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COLERIDGE
The Muse and the Albatross
by
Jenny Fabian



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Illustration opposite:
'Mad Poet'
by Michael Whelan
1992

Jenny Fabian spent her formative years at a boys' public boarding school before attending Francis Holland C of E School for Girls. She married twice and had four children. After dropping out to become a so-called "unrepentant child of the sub-culture", she dropped further out to work with horses and greyhounds. She returned to the normal world about 2000 and now lives in London. She has written for the *Guardian,* the *Observer, Harper/Queen, Mojo, Uncut, Field, Wisden*, and has contributed to various anthologies.



In 1800, when William Wordsworth rejected Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem 'Christabel' from the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads,* it precipitated a crisis of creativity for Coleridge. It would be another sixteen years before 'Christabel' was finally published in *Sibylline Leaves*, aptly-named, for Coleridge's poetry is curiously prescient, particularly in his representation of women as portents of his own fear of failure.

This essay will examine how Coleridge's imagination is driven by this fear of failure, the extent to which the women in his poetry are polarised, and the power they hold over speech, both to inspire and suppress. In 'The Eolian Harp' and 'Kubla Khan' I will examine the conflict between the earthly and the transcendental and the emergence of the Abyssinian maid as muse, with the idea that Coleridge sacrifices himself to her power. I will show how the fear of failure becomes represented as an inability to speak in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and how polarisation of women appears in the form of 'Heaven's Mother' and 'Life-in-Death'. Rituals of crime and punishment in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' illustrate the implicit symbolic violence of Coleridge's imagination that exists beyond the threshold of consciousness. The motif of thresholds is further explored in 'Christabel', which I will link with the Gothic symbolism that Coleridge employs to demonstrate the effects of evil on innocence; here Geraldine is the ultimate seducer in Coleridge's pantheon of female representations, a lamia-like figure with hypnotic powers. Finally, in 'Dejection: An Ode', I will argue how, by acknowledging his loss of the transforming power of the imagination, this loss becomes transformed into a presence that enables Coleridge to explore his creative failure.

> J.B. Beer, who describes Coleridge as a 'visionary', writes:
> at times, he hoped to discover the ideal woman, who should be his inspiration; and at times the "Ideal woman" became, like Solomon's Beloved, or the celestial bride of Jacob Boehme, the image of a psychological state – the recovery of Wisdom and the lost Shechinah'.(1) (Beer 1959, 270)

If Coleridge's women represent a sense of divine knowledge, such as the sibyls of antiquity or the Abyssinian maid, they also represent the polar extreme of evil intention, like the intimidating Life-in-Death and the hypnotic Geraldine. Conflict between active and passive is intrinsic to the dynamics of Coleridge's poetry and represents the competing desires for freedom and engulfment. Camille Paglia argues that 'Coleridge's protagonists are always sexually dual…The poet is feminine because passive to his own vision'. (Paglia 1991, 328-9) For the poet to abandon himself to his muse involves a form of active submission, and beneath the passive surface there is deep mental activity; consequently, the movement in Coleridge's poetry oscillates between the doing and being done to, and it is hard to be sure who is ultimately in control.

This brings the nature of Coleridge's will under scrutiny; he talks in *Biographia Literaria* of the 'magical power' of the imagination that has to be put into action 'by the will and understanding'. (Shawcross II 1973, 12) Yet Coleridge is aware of his own lack of inner strength. He writes in his Notebook of 1803: 'My nature requires another nature for its support', and later, in 1808, 'My inner mind does not justify the Thought that I possess a Genius – my *Strength* is so very small in proportion to my Power'. (Perry 2002, 48, 106) He contrasts himself with the Oak tree, he too 'grows nearly as high and spreads as large, as the Oak – but the *wood*, the heart of Oak, is wanting – *the vital* works vehemently, but the *Immortal* is not with it –' (106)

T.S. Eliot writes of Coleridge: 'for a few years he had been visited by the Muse (I know of no poet to whom this hackneyed metaphor is better applicable) and thenceforth was a haunted man'. (Eliot 1975, 69) Coleridge was also visited and haunted by an impossible love, a love bound up in the fracture of his friendship with Wordsworth and eventual exclusion from the Wordsworth circle. This fracture also concerned Coleridge's relationship with Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law, which placed her, as Richard Holmes writes:

> in a complex and ambiguous position, both a symbol of possible renewal in Coleridge's emotional life, and also a fantasy-figure…[and] a further hold on the intimate heart of Wordsworth's household'. (Holmes 1998, 295)

Coleridge appears to have suffered from a sense of exclusion from an early age; in *Biographia Literaria* he refers to himself as 'an orphan', although this was not the case. (Shawcross 1973, 10) The underlying theme of abandonment in Coleridge's poetry can be linked to the mother/child relationship examined by Barbara Schapiro, a relationship that is, Schapiro writes, 'internalised and results in a corresponding split in the ego'. (Schapiro 1983, x) As a result of this, a sense of guilt informs Coleridge's poetry; in 'Christabel', when the eponymous heroine is abandoned for the second time (first by her mother, in childbirth, then by her father, under the spell of Geraldine) she is only receiving, as Schapiro writes: 'ultimately the retribution she expects'. (Schapiro 1983, 83)

Anthony John Harding notes 'that for Coleridge the idea of mother-love is closely associated with prayer and the ability to pray'. (Harding 1985, 213-4) Coleridge links prayer and sleep with a state of innocence; it is when Christabel is asleep, 'Who, praying always, prays in sleep', that Geraldine imposes her spell of silence. (Abrams 2000, 449) Coleridge's relationship with sleep was ambivalent; as well as the gateway to dreaming, described by Jean Hall as 'the slumber of the conscious self which opens the profoundest depths in ourselves – the unconscious primordial depths', it was later to become a fearful state. (Hall 1991, 65) In full opium addiction Coleridge longed for oblivion without dreams, perhaps like the 'lifeless ocean' at the bottom of Kubla's 'sacred river', but he was even to be excluded from this release. (Abrams 2000, 440) By 1800 Coleridge's Notebooks show evidence that women that might previously have found form in his poetry now pursued him in nightmares:

> A most frightful Dream of a Woman whose features were blended with darkness catching hold of my right eye & attempting to pull it out – I caught hold of her arm fast – a horrid feel…the Woman's name Ebn Ebn Thalud (2) – When I awoke, my right eyelid swelled – (Perry 2002, 19)

This hallucinatory creature is attacking the very symbol of the visionary, the eye, and the gateway to the soul.

Coleridge anticipates the Decadents and Symbolists of the late nineteenth century in his use of symbolism to represent and unify an idea: 'An IDEA, in the *highest* sense of that word, cannot be conveyed but by a symbol; and, except in geometry, all symbols of necessity involve an apparent contradiction'. (Shawcross 1973, 100) In his quest to represent the division that lies at the heart of meaning Coleridge veers between Christian and pagan iconography, and his images of women, serpents, moons, lutes, trees, et al, are hospitable to so many meanings that they can resist definitive interpretation. Harding writes:

> …in Coleridge's *poetry* the perception of division or opposition very often shows itself in the form of a threat not to the stability of outward things, nor even to psychic stability as such, but to *the very possibility of poetic utterance itself*. (Harding 1985, 210)

This dominant theme of the threat to 'poetic utterance' becomes the very fulcrum on which 'Dejection: An Ode' operates. In typical contradictory fashion, Coleridge's loss of the creative muse becomes the actual source of his inspiration.

For Coleridge, women are linked on the one hand to joy and the imagination, on the other to fear and daemonic forces. Julie Carlson asks:

> What should we make of a man whose writings on women were often manifestly unsympathetic but who…more than any other male romantic writer, made "femininity" his subject position?' (Carlson 2002, 203)

I will be suggesting that through this 'subject position' Coleridge both subverts and represents his fear of failure, abandonment, and loss of the poetic voice.

The Muse of Conflict

> *And that simplest lute,*
> *Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!*
> *How by the desultory breeze caress'd,*
> *Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,*
> *It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs*
> *Tempt to repeat the wrong!*
> *(The Eolian Harp)*

Coleridge writes in *Biographia Literaria:* '"The man that hath not music in his soul" (3) can indeed never be a genuine poet…the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of imagination'. (Shawcross II 1973, 14) Consequently, Wordsworth's wounding criticism of 'Christabel' as '"discordant in its character"' was a threat to Coleridges's entire creative ethos. (Holmes 1998, 285) The success of Coleridge's poetry lies in harmonies built on juxtaposition and contrast; the 'mingled measure' in 'Kubla Khan' suggests how the poetic power, as Coleridge writes, 'reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities'. (Abrams 2000, 440; Shawcross II 1973, 12) Like the 'sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!' opposites in Coleridge's poetry exist in a state of mutual conflict. (Abrams 2000, 440) Schapiro writes: 'The seed of English Romanticism…is conflict, conflict that has both an internal and an external aspect'. (Schapiro 1983, xi) Schapiro qualifies this by addressing Coleridge's ambivalence towards 'his unresolved attachment to the mother imago', and argues that Coleridge's self-reproof of his passive nature, his allusions to sleep, and his use of 'breast and oral images…suggest a struggle to resist a regressive tendency'. (Schapiro 1983, xi, 63) However, this lapse into the passive is an essential element in the working of Coleridge's imagination.

The three Conversation poems written in the West Country during the early days of Colerdige's marriage to Sara Fricker expose the seeds of conflict between the domestic microcosm and the untamed forces of Nature. Holmes writes: 'Coleridge's pastoral world is explicitly "sacred", and the Creator's presence is felt in a tradition of Christian mysticism'. (Holmes 1998, 183) In this sense, Coleridge is operating in a Miltonic way, to 'justify the ways of God to man', and assuming a medieval view of religion. (Milton 1667, 3)

Nature is seen as proof of God's divine powers; to identify God *with* Nature was coming too close to the heresy of pantheism, an idea that Coleridge found himself dangerously flirting with.

In 'The Eolian Harp' there is evidence of Coleridge's desires beginning to polarise between the earthly and the transcendental. The framing image is domestic, 'Our cot o'ergrown', from which the poet's imagination radiates and merges with the twilight that surrounds him and his silent listener, 'My pensive Sara!' (Abrams 2000, 419) As the poet balances between the concrete and the abstract, he hesitates, and there is a shift in register as the final line in the first stanza is cut short: 'The stilly murmur of the distant sea / Tells us of silence'. (419) Apprehension of the fear of failure lies buried in this half-line description of a silent horizon, a place beyond words. After the break, the sentence is picked up again, 'And that simplest lute', as the poet moves back to the concrete, for the silence must be filled. (419) The 'lute… Like some coy maid' becomes the metaphor for Coleridge's sensibility. (419) Paglia suggests that 'Coleridge, not Sara, is the coy maid. His ecstatic self-projections are always feminine'. (Paglia 1991, 319) 'Caressed' by the 'breeze' of his imagination, the poet as passive feminine submits to 'a soft witchery of sound' and enters a pagan 'Fairy-Land'. (Abrams 2000, 419) The air that was 'so hushed' at the end of the first stanza has now become 'a world so filled' as the music of the poet's verse swells within him; at the same time there is an skilful symmetry in a retreat once more towards silence, 'the mute still air', at the end of the second stanza. (419-20) In 'The Eolian Harp' silence has a transcendental quality about it; later, in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel', silence becomes a fearful form of retribution.



'Silence' by Fuseli

Day dreaming images in the second stanza prepare us for the poet to slip away into another time, another place: 'as on the midway slope / Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon'. (420) By the end of the third stanza transformation has taken place: the poet has become 'this subject lute' at the mercy of 'random gales'. (420) Through a series of representations the everyday takes on spiritual meaning, and swept into an epiphany of universal love, all nature is symbolised by 'organic harps'. (420) This fusion of the divine with the human is an unsustainable ecstasy, and is interrupted, like a precursor of the person from Porlock, by the silent listener, whose 'more serious eye a mild reproof / Darts'. (420) Geoffrey Yarlott suggests that the opposition between Coleridge's 'intellectual breeze' and Sara, the 'meek daughter in the family of Christ' is 'partly…a device for dramatizing the conflict within himself'. (Yarlott 1967, 95) The restraining hand of orthodoxy is represented by the earthly, domestic feminine; the poet is polarised back from illicit self-intoxication into an awareness of mortality, guilt, and failure to achieve union with God. Again, silence is urged: 'For never guiltless may I speak of him, / The Incomprehensible!' (Abrams 2000, 420) Coleridge always struggled with a sense of guilt over the idea that he challenged the Creator's world with his own 'shapings of the unregenerate mind', and that this artful beauty is as insubstantial as the 'Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break'. (420) As proof of such transgression, harmony is destroyed and the poet confesses to being 'sinful and most miserable'; the 'Idle flitting phantasies' have now become associated with hubris that has threatened the serenity of the moment and lured the poet away from his worldly and domestic duties. (420)

In 'Kubla Khan', as in 'The Eolian Harp', there is a link between music and creativity, but the wailing woman in 'Kubla Khan' has a more fearful implication than the harp or the breeze; she is now a symbol of desire, and emblematic of the sublime aspect of Kubla's imagination: 'A Savage place! as holy and enchanted / As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon-lover!' (440) In contrast to the 'sinuous rills' in the 'gardens bright' of Kubla's decreed landscape, this wailing woman's implied presence emerges within a savage landscape of 'ceaseless turmoil' and 'fast thick pants'. (440) Despite the 'Oriental trappings', Yarlott observes a similarity between Kubla's paradise and the Colridgean "dell": 'it is claustrophobic, sensual, and more congenial to "art" than nature. All the more unpleasant aspects of the "dell" seem peculiarly magnified in *Kubla Khan*'. (Yarlott 1967, 151) The conflict of a landscape that is both 'holy and enchanted' becomes fused together in a metaphorical eruption of creation itself:

A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
(Abrams 2000, 440)

Here Coleridge is working the idea of the fragment as an individual unit yet part of a greater whole, as though mirroring the poem itself, which he has, perhaps ironically, sub-titled as 'A Fragment'.

Beer argues that the wailing woman 'in her very yearning expresses something of the Isis who longs for her lost Osiris'. (Beer 1959, 235) The Abyssinian maid, Beer suggests, is the poem's 'redemptive figure, the complement to the woman wailing for her demon-lover', and if she can complete the creative process, the poet 'would be the restored Osiris…He would be the Apollo, the prince of bards'. (255, 262) For Beer, some sort of conflation takes place between the wailing woman of the chasm and the damsel with a dulcimer on the mountain; they merge into an Isis-like goddess, the mythological representation of the faithful wife and devoted mother who, in the structure of Coleridge's poem, is there to restore the poet's power. The 'mingled measure' then becomes the music of man and nature in harmony. (Abrams 2000, 440)

Ted Hughes writes: 'In Kubla's Paradise, as in a Mandala, the antagonisms are

suspended in a pattern of co-existence'. (Hughes 1995, 389) However, there are intimations that this balancing act is under threat, both from within the poem, 'And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war!' and from without, the poet's creative reverie apparently interrupted by 'a person…from Porlock'. (Abrams 2000, 440, 439) Holmes suggests that the person from Porlock 'may be a psychological personification of the inhibiting factors which haunted so much of Coleridge's unfinished poetry…Like the "judicious friend" of the *Biographia*, he may be Coleridge's escape device'. (Holmes II 1998, 436) This technique of interruption, the idea of the fragment and the explanatory 'Introduction' to 'Kubla Khan' are all forms of Coleridge's self-defence against failure. While on the one hand there is the implication that the poet is some kind of magus, there is also the fear that he is as insubstantial as the dome built in the air, propped up by his own administrations: 'For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise.' (Abrams 2000, 441) With milk as a metaphor for the gift of life, it could be argued that as well as the Biblical allusion there is the subconscious desire for maternal nursing that Coleridge constantly returns to; milk also signifies the retrieval of an uncorrupted state of innocence that for Coleridge and the Romantics was a longed-for condition.

The 'honey-dew' and 'milk of Paradise' can also be linked to the 'anodyne' that induced this 'Vision in a Dream' in the first place. (439) Molly Lefebure argues that 'To study Coleridge from any aspect without taking opium into constant consideration is to ignore the clue without which there can be no correct understanding or interpretation'. (Lefebure 1977, 68) Opium was another form of escape for Coleridge, into a comforting, albeit false, visionary world, and the symbolism of the 'dome' veers between the Oriental connection of opium and female breasts. Like the bursting bubbles from 'The Eolian Harp' the 'dome' images suggest, according to Yarlott, 'moral laxity'. (Yarlott 1967, 131) This 'moral laxity' will later become tied into Coleridge's increasing dependence on opium, which, Lefebure maintains, 'extinguished him as a poet'. (Lefebure 1977, 27) Lefebure suggests that in 1816, when Coleridge was desperate for success with *Sybilline Leaves*, he exploited the romantic myth of the opium eater, and his references to anodynes, dreams and nightmares had the calculated result 'that the poems were universally accepted as opium-inspired'. (27) However, Coleridge was known for his meticulous revisions, and the fragmentary appearance of 'Kubla Khan', the outer narrative that distances the poet while at the same time bringing both outer and inner narratives under the same authorship, are all intentional devices to control the reader's response.

Whatever Faustian pact the poet has made in 'Kubla Khan' to 'revive' the Abyssinian maid's 'symphony and song' within himself, it is a precarious identity that allows him to transmute opposites into a work of art: 'that sunny dome! those caves of ice!' (Abrams 2000, 441) The poet moves into the realm of, as Humphrey House suggests, 'the seer acquainted with the undivided life'. (House 1986, 204) Holmes, however, suggests that 'the poet becomes both the controlling magus of this power, and also perhaps its sacrificial victim'. (Holmes 1998, 166)

> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice
> And close your eyes with holy dread.
> (Abrams 2000, 441)

At the height of his powers, with the appearance of a man possessed, the poet is to be both worshipped and feared. The metaphorical lute from 'The Eolian Harp' is now in the hands of the Abyssinian maid, and through the mediation of this 'damsel with a dulcimer' the poet has appropriated the magical power to rival Nature with his own 'music loud and long'. (441)

Thresholds of Consciousness



Gustave Doré from 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel' Part 1 were written during the earlier days of Coleridge's relationship with Wordsworth in the Quantocks. 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' first appeared in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798; the intention of this collaborative collection of poems with Wordsworth, was, as Coleridge writes in *Biographia Literaria*:

> …to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith'. (Shawcross II 1973, 6)

Hall describes the deep hypnotic state from which Coleridge's 'shadows of imagination' came to life as an 'un-selfed, preconscious depth'. (Hall 1991, 66) Hall suggests that here Coleridge could 'open infinity by escaping the bounds of personality', where he becomes 'the audience of a dream theatre…while the dream images assume the active role'. (74) Although it must be remembered there is always an artistic distance between poet and poem, Romantic poetry

was very much concerned with personal identity, and it can be read that Coleridge as Mariner is the hero of the narrative; his task is to enter a subliminal world, and return with the visionary tale: 'I pass, like night, from land to land; / I have strange powers of speech'. (Abrams 2000, 437) Like the poet in 'Kubla Khan', there is a price to be paid for these powers, which involves, Hall writes, 'a form of self murder'. (Hall 1991, 75) The sublime beauty of the secondary, or double, world that the poet finds himself in compensates for this dangerous exorcism of self; nevertheless, fear inhabits the poem, driving it on, pulling it back. The fearful interjections of the wedding-guest remind the poet not to stray too far beyond the realms of rational understanding: '"I fear thee, ancient Mariner!…I fear thee, and thy glittering eye"'; eyes that glitter and flash are recurring motifs in Coleridge's poetry, denoting frightening and hypnotic powers. (Abrams 2000, 428-9)

The poem opens at a Christian ceremony of marriage, itself a metaphor for unity. With the wedding-guest, we cross over an implied threshold of consciousness into the other world of the Mariner's tale, a dream world, where, as Paglia describes it, 'nature reigns, where there is no law but sex, cruelty, and metamorphosis'. (Paglia 1990, 4) Here Coleridge's conflict between his deep-rooted Christianity and his pagan imagination manifests itself in polarised representations of the mother figure: the Great Mother of the Underworld, a pagan goddess with many faces, and the Queen of Heaven, seen in medieval theology as a redemptive figure, spared the stain of original sin, and who, as the twin figure of the Virgin and Mother, represents an unobtainable ideal. Through his transgression, the Mariner will put himself at the mercy of these opposing female forces.

The Romantic writer explores yet resists. Coleridge was writing at a time when traditional interpretations of the universe were being challenged, an alien universe seemed to be emerging, and a sense of uncertainty, as personified by Hamlet (4), had to be accepted. Coleridge writes in *Biographia Literaria* about the limits of knowledge:

> Whoever is acquainted with the history of philosophy, during the two or three last centuries, cannot but admit, that there appears to have existed a sort of secret and tacit compact among the learned, not to pass beyond a certain limit in speculative science. (Shawcross I, 1973, 95)

Limits are often set by fear; the tension within 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' lies between desire to reach beyond these limits, and the fear of this desire. Coleridge navigates with this fear, using alliteration, repetition, and pause:

> We were the first that ever burst
> Into that silent sea.
> Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
> 'Twas sad as sad could be;
> And we did speak only to break
> The silence of the sea!
> (425-6)

Having 'burst' through this threshold, Coleridge does not allow the Mariner to exalt; instead he confronts him with silence, and fear causes the inspirational breeze to drop. As in 'The Eolian Harp', Coleridge uses a break between stanzas, and again resists his fear of silence: the sailors feel compelled to speak in an attempt to fill the soundless void. The Mariner has crossed a threshold where he finds his powers are perilously limited; the terror of the Mariner's world is Coleridge's own terror: he fears what lies beyond the boundaries of comprehension and has to negotiate with an experience that borders on madness.



The albatross (5) is a crucial representation in the poem. Known as the sailor's friend, it is symbolically a protective figure: 'Through the fog it came; / As if it had been a Christian soul, / We hailed it in God's name'. (424) Killed by the Mariner for no obvious reason, many readings suggest this is an allegory of the Fall of man. Holmes writes:

> In the symbolic killing of the albatross, he [Coleridge] found what might be called a "green parable", the idea of man's destructive effect on the natural world, so that human moral blindness inadvertently introduces evil into the benign systems of nature, releasing uncontrollable forces that take terrible revenge. (Holmes 1998, 173)

Killing the albatross is like the perverse act of a child, and, like a child dependent on its parents, the sailors are dependent on the powers of Nature that surround them.

Alternatively, George Whalley links the albatross with the creative imagination, and argues that in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' Coleridge has 'enshrined…the quintessence of himself, of his suffering and dread, his sense of sin, his remorse, his powerlessness'. (Whalley 1986, 162) Whalley maintains that the lines 'I had killed the bird / That made the breeze to blow' illustrate Coleridge's unconscious prediction that he will destroy his own creative powers. (174; Abrams 2000, 425) There is a sense of Greek tragedy (6) about Coleridge's Mariner, whose tragic flaw (and destiny) it is to commit the fatal error, in this case a wanton act of destruction. The disastrous consequences for the Mariner and the crew of the ship are that they are cut off from all nourishment, and speech is stifled:

> And every tongue, through utter drought,
> Was withered at the root;
> We could not speak, no more than if
> We had been choked with soot.
> (426)

Coleridge's fear at being unable to speak presents itself in the form of a ritual; marooned in a supernatural world of two suns, devoid of the maternal moon, the Mariner

performs a pagan communion with himself in order to find his voice: 'I bit my arm, I sucked the blood'. (427) But for the Mariner, as Coleridge writes in the gloss, it is *'at a dear ransom he freeth his speech from the bonds of thirst'*. (427) 'A speck, a mist, a shape' that 'plunged and tacked and veered' is bringing further affliction: soon the Mariner's very soul will be at stake. The Mariner appeals to 'Heaven's Mother send us grace!' as the apparition appears in front of the 'broad and burning face' of the sun: it is the *'specter-woman and her death mate'* who occupy a skeletal ship. (427, 428) Hughes writes: 'That woman coming out of the moony sun that was "bloody" is the deity of the blood-stream, the river of life':

Her lips were red, her looks were free
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was white as leprosy,
The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.
(Hughes 1995, 426; Abrams 2000, 428)



'Life-in-Death' illustration by Willy Pogany (c.1910)

This 'deity of the blood-stream' has a cold, erotic allure; she is tainted, like the moon in 'Christabel', and the life she brings is a form of death. There is also conflict in the juxtaposition of 'free' and 'locks'. She is all things in opposition: the birth of creation. This is woman as an object of the sublime, as Edmund Burke writes, 'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible'. (Burke 1998, 86) Coleridge's gloss reads: *'Death and Life-in-death have diced for the ship's crew, and she (the latter) winneth the ancient Mariner'*. (Abrams 2000, 428) Holmes remarks that the gloss, 'written in the voice of a learned antiquarian… recognises a more ancient, pagan theme of "vengeance" in the ballad'; Holmes also notes that the *'specter-woman'* 'has no place in traditional theology'. (Holmes II, 1998, 419) Nevertheless, she is an archetype, this lurid femme fatale, and she has the Mariner in her power. He is engulfed in what Paglia describes as a pre-Christian 'swamp-world of the Great Mother'. (Paglia 1991, 324) In this primordial stew of 'a thousand thousand slimy things', the Mariner is stranded on a 'rotting sea' surrounded by dead shipmates on a 'rotting deck'. (Abrams 2000, 429) The gloss tells us, *'He despiseth the creature of the calm…And envieth that they should live, and so many lie dead'*. (429) The Mariner is 'alone, alone, all, all alone', simultaneously privileged and excluded, another reminder of the dreaded poet in 'Kubla Khan', and of Coleridge's own fear of abandonment. (429)

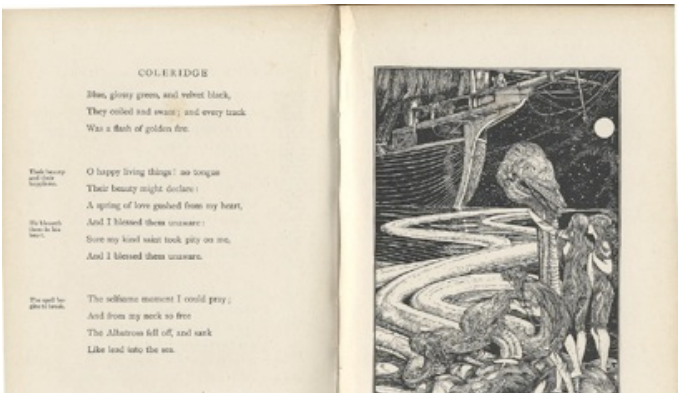
At first the Mariner is unable to pray 'A wicked whisper came, and made / My heart as dry as dust.' (429) It is the gradual recognition of the beauty of *'God's creatures of the great calm'* that gains the Mariner his redemption:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
(430)

The Mariner's spontaneous, heartfelt blessing breaks the spell of Life-in-Death; the Mariner loses the albatross of guilt, he is granted maternal protection, and prayer becomes linked to sleep:

Oh sleep! It is a gentle thing,
Beloved from pole to pole!
To Mary Queen the praise be given!
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,
That slid into my soul.
(430)

Coleridge believed that through prayer the healing process of sleep could take place, but for prayer to work, the spirit must be pure, otherwise sleep would be tormented, as it was to become later for him; as he writes in 'The Pains of Sleep': 'Sleep, the wide blessing, seemed to me / Distemper's worst calamity'. (463)

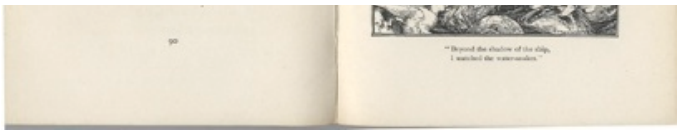

COLERIDGE

Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

By the time Coleridge came to write 'The Pains of Sleep' in 1803 there is a sense of desperation; at the beginning of the poem the



poet attempts to put himself in a state of grace in order to pray for sleep: 'My spirit I to Love compose, / In humble trust mine eye-lids close'. (463) But when the unconscious, dreaming mind takes hold, instead of nourishment and redemption, nightmares come; the 'wild and hateful objects' and the 'sufferings strange and wild' that the poet endures hark back to the description of himself in 'The Eolian Harp' as 'Wildered and dark'. (463, 420) The 'frightful fiend' that pursued the Mariner has, in 'The Pains of Sleep', inflated into 'a fiendish crowd / of shapes and thoughts that tortured me'. (434, 463) These representations of failure and remorse have penetrated the threshold of Coleridge's consciousness to become his own 'fiendish dream'. (463)

The Idea of Symbolism and Gothic Apparatus



Photograph by Josef Sudek

Coleridge, while looking at 'yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane', writes in his Notebook 'I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new'. (Perry 2002, 87) This 'something within' becomes the image without, an expression of a world beyond the senses invoked by symbolism. Coleridge's women may appear as spontaneous visions of the unconscious, in fact, they are carefully constructed ideas that represent a psychological condition, and the corporeal is linked to the spiritual by symbols from the natural world.

In 'Christabel', as in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Coleridge makes particular symbolic use of the moon, linking it to the feminine principle and the power to transform. It is the Mariner's communion with the *'journeying Moon'* and *'By the light of the Moon'*, as described in the gloss, that enables him to see the water-snakes in all their beauty, and consequently he is in a state of grace when he blesses them. (Abrams 2000, 430) The transforming power of the moon in 'Christabel', however, offers no redemption; it has a denying effect, and is, as Schapiro notes, 'cold, withdrawn, and shrunken'. (Schapiro 1983, 72) In the room where Geraldine casts her spell on Christabel the moon's maternal nature has been stifled, 'not a moonbeam enters here'. (Abrams 2000, 446) In Part 2 of 'Christabel' the moon has become completely corrupted and transformed into the eye of a snake, a reiteration of the malevolent power symbolised by the ominous 'Horned Moon' in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', which rises after Life-in-Death has won the Mariner's soul. (Abrams 2000, 428)

'Christabel' was completed on moving to the Lake District to join the Wordsworth clan, and is surrounded by the usual perambulatory explanations. In 1800 Coleridge claimed to have written more than 1,300 lines of the poem, which leaves missing over 600 lines that have never been discovered. In the preface to the 1816 edition Coleridge claims that 'in my very first conception of the tale, I had the whole present to my mind…I trust that I shall be able to embody in verse the three parts yet to come'. (441fn) Nothing ever materialised, and what we have is an extended fragment that still manages to come to a unifying conclusion in the curious 'Conclusion to Part 2': 'A little child, a limber elf / singing, dancing to itself' is a familiar Colridgean motif denoting the aching sense of childhood lost and innocence as a magical state of wholeness. (456) However, this charming image is undercut by another of Coleridge's self-effacing explanations: vindication of the poem as it stands, reinforcing the idea that has been signalled at various points throughout the poem that this is merely a work of idle speculation, 'a broken charm', with no harm intended:

> Perhaps 'tis pretty to force together
> Thoughts so all unlike each other;
> To mutter and mock a broken charm,
> To dally with wrong that does not harm.
> (456)

Coleridge could have been anticipating and preparing himself for the reception of 'Christabel', which, although imitated by Scott and admired by Byron, was to receive harsh criticism at the hands of William Hazlitt, who writes:

> There is something disgusting at the bottom of his subject, which is but ill glossed over by a veil of Della Cruscan sentiment and fine writing – like moon-beams playing on a charnel-house, or flowers strewed on a dead body'. (Hazlitt 1816, 64)

'Christabel' is the culmination of Coleridge's use of the Gothic trope. Coleridge objected to the way Gothic novels of the time (such as those written by Ann Radcliffe) gave reassuring explanations for the supernatural happenings, 'the wonder of effects produced by supernatural power, without the means'; in Coleridge's Supernatural poetry the supernatural *is* the reality. (Perry 2002, 109) The action in 'Christabel' takes place in an ostensibly medieval world of knight errantry and distressed damsels. Coleridge uses the ballad form, and has adapted the metre, as he explains in his introduction, to a 'new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables'. (Abrams 2000, 442) This

accentuates the out-of-kilter effect, and, as Coleridge explains, 'occasional variation of number of syllables' are linked to 'some transition, in the nature of the imagery or passion'. (442) Such a transition would be, for example, the shift in the symbolism of the image as it takes on a deeper, more significant, meaning. Content linked to rhythm is supported and reiterated by what Karen Swann describes as 'Gothic machinery', as in the link between the knell of the clock that signifies the witching hour ('Tis the middle of the night by the castle clock') and the 'toothless mastiff bitch', who 'maketh answer to the clock'. (Swann 1984 159; Abrams 2000, 442) This 'Gothic machinery' continues in Part 2, which opens with the repetitive knell of doom and the incantation of Sir Leoline: '"Each matin bell," the Baron saith, / "Knells us back to a world of death."' (449) The pagan theme of vengeance that Holmes associated with 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' surfaces again in the form of Sir Leoline's unconscious desire for revenge on Christabel for her mother's death.

The poem opens with conflict, almost as though the poet is arguing with himself about the kind of environment he wants to create. The apparent simplicity of the rhyme and repetition is chant-like and hypnotic; at the same time 'but' and 'yet' disorder the internal rhythm, and offer conflicting impressions, creating an atmosphere that is ambiguous, ghostly and shrouded:

> 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.
> (442)



Cloud Ghosts by Richard Riemerschmid

Distortion that conceals is implicit in 'Christabel', and Beer notes:

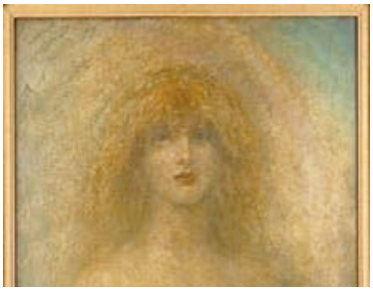
> The images of sun or moon veiled by cloud is one which Coleridge uses with great frequency to express his view that apparent evils are really good seen in distortion… it is clear that clouds and mist have for him the ambivalence of the daemonic'. (Beer 1959, 183)

The way the narrator continually questions his own observations has the effect of transmitting further uncertainty. 'Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?' is a gloomy forecast for the inspirational breeze, compounded by evidence that there seems to be hardly any wind at all:

> There is not wind enough to twirl
> The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
> That dances as often as dance it can,
> Hanging so light, and hanging so high,
> On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.
> (Abrams 2000, 443)

Precarious, exposed, nevertheless the leaf, like the poet, dances on as best it can in mockery of life, in mockery of itself, in prediction of its downfall.

As in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' thresholds and gateways indicate boundaries of consciousness. 'The lovely lady, Christabel' is outside the castle walls, 'a furlong from the castle gate' when her encounter with Geraldine takes place. (442) It is from behind 'the other side of the oak' that Geraldine appears, and it is 'over the threshold of the gate' that she has to be lifted. (443, 445) The juxtaposition of the two ladies entering through a small door in the formidable iron gate from whence lately 'an army in battle array had marched out' contrasts the gender roles played out in a medieval world of patriarchal order. (445) The 'toothless mastiff bitch', who appears to be haunted by the spirit of Christabel's dead mother ('Some say, she sees my lady's shroud'), is represented as an enfeebled guardian figure, possibly an allusion to the mastiff that guarded Pluto's underworld. (442) When Christabel escorts Geraldine across the castle court the mastiff bitch lies impotent, as though dead, 'in moonshine cold'; all she can manage is an 'angry moan'. (445) The religious connotation associated with 'my lady' and her 'shroud' suggests a spiritual link with the Holy Mother, and there are constant appeals by the anxious narrator for 'Mary Mother' to protect Christabel: 'Jesu Maria, shield her well!' (443) Breast symbolism in 'Christabel' is linked to the word 'shield'; however, instead of providing protection and sustenance, the breast image, transferred to Sir Leoline as the surviving parent, is disabled, its owner 'weak in health', his shield now 'hung in a murky old niche in the wall' and synonymous with inactivity and loss of power. (445, 446) Christabel is vulnerable, without parental protection, a situation that alludes to Coleridge's concept of his own childhood.



Uldra by G.F. Watts 1884

Coleridge's supernatural women are not constrained by subjective or generic boundaries and roam in a mythopoetic world of the poet's creation. Thomas Lloyd writes: 'To use an old word, also sometimes used by Coleridge himself, his transnatural beings may be called "daemons," personal beings who may exist beyond the subjective finitude of human consciousness'. (Lloyd 2002, 153) These daemons can



be considered in the light of a guiding spirit or can represent the idea of evil as demonic intention. In 'Christabel' there is blurring between daemonic and demonic just as there is between supernatural and preternatural; none of these phenomena has a distinct explanation. The passive mind can be receptive to the idea of evil, of which Coleridge writes in his Notebook: 'woe to the man, to whom it is an uninteresting question'. (Perry 2002, 45) Geraldine is a complex representation of evil: ambiguity precedes her appearance: 'The lady sprang up, suddenly'. (Abrams 2000, 443) It is almost as though Christabel, while in silent prayer for her absent lover, has herself summoned up the vision of Geraldine:

There she sees a damsel bright,
Drest in a silken robe of white,
That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
The neck that made that white robe wan,
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
Her blue-veined feet unsandal'd were,
And wildly glittered here and there
The gems entangled in her hair.
I guess, 'twas frightful there to see
A lady so richly clad as she –
Beautiful exceedingly!
(443)

There are paradoxical associations between the colour white and Geraldine. Symbolically pure, white can also signify absence and negation, and while Coleridge emphasises the white of Geraldine's dress, there is an ambiguity in the way it is linked to the moon, for the moon itself is in a diseased state. The white dress becomes 'wan' in comparison to its wearer; it is Geraldine who appears imbued with the true brightness of the moon, but, rather than a comforting maternal light, it is a false and dangerous radiance. The link between this shining moonlit apparition and a serpent is signified by the allusion to Geraldine's bare, 'blue-veined feet'. The serpent, once a symbol of wisdom and eternity, since the conception of the Fall has become a principal symbol of evil. With her glittering, 'entangled' hair, Geraldine is a terrible incarnation of the Mariner's water-snakes; she is so beautiful that she is 'frightful', a Medusa-like creature. Burke writes:

> To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. (Burke 1998, 102)

The more we discover about Geraldine, the more obscure she becomes. Her appearance contradicts itself, on the one hand she is brightly obvious, on the other, 'shadowy in the moonlight'. Abducted, abandoned, 'a maid forlorn', yet there are suspicious signs: her refusal to pray, the mastiff's 'yell', and the 'tongue of light' that leaps out of the 'white ashes' to reveal her mesmerising eye. (Abrams 2000, 444, 445) The dubious claim that she is the daughter of Sir Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine, Sir Leoline's long-lost childhood friend, is another sleight of hand.

The reversal of the inhospitality to the Mariner's albatross is acted out as Christabel carries Geraldine over the threshold of the castle. Yet it is the same means to an end. Arthur Nethercott writes: 'The underlying theory, of course, is highly moral and symbolic: evil cannot attack one unless one allows it to enter by one's own act and permission'. (Nethercott 1939, 155) It can be argued that Christabel is party to her own downfall, either in all innocence or by subliminal desire, and that this is a projection of Coleridge's unconscious fears. Christabel, 'The maid devoid of guile and sin', is no match for the metamorphic and predatory Geraldine. (Abrams 2000, 455) Paglia writes: 'That woman can drain and paralyse is part of the latent vampirism in female physiology'. (Paglia 1991, 339) The morning after Geraldine has slept with Christabel she appears more than replenished by sleep; she has become physically 'fairer yet! And yet more fair!' and her shrivelled witch-like bosom has become a pair of 'heaving breasts'. (Abrams 2000, 450) Geraldine represents the male fear of the female body at its most dangerous, erotic and consuming; she is the negative side of the Abyssinian Maid: instead of inspiration and nourishment, she silences and devours, and she is the fatal harbinger of Coleridge's loss of the poetic voice.



'In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel.'
G.F. Watts' illustration for the 1834 ed. of 'Christabel'

Schapiro, in her psychoanalytical examination of the poem, writes 'The fact that Christabel is a female…may be due not only to an attempted disguise…but also to a closer identification with the loved and hated mother whose presence dominates the poem'. (Schapiro 1983, 70) Amongst all the Gothic apparatus, there is something of the loose cannon about the 'wandering mother'. (Abrams 2000, 446) She is pivotal to the poem: it is she who has abandoned Christabel by dying in childbirth, or, from another point of view, it is she who has been killed by giving life to Christabel. Although Sir Leoline attempts to impose his 'custom and law' and assimilate his dead wife into the patriarchal order with the bell-ringing ritual, at the same time he is continually reminding himself of her death and immortalising her ghostly presence. (449)



Christabel also perpetuates her mother's memory, 'O mother dear! that thou wert here!', and she has preserved the 'cordial wine…of virtuous powers' her mother made before her death. (446) These 'virtuous powers' have connotations beyond the obvious, for the secondary meaning of 'virtuous' is occult, or magical, and in medieval times there was a link between religious and occult powers; there was also the ancient belief that ghosts are souls trapped in Purgatory, and here the 'wandering mother' represents a form of revenant.

If, on the one hand, the mother's wine conjures up her spirit, at the same time, the wine appears to possess Geraldine with the power to banish her: 'Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!' (446) The allusion to the witches' line in Macbeth (7), and the dramatically curtailed description of Geraldine when she undoes her 'silken robe': 'Behold! Her bosom and half her side– / A sight to dream of, not to tell!' suggests Geraldine is a witch, and no amount of breast-like shield images can come to Christabel's aid, in spite of the narrator's breathless, almost voyeuristic, supplications: 'O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!' (447-8) Geraldine becomes possessed with 'scorn and pride' (8), and rises to full erotic power, becoming, as Paglia describes it, 'an erection fuelled by her dominance of the mother-spirit'. (Paglia 1990, 340) The mother has been overpowered and assimilated, and now Geraldine will impose the condition on Christabel that Coleridge so much feared, control over the power of speech: 'In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell, / Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!' (Abrams 2000, 448) Geraldine is the body of death symbolically fused with the body of desire, and she is about to overwhelm the body of innocence. It is when Christabel lies down to sleep that Geraldine commits her atrocity. Geraldine acts out a parody of maternal love: while she cradles Christabel in her arms, 'As a mother with her child', there are, Harding notes, 'connotations of necrophilia'. (449; Harding 1985, 210) Sleep is thus linked to a kind of love that emerges as dangerously ambivalent.

Christabel is hypnotised to forget, but we are reminded and re-reminded, like recurring images in a dream, and it is the allegorical dream of Bard Bracy that not only recalls Christabel's seduction and eroticises it, it also reinforces the idea of psychic vampirism; this, as Holmes writes, 'raises autobiographical issues of power and submission'. (Holmes 1998, 290) It is tempting in hindsight for critics to project Coleridge into the role of Christabel in the light of Wordsworth's overpowering success against Coleridge's own poetic dwindling. Erdman comments on Warren Stevenson's reading 'of the heroine's relationship to Geraldine as "a subconscious symbolical representation of Coleridge's relationship to Wordsworth"'. (Erdman 1985, 157) The allegory of Bard Bracy's dream is explicit: Bracy tells how he finds Sir Leoline's favourite dove, named after Christabel, 'underneath the old oak tree', reminding us that it was 'beneath the huge oak tree' that Christabel first knelt to pray:

> When lo! I saw a bright green snake
> Coiled around its wings and neck,
> Green as the herbs on which it couched,
> Close by the dove's its head it crouched;
> And with the dove it heaves and stirs,
> Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!
> (Abrams 2000, 454, 443)

Sir Leoline, heady from recapturing a fantasised past, misunderstands Bracy's dream, and confuses identification further by referring to Geraldine as 'Lord Roland's beauteous dove'. (454) Metamorphosis proceeds alarmingly. Geraldine, in a show of modesty, turns away from Sir Leoline and assumes the pose of the enfolding snake, and, with the earlier image of the diseased moon in her eye, turns her gaze on Christabel:

> A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy,
> And the lady's eyes they shrunk in her head
> Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye,
> And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread,
> At Christabel she looked askance!–
> (454-5)

Under Geraldine's evil eye, Christabel then becomes a 'stumbling', 'hissing' double of Geraldine. (455) This disordered state of female identity is a central theme in Coleridge's dream locus. Although these female figures are, in a sense, generic representations, they are also unstable: their roles reverse, shift, and the definition blurs.



The first illustration of 'Christabel'
- original engraving dated 4 Oct 1828, by C. Stothard

Swann, who sees generic ambiguities in every reading of 'Christabel', points out that 'Geraldine's tale echoes and anticipates Christabel's'. (Swann 1984, 152) In the beginning it is Geraldine who 'scarce can speak'; in the end it is Christabel who 'had no power to tell'. (Abrams 2000, 444, 452) Swann argues that the inability of Christabel 'to tell' is a symptom of the hysteric, and supports this by reference to Robert Burton's seventeenth century exposition *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: 'Many of them cannot tell how to express themselves in words…they think themselves bewitched…they will not speak'. (Burton 1621, 416) Swann extends her argument to Coleridge's narrators, 'who are as enigmatic as the women they tell about – we cannot "well tell" if they are one voice or two'. (Swann



1984, 155) The fact that Sir Leoline represents the Law of reason, yet 'experiences maddening confusion' puts the symbolic order itself under the umbrella of hysteria. (164) All these stifled and confused voices contribute to the 'unreadability' of both Christabel and Geraldine, and Swann sees the whole poem as a subversive exercise in the way it exposes the 'narrative tactics' of Coleridge's 'too-dutiful accession to the laws of gender and genre'. (169)

Swann defines Coleridge's 'new principle' of metre in 'Christabel' as 'the movement of desire':

> The woman whose desire is written on her body is like the man who makes love the "matter" of his discourse: both attempt to disguise desire, and become the more seductive when desire is revealed in the context of their attempts to suppress it. (168, 154)

Desire drives us to look for meaning in Coleridge's tale of concealment and shifting perspectives. But, as Bracy the Bard (another representation of the Colridgean persona) tells us, 'The devil mocks the doleful tale', and this sense of mockery in 'Christabel' is a subtext of resistance against failure. (Abrams 2000, 450) As Coleridge lets his imagination transport him, mockery is the restraining hand that reminds him, and us, that this is, as he describes it in *Biographia Literaria*: 'a work that pretended to be nothing more than a common Faery Tale'. (Shawcross I 1973, 211)

Loss of the Muse

Holmes, in the first volume of his biography on Coleridge, outlines the reversal of power in the relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge: 'Wordsworth, from a position of apparent weakness, had ruthlessly come to dominate the terms of the collaboration'. (Holmes 1998, 285) Wordsworth's rejection of 'Christabel' engenders in Coleridge a sense of abandonment by his admired collaborator, a feeling compounded by his collapsing marriage and unrealistic love for Sara Hutchinson. Coleridge's fear of failure seemed to be staring him in the face. He writes in his Notebook: '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'. (Perry 2002, 19) Out of this crisis comes the love poem 'A Letter to – (Sara Hutchinson)', which Coleridge edits into 'Dejection: An Ode', the poem of inspired loss.

'Dejection: An Ode' is another Conversation poem; as well as a figure of loss, the female addressee, like Charles Lamb in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', functions as an absent mediator between the poet and his audience. Her absence becomes transformed into the vital presence that allows him to explore his creative malfunction. Patricia Ball points out how the paradoxical nature of 'Dejection' 'simultaneously affirms and denies Coleridge's poetic collapse…The poet has achieved his desired state and is face to face throughout with his own condition'. (Ball 1968, 92) This 'desired state' of self-knowledge, however, brings with it, as Ball writes, 'the more negative side of self-recognition'. (92) That is, he recognises what he has lost, and, no longer able to experience 'the immediate joy of self-contact… Coleridge recovers its force vicariously' through the function of the 'Lady': 'To her may all things live, from pole to pole, / Their life the eddying of her living soul!' (92; Abrams 2000, 462)

Coleridge's familiar Romantic metaphors and symbols have undergone a fearful transformation. The 'soft floating witchery of sound' of 'The Eolian Harp' and the 'symphony and song' of the Abyssinian maid have become, in 'Dejection: An Ode', 'the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes / Upon the strings of this Eolian lute'. (419, 441, 459) The symbolism of the moon has become inverted: it is the new moon holding 'the old Moon in her lap', as though the mother/child relationship has been reversed. (459) The fragment of the 'Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence' that Coleridge has adapted to precede 'Dejection: An Ode' – 'Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon, /With the old Moon in her arms' – brings the 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' to mind; the vision of the two moons is an omen that precedes disaster, and consequently, Sir Patrick Spence's ship sinks. (459) In 1801 Coleridge's Notebook entry reads: 'Mind, shipwrecked by storms of doubt, now mastless, rudderless, shattered, – pulling in the dead swell of a dark & windless Sea'. (Perry 2002, 22)

'Aeolius'



Victim of his own emotional turbulence, Coleridge now finds himself trapped in the Mariner's sea of stasis. The Mariner's lurid horizon, illuminated by 'the bright broad Sun…flecked with bars' has, in 'Dejection: An Ode', dwindled to a sickly green, and there is a sense of disintegration:

> All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
> Have I been gazing on the western sky,
> And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
> And still I gaze – and with how blank an eye!
> And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
> That give away their motion to the stars;

(Abrams 2000, 427, 459-60)

The poet's vision, no longer inspired, has been imprisoned by the mechanical.

The tree, and foliage in general, that often symbolised the domestic haven from which Coleridge is now excluded, and could also allude to the tree of knowledge, now provide images of false illusion:

> For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,

And fruits, and foliage, not my own seemed mine.
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth.
(461)

The poet complains that he is not allowed, or even able, to express his emotions, because his 'shaping spirit of Imagination' is in a state of suspension; for Coleridge, it is the subjective imagination, not objective nature that is the 'shaping spirit'. (461) His poetic voice has been rendered impotent, perhaps from too much German-influenced philosophical speculation, or too much opium, and there is, of course, the failure in human terms to sustain personal relationships. All these contribute to the meaning of the closing couplet of Stanza 6: 'Till that which suits a part infects the whole, / And now is almost grown the habit of my soul'. (461) In 1798, at the height of his powers, Coleridge had written in his Notebook:

[The] Serpent by which the ancients emblem'd the Inventive faculty appears to me in its mode of motion most exactly to emblem a writer of Genius. He varies his course yet still glides onwards – all lines of motion [are] his – all beautiful, & all propulsive – '
(Perry 2002, 17)

Four years later, the poet finds himself being strangled by his own emblem of genius. Serpent imagery, foreshadowed in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel', has mutated in 'Dejection' into 'viper thoughts, that coil around my mind, / Reality's dark dream'. (Abrams 2000, 461)



'Medusa' by Jean Delville

J. Robert Barth draws a parallel between 'Dejection: An Ode' and Wordsworth's poem 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', started the same year of 1802. (Barth 1985, 179) Wordsworth too laments a sense of loss: 'Whither is fled, the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?' (Abrams 2000, 288) Whereas Wordsworth turns to nature, Coleridge feels nature has failed him, and turns inwards on himself: 'O Lady! we receive but what we give'. (Abrams 2000, 460) Barth argues, however, that it is when the poet in 'Dejection' allows himself 'to listen to the wind', previously a wild projection of his own self-pity, that 'he is able to let nature touch him, and he finds that it is healing'. (Barth 1985, 184-5) The poet is now able to transform his loss into a positive force of love for the Lady. In the uncensored and more personal 'Letter to – (Sara Hutchinson)' the poet is united with his love through the incorporation of her with Heaven:

Thy dear mild Eyes, that see
The very Heaven, *I* see,
There is a Prayer in them! It is for *me*!
And I dear Sara! *I* am blessing thee!
(Halmi et al 2004, 147)

It is with this blessing, a reminder of the Mariner's blessing of the water-snakes, that his absent muse assumes the unifying power of his imagination.

'Letter to – (Sara Hutchinson)' reveals Coleridge's desire to regress, and Holmes notes 'the erotic confusion between lover and nurse held in the hot palpitating image of the receptive, tender mother dove', surely an echo from Bard Bracy's dream in 'Christabel':

Sister and Friend of my devoutest Choice!
Thou being innocent and full of Love,
And nested with the Darlings of thy Love,
And feeling in thy Soul, Heart, Lips, and Arms
Even what the conjugal and Mother Dove
That borrows genial warmth from these, she warms,
Feels in her thrill'd wings, blessedly outspread!
(Holmes 1998, 316; Halmi et al. 2004, 154)

The dove, symbol of souls, here becomes the link between divine and earthly love, and, of course, a reminder of mother love. As well as human love, there is romantic, sexual, family, friends, and love of nature, plus the ecstasy recalled with the two Hutchinson sisters:

Dear Mary! – on her Lap my Head she lay'd –
Her Hand was on my Brow,
Even as my own is now;
And on my Cheek I felt thy Eye-lash play –
(Halmi et al. 2004, 148)

This confessional moment of profound innocence briefly re-ignites the poet's imagination, soon tempered, however, by his critical opinion of himself: 'I am not the buoyant Thing, I was of yore, / When like an own Child, I to Joy belong'd'. (151) Once again, Coleridge reiterates his theme of innocence as a pure state of joy, linked to love and creativity.

In 'Dejection: An Ode' this joy, 'the spirit and the power', is only given 'to the pure', and, as in 'Christabel', this innocence is vulnerable. (Abrams 2000, 460) 'Dejection' moves from the nightmarish crowd to the motif of the lost child; 'A tale of less affright, / And tempered with delight'. However, the 'lonesome child' who 'moans low in bitter grief and fear, / And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear' hardly fits this description. (462) Barth argues that, by transforming this tale of terror into a work of art, it becomes sublimated to that mythic level that universalises and binds humanity, and 'the

experience the poet could not bear becomes through art (the "tale" the wind tells) not only bearable but even hopeful'. (Barth 1985, 187) Thus it distances the poet from his own grief, with the same soothing effect. Through this catharsis the poet is able to conclude his conversation with his absent muse; now he can allow himself to express his feelings, and wish for her all the things he holds most dear himself: 'Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing' and 'Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice…Dear Lady! friend devoutest of my choice, / Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice'. (Abrams 2000, 462)



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Coleridge himself, however, had lost the joy in his own life: the poet that was once enclosed and protected by the magic circle in 'Kubla Khan' has now become excluded from the Wordsworth circle of domestic bliss, 'That happy vision of beloved faces', as he describes it in the poem 'To William Wordsworth'. (466) He is also deep in opium addiction and self-pity over the loss of Sara Hutchinson, and thus denied the link with the transcendent aspect of his imagination. Coleridge could only keep the idea of love alive for himself, as Barth describes it, 'as a comforting dream'. (Barth 1985, 189) In 'Recollections of Love' Coleridge writes: 'You stood before me like a thought, / a dream remembered in a dream'. (Halmi et al 2004, 194) Holmes suggests that by 1804 'Perhaps Coleridge no longer wanted real women at all, or only in his opium dreams, singing like Abyssinian Maids of Mount Abora'. (Holmes II, 1998, 25) But for Coleridge, dreams had turned to nightmares, and, as he writes to his benefactor, Thomas Wedgwood in 1803, 'the Night is my Hell, Sleep my tormenting Angel…Dreams with me are no Shadows, but the very Substances & foot-thick Calamities of my Life'. (Halmi et al.634) The 'shadows of imagination' that brought forth the Supernatural poetry, and the representations of women that prophetically signalled his fear of failure, now stalked him in his sleep, as he recalls in his Notebook of 1806:

> Memory, a wan misery-Eyed Female…She fed on bitter fruits from the Tree of Life - & often she attempted to tear off from her forehead a seal, which Eternity had placed there; and instantly she found in her Hand a hideous phantom of her own visage, with that seal on its forehead… (Perry 2002, 93)

From the crisis point of creativity in 1800 Holmes sees Coleridge throwing off the albatross of failure with 'the hope of recreating himself imaginatively out of the sense of failure itself'. (Holmes 1998, 296) Eliot maintains, 'The author of *Biographia Literaria* was already a ruined man. Sometimes, however, to be a "ruined man" is itself a vocation'. (Eliot 1975, 69) Seeking refuge in metaphysics, Coleridge managed to rise from the ashes of poetic failure in the persona of the transcendental philosopher. Perhaps, as signified in 'Dejection: An Ode', there was a kind of redemption for Coleridge in the act of recognition of what it was he had lost. Coleridge was not unproductive outside the boundaries of poetry; he gave famous lectures, wrote articles and essays and produced his newspaper *The Friend*, as well as writing *Biographia Literaria*. Hazlitt, who once said of Coleridge that 'the light of his genius shone into my soul', pilloried him for what he saw as a recantation of political idealism and a squandering of genius on articles for journals:

> Alas! "Frailty, thy name is *Genius*!" (9) What is become of all this mighty heap of hope, of thoughts, of learning, and humanity? It has ended in swallowing doses of oblivion and in writing paragraphs in the Courier. Such, and so little, is the mind of man!' (Hazlitt 1823, 513; Hazlitt 1825, 615)

As late as 1827, however, Coleridge writes in an annotation: 'I still have that within me that which is both Harp and Breeze'. (Cited in Paley, 1996, 4) But the fear of failure that drove Coleridge's imagination and haunted his poetry had ominously foreshadowed his own life, in which he was to find himself silenced on the one hand like Christabel, yet doomed to tell his tale forever like the Mariner.

Endnotes

1) Cabbalistic reference to divine light linked to creative forces, mentioned in Coleridge's Notebooks. See Perry 2002, 95; Beer 1959, 59.
2) Perry notes: 'A druggist called "Ebn Thaher" appears in the translation of the Arabian Nights that STC would have known'. (Perry 2002, 162)
3) 'The man that hath no music in himself / Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds, / Is fit for treason, stratagems, and spoils': *Merchant of Venice* V.i.83-85.
4) 'C himself is supposed to have said on June 24, 1827, "I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so"'. (Halmi et al 2004 fn.336)
5) Wordsworth suggested the idea of killing the albatross.
6) Aristotle, 4th century BC, in Chapter 1 of the *Poetics* uses 'hamartia' to denote error of judgment that tragic heroes make and which leads to their downfall. It is often associated with hubris.
7) *Macbeth* 1.iii.21-2.
8) Beer notes these are 'primary characteristics of the fallen angel'. (Beer 1959, 189)
9) Hamlet I.ii.146: 'frailty, thy name is woman –'

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