM

[Dennis M. Welch is the author of numerous articles on the Romantic poets. His work includes “Blake’s *Songs of Experience: The World Lost and Found*” and “Blake’s Book of Los and Visionary Economics.” In the excerpt below from his article “*Christabel, King Lear, and the Cinderella Folktale*,” Welch discusses the poem as a ballad, the narrative elements of which are revisions of the paternal abuse found in Shakespeare and the fairytale, which identify the poem’s most terrifying theme of incest.]

Source studies of Coleridge’s mysterious ballad *Christabel* have been numerous and yet tentative. In the well-researched and well-known *Road to Tryermaine*, Arthur Nethercot admits that he “has not found any one whole story on which . . . the poem depends.” Similarly, Kathleen Coburn asserts that “no central fable behind it has ever been found. . . . the traditional fables on which the narrative parts are based have been all lost sight of.” In spite of such remarks, however, several source-hunters and critics have shown that the ballad includes numerous folktale elements. Indeed, Coleridge himself, recognizing in the *Biographia Literaria* the broad and checkered reception of *Christabel* “among literary men” even before its actual publication, acknowledged with some chagrin that the ballad “pretended to be nothing more than a common Faery Tale.” Given this acknowledgment and the considerable evidence (explored in the following pages) that the ballad deals with the paternal abuse of Christabel (and *not* merely her repressed sexual fantasies, which other critics have emphasized), this essay argues that a major source underlying Coleridge’s poem is the Cinderella folktale. For variations of this tale have dealt with similar abuse and quite probably influenced the ballad through his broad reading and knowledge and especially his interest in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, which itself includes significant aspects of the Cinderella legend. Although there are many variations of the legend, which have developed in European and other cultures, several of the variations

have elements in common that Coleridge would have recognized. But, interestingly, he tried to de-emphasize some of these elements both in his criticism of *King Lear* and in his ballad. In the following pages I shall discuss variations of the folktale most akin to the play and the ballad, indicate relevant parallels between these works and their common source, and argue that the ballad's provenance helps confirm that its true though horrifying subject matter is father-daughter incest.

According to Marian Cox's seminal study of the Cinderella story, the "unlawful marriage" or relationship—a euphemism for incest between a father and daughter—characterizes one group of the story's variants and "has been utilized in the legendary history of Christian saints, in a number of medieval romances, and in . . . mysteries based on the same." For example, in the "Constance Saga," from which the medieval romance *Emare* derives, a young maiden was rejected by an unnatural father—not unlike Christabel near the end of her fragmentary tale, where Sir Leoline turned "away from his own sweet maid." And just as Leoline had once loved Christabel "so well," so in *Vita Offae Primi* an ancient king of York had loved his daughter to excess. ⟨. . .⟩

⟨A⟩s Alan Dundes observes, "Many [Cinderella] folktales begin with the queen or original mother already dead" or absent. This factor was central to one of the most important of all Cinderella tales, the legend of St. Dipne; and, as I will show, it was important to *King Lear* and especially *Christabel*. According to J. A. S. Collin de Plancy, Dipne was the lovely daughter of a pagan Irish king. After her mother died Dipne remained devoted to her memory—just as Christabel remains devoted to her deceased mother ("O mother dear! that thou wert here"). But the king—a lustful though grief-stricken man, whom Sir Leoline closely resembles in his "wroth" and "madness"—tried to induce Dipne to marry him. As he became more insistent, she sought solace at her mother's grave and counsel from her confessor, who advised her to delay the king until she could flee. ⟨. . .⟩

In a study of *King Lear* in 1934, James Bransom insinuated that an "incestuous passion" by the king for one of his daughters may have influenced his behavior. In a letter to Bransom, Freud agreed, suggesting that "the secret meaning of the tragedy" involves the king's "repressed incestuous claims on a daughter's love." But in

“Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s ‘Gradiva,’” which was published (in 1907) long before he wrote to Bransom, Freud has raised suspicions about Lear although he doubted the king’s culpability, referring to the love-test at the beginning of the play as “an improbable premiss.” (. . .)

Nonetheless, the suggestions of Freud and Bransom concerning the tragedy have been taken up by more recent scholars—and with considerable persuasiveness. For example, Arpad Pauncz has argued that “Lear not only loves his daughters; he is also in love with them, especially the youngest one.” When Cordelia shrinks from him, his anger and outrage toward her, which anticipate the reactions of Sir Leoline toward his daughter in Part II of *Christabel*, implicate the king’s real desire. As S. C. V. Statner and O. B. Goodman aver, “Cordelia’s instinctive withdrawal . . . begets Lear’s guilt-ridden rage, and he just as instinctively tries to cover the shame of having touched a forbidden place.” Thus, ironically at the very same time this father angrily disclaims his “paternal care,” “Propinquity,” and “property of blood” in Cordelia, he uses words that imply a “barbarous Scythian” appetite for “his generation.” Regarding the play’s opening love-test specifically, Mark Taylor says that Lear tries “to assert his control over the one daughter whom he loves, who has come of age, [and] who is separating herself from him”—just as *Christabel* seeks to do from Sir Leoline despite her lover’s untimely absence.

—Dennis M. Welch, “*Christabel*, *King Lear*, and the Cinderella Folktale,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 32, no. 3 (Summer 1996): pp. 291–92, 293–94, 294–95.



MARGERY DURHAM ON CHRISTABEL’S AMBIGUITY

[Margery Durham is the author of “The Mother Tongue: *Christabel* and the Language of Love.” In the excerpt below from her article, Durham discusses the ambiguity of *Christabel*’s character when she vacillates between innocence and guilt. Durham relates that ambiguity to recent psychoanalytic theory that indicates the infant’s

relationship to the mother is the source of symbol formation and language. Thus, this is a way to understand that ambiguity.]

At the time of its publication a reviewer declared *Christabel* “the most obscene Poem in the English language.” Coleridge replied, “I saw an old book in Coleorton in which the *Paradise Lost* was described as an ‘obscene poem,’ so I am in good company.” In its portrayal of innocence mixed with depravity, *Christabel* draws readers into its gothic atmosphere, and there it leaves them, intrigued and bewildered. Like most readers, I am puzzled by the way in which Coleridge clouds the innocence of his central female figure. The ambivalence he suggests can be understood, I think, by reading the poem in the light of certain passages in the poet’s notebooks, where his entries around the time he composed *Christabel* define topics in which he was deeply, even passionately interested. Most relevant to the poem are his speculations about associative thought, as it might function in the origin of both speech and moral choice. In the notebooks Coleridge speculates that language may develop from the physical contact between infant and mother. For Coleridge, culture begins at the breast, and language is indeed the mother tongue.

A considerable body of psychoanalytic theory recognizes the infant’s relationship with the mother as the source of symbol formation and therefore of language and culture, and since Coleridge himself is credited with coining the word “psychoanalytical,” it seems all the more reasonable to inquire whether any of the current theories can yield insights into his poem. Since the time of Freud and his earliest associates, Melanie Klein and those who have developed the implications of her work have further advanced our understanding of the individual’s relationship to culture, and the tensions they describe in this relationship are, I believe, analogous to the ambivalence one finds in *Christabel*. Klein’s definition of the alternative ways, which she terms “manic” and “depressive,” by which these tensions are resolved also helps us to interpret Coleridge’s work. I will therefore compare the poem with both Coleridge’s notebook speculations and Klein’s more systematically developed theory. Relevant to this comparison is the poem’s thematic resemblance, in its consideration of a fall from innocence, to *Paradise Lost*, and this parallel provides a mythic

resolution of the dilemmas, logical and psychological, which Coleridge depicts. (. . .)

Klein began her work with the common psychoanalytic assumption that all formation of symbols (all fantasy, all conceptualization, and therefore all mental relationship to the outside world) is a projection of the infant's sense of the mother's body. Ernest Jones had pointed out that nonmaternal experience can provide a pleasure similar in quality to that received from the mother. Then, when access to the original pleasure is blocked, the infant can redirect its desire to the analogous experience. Cradling and suckling thus replace the womb. These pleasures can yield to the enjoyment of solid food, and in time to babbling, to speaking, even to writing poetry. From this redirection Klein reasoned not only that the outside world is "the mother's body in an extended sense," but also "that symbolism is the foundation of all sublimation and of every talent, since it is by way of symbolic equation that things, activities and interests become the subject of libidinal phantasies." From the symbolization of infantile conflict and desire in children's play and in art, she developed her theory of reparation, according to which civilization actively remodels the world into a sublimated version of the infant's original pleasure.

Klein also found that the procedure could go wrong, and it is here that her theory first illuminates *Christabel*. If the original source of pleasure fails and no analogous equation has been made, then the former pleasures become equated with potentially analogous ones within a category of unfulfillment and therefore of pain. The child then withdraws from both the painfully tantalizing mother and the analogous outside world, and the result is paranoid delusion and inhibition, including as one extreme form the speech-inhibiting psychosis now termed autism. Putting the matter rather simply: feeding problems can thus create stuttering and, at last, silence. Most important for our study of *Christabel*, Klein maintains that neurosis and sublimation are inversions of each other and, she adds, "for some time the two follow the same path" from original pleasure to possible alternatives and back—for better or worse—to the child. (. . .)

At best, however, poetry, music, politics—all the civilized arts—become the means of creating, on the cultural level, a maternal equivalent. As we reshape the world to our satisfaction, Klein maintained, we try to recreate the life-giving environment that a

mother can no longer provide, and our standard of comparison (outside the womb) is our recollection of the earliest moments at the breast. Aesthetic balance may suggest such analogous pleasure, and I shall argue that *Christabel* also symbolizes the conflicts within the reparative struggle.

—Margery Durham, “The Mother Tongue: ‘Christabel’ and the Language of Love.” In *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, eds. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985): pp. 169–70 and 172–73.



AVERY F. GASKINS ON THE POEM AS BOTH A VERSE DRAMA AND A GOTHIC PARODY

[Avery F. Gaskins has written extensively on the Romantic period. His articles include “Coleridge: Nature, the Conversation Poems and the Structure of Meditation” and “Wordsworth’s Stolen Boat: Some Problems of Interpretation.” In the excerpt below from his article “Dramatic Form, ‘Double Voice,’ and ‘Carnivalization’ in ‘Christabel,’” Gaskins discusses the poem as a type of verse drama containing more than one narrative voice and, at the same time, a poem that can be read as a parody of the Gothic novels in which the authority of established customs and institutions are subverted.]

In the fall of 1797, Coleridge finished a verse drama *Osorio* as he was also continuing work on his share of *Lyrical Ballads*. Among a number of poems in varying stages of completion upon which Coleridge worked at this time was “Christabel.” Constructing a dramatic text for *Osorio* had left him with the habit of developing action through dialogue, especially questions and answers, a habit which he carried over into the writing of Part I of “Christabel.” The result is a kind of hybrid text which is not drama, but has some of the feel of drama. For example, after using just thirteen lines setting the scene, some unidentified narrator begins a series of dialogues

with a second unidentified narrator in the form of questions and answers:

Is the night chilly and dark?
The night is chilly, but not dark.
The thin gray cloud is spread on high,
It covers but not hides the sky.
The moon is behind, and at the full;
And yet she looks both small and dull.
The night is chill, the cloud is gray:
'Tis a month before the month of May,
And spring comes slowly up this way.

Exchanges such as this dominate Part I up to The Conclusion and are used by the author in the ways he might have used a single, omniscient narrator: to add further detail to the setting, to advance the action, to establish motives for the actions of characters, and to call special attention to important moments.

It may occur to some persons that these exchanges may not be dialogues at all and that the questions posed are merely rhetorical devices utilized by a single narrator. To such a suggestion, I would have a number of answers. First, the narrator would have to establish a presence or persona as Byron does for himself in *Don Juan* before using rhetorical questions for effect. In the thirteen lines leading up to the first exchange, no such persona has been established. Second, since there is already firmly set up in the opening lines a pattern of narration which is assertive, there was little economy for the narrator to have broken in with a question to himself or the reader. Rather than letting line 15 "The night is chilly, but not dark" serve as an answer, if the narrator had moved to it directly, the story could have been narrated just as effectively. There must have been another reason for introducing the question at that point, and I feel it was to establish a questioner. Third, although a question such as "Is the night chilly and dark?" may seem rhetorical since the questioner could have had the answer merely by observing, there are many others which seem to be genuine requests for information that the questioner does not have. For example, the questioner has to be told why Christabel is outside the castle by herself and at night and in the bedroom scene requests an interpretation of Geraldine's aside and to whom it is addressed. (. . .)

The narrators speak the language of pious gossips. Their role in the story is to be feckless observers, often horrified or morally

outraged at what they are observing, but without the power to intercede. In a number of places when they sense that Christabel is being morally or physically threatened, they are reduced to ritualistic prayer, “Jesu, Maria, shield her well!” In The Conclusion to Part I, as they reflect on the moral implications of what has transpired in Christabel’s bedroom, they become indignant and do a great deal of clucking about. After establishing in the opening that “It was a lovely sight to see / The lady Christabel, when she / Was praying at the old oak tree,” they lament the fallen condition of Christabel:

O sorrow and shame! Can this be she,
The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree?
And lo! the worker of these harms,
That holds the maiden in her arms
Seems to slumber still and mild,
As a mother with her child.
A star hath set, a star hath risen,
O Geraldine! since arms of thine
Have been the lovely lady’s prison.

They understand their own lack of power to correct the situation and must rely on the hope that Christabel herself will turn to prayer and bring about her own salvation: “And this she knows, in joys and woes, / The saints will aid if men will call: / For the blue sky bends over all!” (. . .)

That “Christabel” may have parodic qualities has not escaped the notice of critics. Both Edward Duffy and Edward Dramin have suggested that “Christabel” may be a parody which has as its target the Gothic Novel. Duffy finds the parody in the characterizations, and Dramin feels the entire work parodies the major conventions of the genre.

However, as has already been stated, “carnivalization” uses parody, but goes beyond it in the sociological and ideological implications it creates, and in “Christabel,” I can find parodic overtones here and there that work toward Bakhtinian “carnivalization.” The objects in these cases are Sir Leoline and the class he represents. Since the manuscript of “Christabel” is a fragment lacking a conclusion, the action leading up to where the narrative stops has the potential of developing into a genuine domestic tragedy concerning an aristocratic family, or a parodic treatment thereof, and parodic language, where it is found in the poem, creates the effect of carnivalization.

Without imputing any conscious intent on Coleridge's part, I should like to suggest that the carnivalization of the De Vaux household may be a by-product of Coleridge's radical political activities from 1795 to 1798. The Pantisocracy scheme had been an attempt to escape the class structure of England and set up a more democratic society in America. Since 1795, he had been making a number of public and private statements attacking privileged classes and urging governmental reform. During this period, Coleridge exchanged letters with the radical, John Thelwell, who had been tried for treason for supporting the French Revolution and advocating the overthrow of aristocratic power in government. His admiration for Thelwell was so great that in July of 1797, just as he was beginning to write "Christabel," he invited Thelwell to come visit him in Nether Stowey with the idea that he might settle there permanently and the two men might exchange ideas more frequently and easily.

—Avery F. Gaskins, "Dramatic Form, 'Double Voice,' and 'Carnivalization' in 'Christabel,'" *European Romantic Review* 4, no. 1 (Summer 1993): pp. 2–3, 4, 7.



ROSEMARY ASHTON ON COLERIDGE'S INDECISIVENESS IN REGARDS TO GERALDINE

[Rosemary Ashton is the author of *George Eliot: A Life* and *The Mill on the Floss: A Natural History*. In the excerpt below from her biography of Coleridge, Ashton discusses some of the reasons for Coleridge's difficulties in finishing "Christabel," difficulties which are in part attributable to what she sees as his indecisiveness concerning the guilt of Lady Geraldine. She cites biographical evidence to account for that indecisiveness.]

Coleridge just could not find, or create, the conditions under which he could finish 'Christabel'. 'I tried & tried, & nothing would come of it', he confessed in a moment of plain, unvarnished truth-telling in an otherwise complicated and contradictory account to Josiah Wedgwood on 1 November. A notebook entry for 30 October speaks

eloquently of his problem: 'He knew not what to do—something, he felt, must be done—he rose, drew his writing-desk suddenly before him—sate down, took the pen—& found that he knew not what to do.'

Wordsworth, too, saw the problem clearly enough. Surely Coleridge is the subject of a fragment he wrote at this time:

Deep read in experience perhaps he is nice,
On himself is so fond of bestowing advice
And of puzzling at what may befall,
So intent upon baking his bread without leaven
And of giving to earth the perfection of heaven,
That he thinks and does nothing at all.

It was in Volume II of *Lyrical Ballads* that Wordsworth included 'A Character, in the antithetical Manner', which Coleridge recognized as a 'true sketch' of himself. In addition to the 'weight' and 'levity' and the 'bustle and sluggishness' Wordsworth discerns in his friend's face there is the following telling paradox:

There's indifference, alike when he fails and succeeds,
And attention full ten times as much as there needs. { . . . }

The unfinished poem 'Christabel' presents the student of Coleridge with several problems. Questions arise about how it would have ended and about its metre, which Coleridge claimed was experimental and new. Though not published until 1816, the poem was known to, and admired by, a number of Coleridge's acquaintances from Carlyon and others who heard him declaim Part I in the Hartz Mountains in 1799 to his many readings of the two parts in literary circles in the Lakes and later in London between 1800 and 1816. Several manuscripts in different hands survive; and the two most successful poets of the age, Scott and Byron, heard it read from a manuscript and imitated it in poems of their own which *preceded* the original in their date of publication.

We have therefore a case of a poem existing in slightly variant forms which were, in a sense, public property before publication. (*The Prelude* is, of course, a greater example of the same phenomenon.) 'Christabel' is a nightmare narrative with a Gothic setting, a supernatural aspect, and an unsolved mystery. Thus far it has affinities with 'The Ancient Mariner'. But there are striking differences too. The mystery in 'Christabel' is whether the Lady

Geraldine, who casts a spell on the heroine, is herself the innocent victim of an evil enchantment or a kind of incarnation of evil. What there is of the poem raises the question, but does not answer it.

In Part I Geraldine, whom Christabel finds in a wood by moonlight, says she has been abducted by 'five warriors' and has 'lain entranced' in some versions, or 'lain in fits' in others. She is invited into Christabel's father's castle, with repeated crossing of thresholds: 'they crossed the moat', 'over the threshold of the gate', 'they crossed the court', 'they passed the hall'. Once over the final threshold and inside Christabel's chamber, the strange lady engages in a muttered verbal tussle with the spirit of Christabel's dead mother. 'Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!' says Geraldine in an echo of one of Macbeth's witches, as she puts a malignant spell on Christabel, who thereafter is unable to warn her father about this dangerous guest.

Christabel has been initiated into guilt and needs to be saved. The question remains unanswered as to how this would have happened. Coleridge would presumably have had to decide not only whether Geraldine was evil in herself or under another's spell, but also how her influence was to be negated. At some point after 1816 he apparently told Gillman that in the continuation which he went on promising in every edition from 1816 on, except the last in 1834, Geraldine was to have been defeated by the return of Christabel's absent lover.

We can make a guess about why Coleridge found it impossible to finish the poem. At its centre is the heroine's initiation into what seems like sexual guilt. She acts hospitably and is violated by Geraldine. Famously, Christabel gets into bed and watches Geraldine undress. There follows the well-known stanza which caused Shelley to scream and which influenced Keats in the dream scenes of both 'Lamia' and 'The Eve of St Agnes':

Beneath the lamp the lady bowed,
And slowly rolled her eyes around;
Then drawing in her breath aloud,
Like one that shuddered, she unbound
The cincture from beneath her breast:
Her silken robe, and inner vest,
Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side—

[Are lean and old and foul of hue]
A sight to dream of, not to tell!
O shield her! Shield sweet Christabel!

The line in brackets appears only in certain manuscript versions, one of which Hazlitt saw and gleefully restored (slightly misquoting it) in his review of the poem in 1816. He used its omission from the published version to suggest both the strong sexual element in the poem and Coleridge's timidity in handling it: 'There is something disgusting at the bottom of his subject, which is but ill glossed over.' Of the many parodies of 'Christabel', that by William Maginn in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1819 picks up something, boldly making Geraldine a man in disguise. The bewildered Christabel finds herself pregnant, and Maginn asks cheekily:

Pale Christabel, who could divine
That its sire was the Ladie Geraldine?

This is all good, if not clean, fun. It also gets to the heart of 'Christabel' as a poem which gives expression to sexual guilt and compulsion.

Coleridge was a prey to guilty nightmares of emotional and sexual desires. Such experiences lie behind the pseudo-sexual attraction-cum-repulsion in 'Christabel' which Hazlitt was the first to spot. The Gothic setting with its melodramatic and potentially comic elements—the owls, the crowing cock, the castle clock, the mastiff bitch, the midnight excursion, the ghost of Christabel's mother—is used by Coleridge much as the Gothic novelists used such trappings, as a distancing device to render the sexual and the sinful acceptable subjects.

—Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996): pp. 182, 183–85.



JENNIFER FORD ON CHRISTABEL'S DISTURBED SLEEP

[Jennifer Ford is the author of *Coleridge on Dreaming*. In the excerpt below, Ford discusses "Christabel" in terms of a

poetical description of disturbed sleep, elements of which are so disturbing that Christabel is haunted even when she is awake. Ford cites biographical evidence that explains why Coleridge's treatment of sin in this poem contradicts his moral beliefs; the poem was written during the period of the *Lyrical Ballads*, a project for which Coleridge's contribution was to write poems of the supernatural.]

Some poems did arise from that long illness, most notably 'The Pains of Sleep'. Thomas Poole commented that 'The Pains of Sleep' was a 'magnificent poetical description of disturbed sleep', But other poems included with the publication of 'The Pains of Sleep' may also have arisen from the illness. Christabel, too, becomes the subject for a poetical discussion of disturbed sleep. Her retreat to the solitude of the woods is very similar to her retreat within a world of dream and sleep. She ventures out, 'a furlong from the castle gate', to pray for the safety of her lover, but she also ventures into the somnial space of her mind, where, in versions of the poem drafted between 1797 and 1801, she moans and leaps as she dreams of her knight. Coleridge, as poet, also effects a double retreat: first into the world of imagination to write the poem, and second, into the fitful sleep of Christabel, with which he empathises. This sleep is encountered not merely in Christabel's sleeping life: she recognises features of it when she thinks she is awake. As Geraldine undresses, the narrative poet reveals how her

silken robe, and inner vest,
Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
Behold! Her bosom and half her side—
A sight to dream of, not to tell!

Perhaps the 'sight' of Geraldine is akin to Christabel's dreams of her beloved knight, dreams which make her 'moan and leap' and which cannot be freely articulated because they belong in a special somnial space. Such visions and dreams are inexorably unutterable. When the night has passed, and Christabel awakens and greets her father, she does not seem entirely sure that she has awoken, for the power of her dream-world is still so strong, as is the power of Geraldine: 'Christabel in dizzy trance, / Stumbling on the unsteady ground— / Shudder'd aloud, with a hissing sound.' The dizzy trance, and the earlier references to moaning and groaning in sleep, suggest that Christabel is no stranger to disturbed sleep: in fact, with 'open eyes'

she is described as 'Asleep, and dreaming fearfully'. In this dizzy trance, Christabel is said to be bereft of her thoughts—'her thoughts are gone'—in much the same way as, when she first awoke, she was in such a 'perplexity of mind' that she thought she had sinned. The remnants of her uneasy dream, and the ease with which the somnial space is apparently invoked in waking life by Geraldine, are significantly stronger in the earlier drafts of the poem. Her retreat into the forest and into fearful dreams closely parallels Coleridge's notion of a 'wild storehouse' of poems, a space which houses poetic materials.

Despite his letter to Poole, Coleridge was not always confident of his ability to gain access to those strange and often painful regions of the mind. Often, he did not want to gain access at all, for those regions were totally incompatible with his conscious morality. There are countless instances of the shocking realisation that there seem to be two different parts of the self, a division which is most potently manifested in and through the processes of dreaming and in dreams themselves. This realisation was particularly evident in times of deep despair, caused by his opium taking. In a letter to Matthew Coates, from December 1803, Coleridge complains of

the Horrors of my Sleep, and Night-screams (so loud & so frequent as to make me almost a Nuisance in my own house [D]) seemed to carry beyond mere Body—counterfeiting, as it were, the Tortures of Guilt, and what we are told of the Punishments of a spiritual World—I am at length a Convalescent—but dreading such another Bout as much as I dare dread a Thing which has not immediate connection with my Conscience.

His genuine lack of knowledge as to why the 'Horrors' of his sleep visit him is counterbalanced by the implied realisation that those same horrors must be in some way connected to his conscience and to his own behaviours. Illness and the onslaught of yet more dreadful dreams are described as parallel fears. The want of a connection between what is dreamt and what is conscious to the self during waking life becomes indicative of a self which is perceived as fundamentally dislodged and disrupted: the experience of dreams, an experience which is intensified in nightmares, creates the potential for the paradoxically total fragmentation of the self. That Coleridge dreads and describes such a dream as 'a *Thing* which has no immediate connection with my Conscience' (my emphasis) immediately indicates the extent to which the dream can divide the

mind into two entirely different regions with entirely different moralities: those ‘Tortures of Guilt, and what we are told of the

instrumentality of a series of appropriate and symbolic visual and audital Images spontaneously rising before him, and these so clear and so distinct as at length to ~~become~~ overpower his first suspicions of their *subjective* nature and to become *objective* for him—i.e. in *his own* belief of their kind and origin—still the Thoughts, the Reasonings, the Grounds, the Deductions, the Facts illustrative or in proof, and the Conclusions, remain the same!

What Coleridge extracts from his hypothesis is both the *validity* of Swedenborg’s facts and conclusions and the *incorrect reasoning* under which those conclusions were formed. Because Swedenborg was in a unique dreaming state, and because there were certain faculties within his mind that were still functioning as though he were fully awake, he was unable to distinguish what he saw from what he thought he saw: images both clear and distinct from his own mind are eventually seen as objective. (. . .)

As a poet whose primary concerns in the *Lyrical Ballads* were to be ‘directed to persons and characters supernatural’, Coleridge shows an interest in witchcraft and apparitions that becomes even more intriguing. A comment he made about *Christabel* is revealing of his thoughts on ghosts and apparitions. In October 1804, in a cryptic note written three years after the poem, he makes a tantalising reference to Geraldine’s character: ‘Saturday Morning . . . a most tremendous Rain storm with Lightning & Thunder, one Clap of which burst directly over . . . Vivid flashes in mid day, the terror without the beauty. —A ghost by day time / Geraldine.’ Years later, on 1 July 1833, he claimed that the reason why he had not yet finished *Christabel* was not because he did not know how to finish it, but rather because he could not ‘carry on with equal success the execution of the idea—the most difficult . . . that can be attempted to Romantic Poetry— . . . witchery by daylight’. Although this comment has often been seen as another attempt to rationalise why he had not completed the poem, it is also highly likely that Coleridge’s reasoning is quite correct. For over thirty years, he attempted to understand the often cited/sighted occurrences of ghosts, witchcraft activities and visions. If he had not yet ascertained in his own mind the exact explanation for such phenomena, he could not finish his poem.

His description of Geraldine as a ‘ghost by day time’ sheds light on his thinking on dreams and visions, and the ways in which an understanding of witchcraft could further elucidate the mysteries of dreams. His comment also reveals the important connections he perceived between the studies of witchcraft and those on dreaming. From the time that Geraldine encounters Christabel by the ‘broad breasted old oak tree’, and particularly those times surrounding awakening and sleeping, it seems that it is indeed the ‘true witching time’.

—Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998): pp. 46–47, 96–97.

