

could make such a leap! That particular one Coleridge's friend Wordsworth could not have made, strong as he was in poetic imagination. It implies almost something spectral, superearthly, something uncanny. And what an exquisitely musical rhythm the thought weaves about itself for its poetic incarnation.

—George H. Calvert, *Coleridge, Shelley, Goethe: Biographic Aesthetic Studies*, 1880, pp. 12–16

CHRISTABEL

GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON (1816)

Christabel—I won't have you sneer at *Christabel*—it is a fine wild poem.

—George Gordon, Lord Byron, letter to John Murray, September 30, 1816

JOHN GIBSON LOCKHART “ON THE LAKE SCHOOL OF POETRY: III. COLERIDGE” (1819)

While admitting that Coleridge has displayed his abilities as a talented poet, capable of writing an accomplished and carefully crafted work such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, John Gibson Lockhart's review is primarily focused on *Christabel*. In it, he delivers mostly negative commentary, accusing Coleridge of suffering from a serious lack of determination and failing to have formulated a cohesive plan for its completion, content to leave it as a mere fragment. Lockhart suggests that Coleridge has not really been present to himself while working on the poem: “It does not appear that even the language of a poem can arise spontaneously throughout like a strain of music, any more than the colours of the painter will go and arrange themselves on his canvass, while he is musing on the subject in another room.” However, Lockhart mitigates, ever so slightly, some of the condemnation he has leveled at *Christabel*, in admitting that the finished product might have been a strong work. All in all, though, Lockhart delivers a scathing review, warning the unwary reader that “[h]e that is determined to try every thing by the standard of what is called common sense . . . had better not open this production.”



Christabel, as our readers are aware, is only a fragment, and had been in existence for many years antecedent to the time of its publication. Neither has the author assigned any reason either for the long delay of its appearance—or for the imperfect state in which he has at last suffered it to appear. In all probability he had waited long in the hope of being able to finish it to his satisfaction; but finding that he was never revisited by a mood sufficiently genial—he determined to let the piece be printed as it was. It is not in the history of *Christabel* alone that we have seen reason to suspect Mr. Coleridge of being by far too passive in his notions concerning the mode in which a poet ought to deal with his muse. It is very true, that the best conceptions and designs are frequently those which occur to a man of fine talents, without having been painfully sought after: but the exertion of the Will is always necessary in the worthy execution of them. It behooves a poet, like any other artist, after he has fairly conceived the idea of his piece, to set about realising it in good earnest, and to use his most persevering attention in considering how all its parts are to be adapted and conjoined. It does not appear that even the language of a poem can arise spontaneously throughout like a strain of music, any more than the colours of the painter will go and arrange themselves on his canvass, while he is musing on the subject in another room. Language is a material which it requires no little labour to reduce into beautiful forms,—a truth of which the ancients were, above all others, well and continually aware. For although vivid ideas naturally suggest happy expressions, yet the latter are, as it were, only insulated traits or features, which require much management in the joining, and the art of the composer is seen in the symmetry of the whole structure. Now, in many respects Mr Coleridge seems too anxious to enjoy the advantages of an inspired writer, and to produce his poetry at once in its perfect form—like the palaces which spring out of the desert in complete splendour at a single rubbing of the lamp in the Arabian Tale. But carefulness above all is necessary to a poet in these latter days, when the ordinary medium through which things are viewed is so very far from being poetical—and when the natural strain of scarcely any man's associations can be expected to be of that sort which is most akin to high and poetical feeling. There is no question there are many, very many passages in the poetry of this writer, which shew what excellent things may be done under the impulse of a happy moment—passages in which the language—above all things—has such aerial graces as would have been utterly beyond the reach of any person who might have attempted to produce the like, without being able to lift his spirit into the same ecstatic mood. It is not to be denied, however, that among the whole of his poems

there are only a few in the composition of which he seems to have been blessed all throughout with the same sustaining energy of afflatus. The *Mariner*—we need not say—is one of these. The poem “*Love*” is another—and were *Christabel* completed as it has been begun, we doubt not it would be allowed by all who are capable of tasting the merits of such poetry, to be a third—and, perhaps, the most splendid of the three.

It is impossible to gather from the part which has been published any conception of what is the meditated conclusion of the story of *Christabel*. Incidents can never be fairly judged of till we know what they lead to. Of those which occur in the first and second cantos of this poem, there is no doubt many appear at present very strange and disagreeable, and the sooner the remainder comes forth to explain them, the better. One thing is evident, that no man need sit down to read *Christabel* with any prospect of gratification, whose mind has not rejoiced habitually in the luxury of visionary and superstitious reveries. He that is determined to try every thing by the standard of what is called common sense, and who has an aversion to admit, even in poetry, of the existence of things more than are dreamt of in philosophy, had better not open this production, which is only proper for a solitary couch and a midnight taper. Mr Coleridge is the prince of superstitious poets; and he that does not read *Christabel* with a strange and harrowing feeling of mysterious dread, may be assured that his soul is made of impenetrable stuff.

—John Gibson Lockhart, “On the Lake School of Poetry: III. Coleridge,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, October 1819, pp. 8–9

JOHN STERLING “ON COLERIDGE’S *CHRISTABEL*” (1828)

John Sterling’s commentary on *Christabel* is written in defense of a poem he believes has been outrageously attacked by those who cannot appreciate its beauty. Sterling congratulates Coleridge for being the first English poet in 150 years to revive the fantasy and magic of the medieval romance. For Sterling, Coleridge is a man of genius who addressed his poem to a readership that welcomed a return to the mystical qualities of that tradition.



It is common to hear everything which Mr. Coleridge has written condemned with bitterness and boldness. His poems are called extravagant; and his prose

works, poems too, and of the noblest breed, are pronounced to be mystical, obscure, metaphysical, theoretical, unintelligible, and so forth; just as the same phrases have over and over been applied, with as much sagacity, to Plato, St. Paul, Cudworth, and Kant. But *Christabel* is the only one of his writings which is ever treated with unmingled contempt; and I wish to examine with what justice this feeling has been excited. In the first place it should be remembered, that, at the time when it was written, the end of the last century, no attempt had been made in England by a man of genius for a hundred and fifty years to embody in poetry those resources which feudal manners and popular superstitions supply to the imagination. To those who care not for the mythology of demoniac terrors and wizard enchantment, Mr. Coleridge did not write. He did not write for Bayles and Holbachs; nor did he write for Glanvils or Jameses: but for those who, not believing the creed of the people, not holding that which was in a great degree the substantial religion of Europe for a thousand years, yet see in these superstitions the forms under which devotion presented itself to the minds of our forefathers, the grotesque mask assumed for a period, like the veil on the face of Moses, as a covering for the glory of God. Persons who think this obsolete faith to be merely ridiculous, will of course think so of *Christabel*. He who perceives in them a beauty of their own, and discovers all the good to which in those ages they were necessary accompaniments, will not object to have them represented, together with all the attributes and associations which rightly belong to them, and in which genius, while it raises them from their dim cemetery, delights again to array them.

—John Sterling, “On Coleridge’s *Christabel*,”
1828, *Essays and Tales*, ed. Julius Charles Hare,
1848, vol. 1, pp. 101–102

EDGAR ALLAN POE “THE RATIONALE OF VERSE” (1848)

Out of a hundred readers of *Christabel*, fifty will be able to make nothing of its rhythm, while forty-nine of the remaining fifty will, with some ado, fancy they comprehend it, after the fourth or fifth perusal. The one out of the whole hundred who shall both comprehend and admire it at first sight—must be an unaccountably clever person—and I am by far too modest to assume, for a moment, that that very clever person is myself.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Rationale of Verse,” 1848