The 'true wild weird spirit' of 'Christabel'

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COLERIDGE WROTE IN *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA* THAT 'CHRISTABEL' 'pretended to be nothing more than a common Faery Tale' (BL II 238). Notice that word 'pretended': it can of course mean 'intended to be', which is the sense that, quite properly, tends to be inferred here. But it's a nice piece of Coleridgean equivocation, too: 'Christabel' may well have 'pretended' to be nothing more than 'a common Faery Tale'—but there's a bit more to it than that. Coleridge, after all, said in the *Biographia* that after 'The Ancient Mariner', 'Christabel' was the poem 'in which I should have more nearly realized my ideal' of writing a poem of the supernatural, which would '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' (BL II 7, 6)—the very heart of his poetic project of 1797-98, from which he took his bearings as a poet and thinker for the rest of his life.[1]

In this paper I aim to draw out something of what Coleridge himself called the 'true wild weird spirit' of the poem.[2] I describe how Christabel is a far more willing participant in the action of the poem than critics have tended to allow—in her case, as the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words—and how the poem reveals the substance of her silence. I then go on to look more closely at three of the devices Coleridge employs that characterise the poem's 'true wild weird spirit': its ritualistic alignments, its doubling of vision, and its serpent imagery. But first a word about its publication, early reception, and received views of the poem.

The poem as we have it was published on 25 May 1816, together with 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Pains of Sleep', by John Murray, Byron's publisher, and in part at Byron's behest. It is fragmentary—and Coleridge always maintained that 'Christabel' was unfinished. Coleridge had floated the idea of a five-part structure since 1800, and in 1833, he said that 'I have, as I always had, the whole plan entire from beginning to end in my mind; but I fear I could not carry on with equal success the execution of the idea, an extremely subtle and difficult one' (TT II 245). Wordsworth was not so convinced, and told Henry Crabb Robinson that he was sure Coleridge 'never formed a plan or knew what was to be the end of "Christabel"'.[3] Charles Lamb, who knew the poem before Coleridge had written Part II, appears to have been surprised and dismayed by

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[1] This paper is based upon a lecture given at the Coleridge Autumn Study Weekend at Halsway Manor, Crowcombe, Somerset, on 16th September 2016. It draws upon the reading advanced in the final chapter of my book *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), and both the editor and I are very grateful to Marilyn Gaull, the editor of the series in which that work appeared, for permission to reproduce elements of that chapter in what follows.

[2] Thomas Allsop, *Letters, Conversations and Recollections of S.T. Coleridge*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1836), I 94-5.

[3] Henry Crabb Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson: On Books and their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley, 3 vols (London: J.M. Dent, 1938), II 487.

the thought of any continuation past Part I.[4]

Coleridge recalled his task in Part II as 'witchery by daylight' (TT I 410), but as Jim Mays has observed, Part I is—paradoxically—'an essentially complete fragment' (PW I.1 479). However much Coleridge wished to move the narrative on, as a marketable 'Legend, in five Books' (CL II 716), newly grounded in the Lake District, his attempt to do so in Part II raised 'more difficulties than it added opportunities' (Mays: PW I.1 479). Despite its apparent narrative intentions regarding Lord Roland, Part II remains a meditation on the epiphany of Part I, dramatizing further its psychological, social and spiritual impact. In places, Coleridge appears to have recognized that the poem was, in this sense, complete, and that the poem's central event—Geraldine's epiphany and fascination of Christabel—possessed the singular visionary authority at the heart of the poem.

His friend Thomas Allsop records a remark around 1820 which suggests Coleridge's awareness that its originating vision had already been fulfilled: 'If I should finish "Christabel," I shall certainly extend it and give new characters, and a greater number of incidents. This the reading public require'.[5] There seems to be no plan here, beyond the texts as we have them. In 1823, Coleridge imagined Part III of 'Christabel' as 'the song of her desolation' (CN IV 5032), but again, this implies a focus on the same, singular, epiphanic event of which he had already written. Jane Nelson suggests that the Conclusion to Part II, written separately in 1801, apparently with Hartley in mind (CL II 728), provides 'closure' in the form of the 'half-human child'—the poem's final eerie figure of 'the elusive genesis of our being'.[6] Such closure, however, seals the poem off with a teasing obliquity that refuses conclusion, reproducing the open-endedness of a deliberate fragment. When Coleridge wrote that 'in my very first conception of the tale, I had the whole present to my mind, with the wholeness, no less than with the liveliness of a vision' (PW II.1 625), he may, therefore, have been accurate, to the extent that he had conceived a poem of daemonic consummation. To Allsop, again, he indicates that his original inspiration had gone no further: 'I had the whole of the two cantos in my mind before I began it; certainly, the first canto is more perfect, has more of the true wild weird spirit, than the last'.[7]

There are stories of how the poem was to end—most notably the reconciliatory, sentimental ending described by Derwent Coleridge after his father's death, in which Christabel is to 'restore her absent lover' by her own innocent suffering.[8] The details of this suggestion are set out in Humphrey

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[4] 'I was very angry with Coleridge, when I first heard that he had written a second canto, and that he intended to finish it': a remark made to James Gillman (quoted PW I.1 478).

[5] Allsop, *Letters, Conversations and Recollections*, I 94.

[6] Jane A. Nelson, 'Entelechy and Structure in "Christabel"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 19:3 (Fall 1980), 375-393, 375, 391, 388.

[7] Allsop, *Letters, Conversations and Recollections*, I 94-5.

[8] John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), 177, 185. 'There is, indeed, every reason to think of Geraldine as a daemonic being', writes Beer, but the daemonic is to be made safe: 'Christabel is intended to redeem the daemonic evil' of 'that which, properly tempered, is a necessary and indispensable element in the good': 189, 191.

House's classic study of 1955, and John Beer's equally classic *Coleridge the Visionary*, and both Derwent and James Gillman give accounts (two in Gillman's case) of how they believed Coleridge planned to complete the poem along these lines.[9] As Mays remarks, however, these plans 'do not square with one another or with the poem we have' (PW I.1 479). Derwent went so far as to suggest that the poem was 'founded on the Roman Catholic notion of expiation for others' sins', which, knowing Coleridge's objections to that notion, does not seem tenable.[10] It is most likely, then, that these later plans, insofar as Coleridge was directly responsible for them—which is questionable—are sops to the curious but conventional: in 1820, Coleridge confided to Allsop 'an increasing dislike to appear out of the common & natural mode of thinking & acting', which 'is, I own, s[ad] weakness—but I am weary of *Dyspathy*' (CL V 40).

He had had his fair share of 'dyspathy'. The poem's strangeness—its multi-layered subversion of contemporary religious, sexual and political mores—provoked a revealingly irrational, even superstitious response, under the guise of civilized good sense. Karen Swann has shown that critics identified both the poem and its author with the witchery it enacted: upon publication, the poem was characterised as 'immodest and improper, and its author, not simply "unmanly," but an "enchanted virgin," a "witch," and an "old nurse"'.[11] Coleridge suspected that the poem would arouse 'Disgust' as early as 1799 (CL I 545), and his prophecy was realized in the reviews of 1816. 'There is something disgusting at the bottom of his subject', Hazlitt declared, which Coleridge had dangerously combined with poetic magic: 'The mind, in reading it, is spell-bound'.[12]

Later commentary proved much more receptive—but my reading questions that line of criticism (by far the most pervasive) which sees the poem as a study in evil. Such interpretations find a binary opposition between the 'innocence' of Christabel and the 'evil' of Geraldine, whose serpentine prowess is understood in conventional Christian terms, as the sign of Satanic intent: an approach that tends to reduce the poem to an exercise in the preconceptions of abstract theology, and its characters to one-dimensional chess-pieces.

'Christabel' surpasses the limitations of a morality tale, or the juggling of abstractions on the subject of evil. Coleridge's sense of the poem as an authentic embodiment of a 'wild weird spirit' does not suggest a tale of psychological defeat and/or sentimental redemption, but the mythopoetic signature of his own imaginative appetite.

Another line of criticism proposes that Christabel is forced into silence by the action of the poem, and that this mirrors the foreclosure of the poem and

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[9] See Humphrey House, *Coleridge: The Clark Lectures 1951-2* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), 126-29, Beer *Coleridge the Visionary*, 176-78, 187-88, and PW I.1 478-79.

[10] Quoted PW I.1 479.

[11] Karen Swann, 'Literary Gentlemen and Lovely Ladies: The Debate on the Character of *Christabel*', *English Literary History* 52:2 (Summer 1985), 397-418, 398.

[12] *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), IX 25, 24.

hence its fragmentary status. But to suggest that Christabel is somehow annihilated by her experience supposes that prior to her encounter with Geraldine, Christabel enjoyed relatively free and untroubled self-expression. From the start, however, the poem makes it clear that that is palpably untrue: Christabel is *already* 'silent'—and the poem tells the story of the latency within that silence, by revealing its unspoken form.

Prior criticism, therefore, has tended to suppress the possibility that Christabel's communion with Geraldine is, precisely, an act and expression of her own spirit, however alien and disturbing in the sight of prevailing religious *mores*. After all, the poem is not composed in the manner of a moral lesson: the seductive rhythms in which it 'sings' of its central event, together with its implicit critique on the authority of Christian discourse, do not suggest spiritual annihilation, but the exhilaration of mystery.

How, then, does the poem constitute its 'true wild weird spirit'?

Its dynamics are peculiarly involved—so let me say now that Geraldine is the serpent in the silence of Christabel's prayers, and Christabel gives her life.

From the beginning, Christabel's mysterious actions imply the character of her silence: what she intuits, feels, desires, but for social, moral and religious reasons does not have the capacity to speak of in the castle. Christabel has been disturbed by 'dreams all yesternight / Of her own betrothed Knight' (PW I.1 484), and on first publication, these are 'Dreams, that made her moan and leap, / As on her bed she lay in sleep' (PW II.1 627).[13] This is the first in a series of instances which make dream-life central to the poem, and allows the narrator to offer an explanation that explains nothing. As with her sight of Geraldine later, the detail of her dream remains unspoken, 'not to tell' (PW I.1 491); a truth private to Christabel. Even without the deleted lines, however, it is implied that these dreams have an erotic source: they involve thoughts and feelings for an absent lover.

This must, therefore, inform Christabel's actions, but in itself, is not enough to account for her venture into forest. Her disturbing dreams did not even occur that night: they happened 'yesternight'. The dreams have acted as a kind of summons, but the next day, Christabel has waited for the secrecy of a chill midnight to steal into the wood. Similarly, the suggestion that 'She in the Midnight Wood will pray / For the Weal of her Lover, that's far away' (PW I.1 484), prompts more questions than it answers, in the disparity between the act it purports to be and the act itself. In other words, it merely draws attention to the silence latent in the fact that Christabel has, in stealth, gone into the 'Midnight Wood' alone, under a full moon, to kneel beneath 'the huge Oak Tree' (PW I.1 484). The tension between the naming of the act and the act itself evokes the transgressive quality of Christabel's spiritual and sexual disturbance: her 'prayer' does not take the form of Christian piety, but an eroticized secret brought to the living totem of a moonlit oak.

Christabel's mysterious act of devotion at the oak concentrates several

[13] It is likely that Coleridge suppressed these lines after the hostile reviews of the 1816 edition, which included accusations of obscenity.

Coleridgean figures: not least in 'Kubla Khan', the woman who haunts the 'holy and inchanted' woods of the chasm, 'wailing for her demon-lover' (PW I.1 513). The wood and its oak is clearly sacred to Christabel in some way, but here, the invitation to her 'demon-lover' is implicit: an act of occult contemplation that releases transnatural energies.

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

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

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

The pattern of Christabel's furtive transgression continues and intensifies once she sees Geraldine, and shapes the whole movement of Part I. Geraldine's stunning epiphany both alarms and fascinates Christabel: "'Mary Mother, save me now!" / Said Christabel "And who art thou?'" (PW I.1 485). As if recognizing a disturbing quality in Geraldine's dazzling appearance, Christabel utters the Christian charm of protection she has been brought up with; immediately, however, she tries to know what she is facing. Geraldine evidently cannot force herself upon Christabel at this point: she twice asks Christabel to 'Stretch forth thy hand, and have no fear' (PW I.1 485), and only

tries to convince her with the story of her abduction when Christabel, still wary, asks "'How cam'st thou here?'" (PW I.1 484). Like the vampire, for all her power, Geraldine needs Christabel to willingly accept her—and she does. Despite her intuitive recognition of the 'Lady strange', and the fusion of fear and desire she evokes—it was 'frightful there to see / A Lady so richly clad, as She, / Beautiful Exceedingly!' (PW I.1 485)—Christabel lets her in.

When Christabel pledges the 'Service of Sir Leoline', in response to Geraldine's story (PW I.1 486), another disparity between action and explanation opens up. Geraldine's brilliant appearance 'in a silken Robe of White' (PW I.1 485) plainly does not tally with her story of rough treatment, but Christabel—like the reader—lets that go by, for the sake of being in Geraldine's luminous presence. Christabel volunteers her father's 'stout Chivalry', but no sooner has she done so, than she announces that he 'is weak in health', and must not be woken (PW I.1 486, 487). Nor is she prepared to disturb any attendants: for that night, she wishes to keep Geraldine as secret as her trip to the forest. Christabel and Geraldine speak the language of chivalry, but use it as the conduit for a hidden desire which bypasses and subverts a hypocritical and inadequate patriarchal order.[14]

At every step through the castle, up to and including her sexual submission, Christabel indulges her fascination with Geraldine. After making excuses not to disturb anyone, she invites Geraldine to spend the night with her: 'But we will move as if in stealth, / And I beseech your Courtesy, / This Night to share your Couch with me' (PW I.1 487). Again, Christabel pursues her impulses in 'stealth', conscious of the *frisson* of transgression. In the 1816 version of these lines, she is still more direct, even commanding Geraldine: 'So to my Room we'll creep in stealth, / And you to night must sleep with me' (PW II.1 630).[15] When Geraldine faints at the entrance to the castle, 'Christabel with Might and Main / Lifted her up, a weary Weight, / Over the Threshold of the Gate' (PW I.1 487): she once more performs the act of will necessary to empower her companion, without querying why, once inside, 'the Lady rose again, / And mov'd, as She were not in Pain' (PW I.1 487). Rather, the narrator hints at their increasing pleasure as they get nearer to the heart of Christabel's world: 'right glad they were' (PW I.1 487). Christabel either misses or accepts without demur other signs of Geraldine's otherworldly aura. She leads Geraldine past the ineffectual castle guard dog, the 'toothless mastiff Bitch', despite the fact that the mastiff made 'an angry moan', which she had never done 'Beneath the eye of Christabel' (PW I.1 483, 488). More strikingly, when the dying brands of the castle emit 'A Tongue of Light, a Fit of Flame' as Geraldine passes them, Christabel merely remains fixated on 'the Lady's Eye' (PW I.1 488). As the torches reveal her father's shield, it merely prompts her to remind Geraldine to tread softly, to maintain their secrecy: 'jealous of the list'ning Air, / They steal

[14] Tim Fulford analyses the political implications of the poem's treatment of 'chivalry', a concept which, as he observes, Burke's response to the French Revolution made had made 'a burning political issue' of the time: 'Slavery and superstition in the supernatural poems', in Lucy Newlyn (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 45-58, 55-7.

[15] Again, it seems that Coleridge softened these lines in response to accusations of obscenity in the press.

their way from stair to stair' until, right outside the Baron's room, they are 'still as Death with stifled Breath!', as they pass a further threshold (PW I.1 488). Coleridge constructs an inverse crescendo, in which their stealth reaches its climax as they reach their destination: Christabel's chamber.

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

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

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

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

Geraldine's spell does not silence Christabel, therefore, any further than she already was. She is changed, however: by giving her silence form and reality, her midnight tryst with Geraldine lays bare the doubleness of her own experience, in which Christian discourse and chivalric sex-roles are inadequate to the spiritual, emotional and sexual forces active within her. Part I of the poem shows how these forces shape her behaviour in spite of her upbringing and cultural context: they constitute her secret life. At the close of Part I, the

drama of that secret life reaches its climax in ritual consummation.

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

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

Christabel sees, experiences and knows more than the reader is told. When Geraldine undresses, she receives a revelation: 'Behold! her Bosom and half her Side— / A Sight to dream of, not to tell! / O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!' (PW I.1 491).

That mystery is heightened by the scrupulously ambiguous qualities with which Coleridge invests Geraldine. From her first appearance out of the oak, her presence warps natural laws. Her white silk robe 'shadowy in the moonlight shone', blending light with darkness, radiance with shadow, and her jewels seem part of her: 'wildly glitter'd here and there / The Gems entangled in her Hair' (PW I.1 485). That glittering quality—and her response to the wild-flower wine, in which her eyes ' 'gan glitter bright' (PW I.1 490)—is one of several features that recall the Mariner's powers of fascination. Just as 'The Mariner hath his will', so does Geraldine: 'One Hour was thine— / Thou'st had thy Will!' (PW I.1 373, 492). In Part II of the poem, Christabel remembers 'The Vision of Fear, the Touch and Pain!', which suggests something of Geraldine's eldritch vitality: 'Again she saw that Bosom old, / Again she felt that Bosom cold' (PW I.1 497). Similarly, she sees Geraldine as a lamia with 'shrunken serpent Eyes' (PW I.1 501). Besides the evidence of the poem itself, Coleridge's insight into Shakespeare's Weird Sisters give the best clue to his conception of Geraldine: 'They were awful beings: and blended in themselves the Fates and Furies of the ancients with the sorceresses of Gothic and popular superstition'; they 'have the power of tempting those, who have been the tempters of themselves' (LL I 531).[16]

Like the Weird Sisters, to borrow Coleridge's description of them again, Geraldine is a 'wonderful admixture of Witch Fate and Fairy' (TT I 573), and operates upon Christabel as such, teasing out her own desire, and fulfilling it with the force of magic. Geraldine realizes the 'unlawful thoughts' (PW I.1 331) of Christabel's hidden being: in the touch of her bosom and the power of

[16] Geraldine uses a curse on the spirit of Christabel's mother lifted directly from *Macbeth*: 'Peak and pine!' (PW I.1 489).

her spell, Christabel exchanges normality for secret knowledge. She is initiated into an order being that Coleridge associated with Pan in the *Biographia Literaria*: an 'intelligence blended with a darker power, deeper, mightier, and more universal than the conscious intellect of man' (BL II 117). Geraldine's magical words do not merely affect Christabel's mind; they alter her entire being, and Coleridge reinforces this by dramatizing her daemonic consummation through sexual contact and its subsequent dream-filled sleep. Coleridge also eroticizes spiritual transgression in 'The Eolian Harp' and 'Kubla Khan', but in 'Christabel' it is more explicit: Geraldine is, literally, a 'demon-lover', who answers Christabel's silent call. Christabel's sexual receptivity to Geraldine signals the depth of her receptivity to all that Geraldine represents. She experiences Geraldine's otherworldly power in the most complete and palpable form of human intimacy.

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

> With open eyes (ah woe is me!)
> Asleep, and dreaming fearfully,
> Fearfully dreaming, yet, I wis,
> Dreaming that alone, which is—
> O Sorrow and Shame! (PW I.1 492)

Christabel's open eyes register the impact of her disturbing new-found knowledge. As Part II of the poem makes clear, Christabel is psychologically and physiologically altered by what she has known: she has become herself a transnatural being, and her body will tell what her speech cannot. Harold Bloom notices that the poem presents 'a nightmare as if it were a fulfillment of desire' (1971, 213), but that is precisely the ambivalence Coleridge achieves. In the second phase of Christabel's enchanted sleep, her eyes close and she passes into a state of bliss:

> Tears she sheds—
> Large Tears, that leave the Lashes bright!
> And oft the while she seems to smile
> As Infants at a sudden Light!
>
> Yea, she doth smile and she doth weep,
> Like a youthful Hermitess
> Beauteous in a Wilderness,
> Who, praying always, prays in Sleep. (PW I.1 493)

The imagery not only suggests a new light dawning on a new mind, but also that Christabel has won a kind of sacred freedom, and has become like Geraldine, a woman of the woods: 'Beauteous in a Wilderness'. Just as Geraldine was the answer to Christabel's ambiguous 'prayer' at the oak, so

here, asleep in her daemonic embrace, she is said to be in prayer. Geraldine's body is the shape of Christabel's silence, and the form of her transnatural gnosis.

In the remainder of this essay, I focus on three specific features of that gnosis: Coleridge's ritual orchestration of Christabel's union with Geraldine; the doubling of vision within the poem; and the significance of the serpent as an image of that gnosis.

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

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

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

The disruption of time and space around her 'marriage' to Geraldine lends a cosmic significance to Christabel's transnatural consummation. The identification of birth and death in the setting and rising of a star echoes the

identification of winter with spring, midnight with morning, and the fact that Christabel's birth is already associated with death: specifically, her mother's.[17] Geraldine, who sleeps with Christabel 'still and mild, / As a Mother with her Child' (PW I.1 492) has displaced the natural, maternal order, to become the agent of Christabel's initiatory death and rebirth in daemonic form.

The blurring of the distinction between Geraldine and Christabel's mother is one of the most suggestive aspects of the doubling of vision that occurs throughout the poem. H.W. Piper observes several instances of 'some strange identity between the mother and Geraldine': 'Geraldine can summon the mother with a wish, dismiss her, take her place for an "hour", and be revived by the wine she has prepared'.[18]

There are other ambiguous overlaps. The mastiff makes an 'angry moan' as Geraldine passes, but we also know that when she howls, 'Some say, she sees my Lady's Shroud' meaning (presumably) Christabel's mother (PW I.1 488, 483), subtly identifying the two.

In the Conclusion to Part I, the narrator's query about Christabel's 'Vision sweet'—'What if She knew her Mother near?' (PW I.1 493)—is particularly ambivalent, given that Christabel's repose in Geraldine's arms has just been compared to a child with her mother. Nothing in the poem clearly separates 'that Vision blest, / Which comforted her After rest, / When in the Lady's Arms she lay' from Geraldine (PW I.1 497). Rather, the poem brings them together, blending them in Christabel's experience. This 'hovering between two images' is part of the imaginative apparatus by which the poem productively disrupts the forms of human knowledge, in order to evoke 'a strong working of the mind' (LL I 311)—a pattern that recurs from the from the first lines of the poem, with its fusion of midnight and morning, light and dark, a moon both veiled and 'at the Full'; Geraldine's epiphany blends the 'frightful' with the 'Beautiful' (PW I.1 483, 485).[19] In 'The Pains of Sleep', similar visions become the stuff of personal nightmare: 'Desire with loathing strangely mixed'; 'Deeds to be hid which were not hid'; 'To know and loathe, yet wish and do!' (PW I.2 754). In 'Christabel', however, mythopoesis both anticipates and transcends Coleridge's subsequent autobiography. Christabel's experiences expose the disparity between her inner life and the language available to her to express it, and that disparity is expressed in the paradoxical roles fulfilled by

[17] In March 1810, Coleridge returned to this point in his notebook: 'Christabel—My first cries mingled with my Mother's Death-groan' (CN III 3720).

[18] H.W. Piper, *The Singing of Mount Abora: Coleridge's Use of Biblical Imagery and Natural Symbolism in Poetry and Philosophy* (London and Toronto: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987), 76, 77.

[19] The poem 'Love', composed in 1799, places the same double vision at the heart of the story within the story, which the lover tells to Genevieve: 'There came and look'd him in the face / An angel beautiful and bright; / And that he knew it was a Fiend, / This miserable Knight!' (PW I.2 608). Mays notes that in 'Love', Coleridge 'manages to encompass innocence and guile, modesty and contrivance, pleasure and pain, "Hopes, and fears that kindle hope", and bring them into some kind of alignment', adding that '[a]gain and again, when you read a Coleridge poem, you are—or should be—aware of being courted by double or multiple occasions': 'Coleridge's "Love": "All He Can Manage, More Than He Could"', in Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (eds.), *Coleridge's Visionary Languages* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 49-66, 53, 56. On the verbal parallels between 'Love' and 'Christabel', see Geoffrey Yarlott, *Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid* (London: Methuen, 1967), 318-21.

Geraldine's body.[20] She is both frightening and desirable, old and young, a daemon-lover and mother-figure; a challenge to any 'presumptuous Philosophy which in its rage of explanation allows no xyz, no symbol representative of the vast Terra Incognita of Knowledge' (CN III 3825).

As part of this provocative doubling of vision, Coleridge subverts the possible assumption that Geraldine personifies 'evil'. Coleridge may have later inserted lines 255-61, where Geraldine 'eyes the Maid and seeks delay' before taking Christabel in her arms (PW I.1 491), in response to prudish criticism.[21] However, the lines are in keeping with similar complications throughout the text;[22] for example, her curious assurance that 'All they, who live in th' upper Sky, / Do love you, holy Christabel!', and her enigmatic promise to repay Christabel's welcome (PW I.1 490). Geraldine is burdened with a form of 'dread' (PW I.1 494, 501), which adds a touch of authentic vulnerability behind her façade as 'a Maiden most forlorn' (PW I.1 489). Nor does this dilute Coleridge's original vision; from the earliest manuscripts, Geraldine's power coincides with self-conscious awareness of her alienation, which she communicates to Christabel: 'The Mark of my Shame, the Seal of my Sorrow' (PW II.1 634).

Christabel takes on this shame and sorrow: her fascination with Geraldine leads her to become what she has known. The obscure sense of shame in her new knowledge is made clear: she sleeps in Geraldine's arms, 'Dreaming that alone, which is— / O Sorrow and Shame!' (PW I.1 492). The next morning, the sight of Geraldine, 'fairer yet! and yet more fair!' as 'her girded Vests / Grew tight beneath her heaving Breasts', stirs guilty feelings: '"Sure I have sinn'd!" said Christabel', troubled 'With such Perplexity of Mind / As Dreams too lively leave behind' (PW I.1 495).

The 'shame' of Christabel's experience consists in her separation from those who do not share her occult knowledge: they may be, so to speak, unfallen, but they are ignorant of the ecstasy and mystery of her experience. As an avatar of the transnatural, Geraldine is both the tempter and the fruit of an occult knowledge: an ambiguity reinforced in her image as a serpent in Part II.

Like the mariner, Geraldine communicates the knowledge she embodies as a kind of contagion, infecting Christabel's entire being. Christabel is not merely the wedding-guest, however; she is the Mariner too, fascinated by her own transnatural vision, in the form of Geraldine, and re-created by its hieratic force. Her knowledge now crosses sensory boundaries, but Christabel experiences her power to see what others do not as both a gift and a curse. The poem as it stands only covers the drama of her initiation into this state, and in Part II, her immediate crisis as a stunned witness to Geraldine's mastery and

[20] As Edward Strickland has it: 'Geraldine is the cradling madonna as well as seductress of the imagination': 'Metamorphoses of the Muse in Romantic Poesis: *Christabel*', *English Literary History* 44:4 (Winter, 1977), 641-58, 653.

[21] The contemptuous article of September 1816 in the *Edinburgh Review*, thought to be by Thomas Moore, specifically mentions the unhesitant directness of Geraldine's approach, which originally read, 'She took two Paces, and a Stride, / And lay down by the Maiden's Side' (PW II.1 634).

[22] Besides which, the supposedly moral motivation for the new lines is balanced by the fact that for the same edition, Coleridge expanded upon Geraldine's transnatural glamour in ll. 60-65.

manipulation of those around her. In ways that again resemble the Mariner, the Catholic, chivalric paradigm which Christabel has inhabited all her life is now a hollow and vestigial hang-over from before her spiritual revolution. Nevertheless, it still surrounds her, and limits her capacity for verbal response: she prays 'That He, who on the Cross did groan, / Might wash away her Sins unknown' (PW I.1 495), even though the poem has rendered every other Christian protective wish—encapsulated in the refrain of 'Jesu Maria, shield her well!' (PW I.1 485)—ineffectual.[23]

Geraldine's language operates through the magical facility of many voices—'faint and sweet', 'alter'd', 'hollow', 'low' (PW I.1 485, 489, 491)—while Christabel is habituated to the language of 'sin' and maidenly duty. It is implicit that, if Christabel is *becoming* Geraldine, she too might develop the magical power she has witnessed, but that would entail an entire acceptance of her gnosis through Geraldine that the poem never reaches. It is likely, then, if she *could* try and describe it, that in her fear and inability to articulate what she has known, Christabel would do violence to its truths and therefore to herself, by naming it as 'evil'. As if recognizing that Christabel could not yet come to terms with her new-found state, the spell that makes Geraldine 'Lord of [her] Utterance' (PW I.1 491) co-operates with the inadequacy of Christabel's Christian discourse, to keep their secret consummation pre-verbal. This does not exactly curtail its expression, however: while Geraldine retains the magic of words, Christabel's transnatural knowledge is realized physiologically.

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

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

Coleridge held that the 'sublime faculty' of a 'great mind' such as Shakespeare's was to become what it contemplates, and hence 'to become by power of Imagination another Thing' (CN II 3290, 3247). This involved an order of psychic exposure akin to love: 'Love transforms the souls [*sic*] into a conformity with the object loved' (CN I 189). The object of contemplation and of love is therefore crucial. Fascinated by the transnatural Geraldine, to whose power she has willingly exposed herself, Christabel herself becomes transnatural. For Coleridge, moreover, this model of becoming is a form of self-revelation. His work is filled with philosophical variations on the principle

[23] Camille Paglia observes a 'harsh Coleridgean irony' in his inversion of Christian expectations of prayer: in both 'Christabel' and 'The Ancient Mariner', she writes, 'Christian prayer produces pagan epiphany': *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 332.

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

In choosing the serpent as the physiological emblem of Christabel's knowledge, Coleridge clearly knew of its provocative associations; but it is equally clear that he invested the image with a value far removed from religious repugnance. Indeed, the serpent was far from being a stock image of 'evil', for Coleridge. On the contrary, he used it as the symbolic nexus of language, knowledge and power throughout his life: as an image of 'a writer of Genius' (CN I 609); of Shakespeare's language, 'which he compared to the sinuous and over-varied lapses of a serpent, writhing in every direction, but still progressive, and in every posture beautiful' (LL II 278); the 'principle of the imagination';[24] of poetic form and intellectual power (BL II 14); and the Hebraic equivalent to the Promethean agency which lured humanity to 'the Nous, or divine principle' in itself (SWF II 1287, 1285).

Moreover, in one of his most telling notebook entries, belonging to 1825, Coleridge used it as an image of his authentic self. He recalls (or imagines) being consoled by a friend—perhaps Anne Gillman—who assures him that he is 'an *innocent* man'. After some doubts, Coleridge concedes that he does have an essential 'innocency' and a 'child-like Heart', but qualifies this:

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

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

[24] As recalled by William Hazlitt: see *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London, 1930-34), XVIII 371.

kissed was and remained, in his own words, his 'unleavened *Self*': his original and essential being.[25]

When writing 'Christabel' Coleridge drew on extensive notes on reptilian imagery that reflect his peculiarly strong interest.[26] Bard Bracy is more sensitive to the poem's strange events than Leoline, as his dream of the snake coiled round the dove at midnight shows (PW I.1 500). Nevertheless, he interprets the vision in conventional terms: the snake is un-Christian, as he understands it, and therefore it must be evil. In the light of what the reader knows, Bracy's intention the next morning, 'With Music strong and saintly Song / To wander thro' the Forest bare, / Lest aught unholy loiter there' (PW I.1 500), reads almost as parodically ignorant and ineffectual: the snake is right in front of him. Coleridge also makes a point of Leoline's misinterpretation of the dream (PW I.1 500-1), so that its true import remains an unspoken secret between Geraldine, Christabel and the reader. Even then, however, its true significance is locked into the obliquity of the poem itself. Coleridge builds the poem's double vision into the language with which Bracy describes what he sees: the snake's head is close to the dove's, 'And with the Dove it heaves and stirs, / Swelling its Neck as she swell'd hers!' (PW I.1 500). Bracy sees it as the struggle of a victim, but in this eroticized image, the dove and the snake heave, stir and swell in concert: the dynamics of will, of seducer and seduced, are interchangeable. This precisely anticipates Coleridge's later image of his 'unleavened *Self*' (CN IV 5275): like Christabel, he is both unable and unwilling to wish away the kiss of the serpent wreathed around his heart. As well as the emblem of access to hidden knowledge, Coleridge also knew the entwined serpent as a symbol of healing, associated with the god Asclepius. It is in this ambiguous blend of knowledge, power, beauty and transgression that the serpent functions as a psychic icon at the centre of the poem's myth.

It is a myth with no end—and the poem's irresolution sets its daemonic agency free: Geraldine has successfully 'escaped' and is at large in the world. Two hundred years since the poem's publication, she is ever-young, and the mystery of Christabel's desire and Geraldine's power lives on—its 'true wild weird spirit' beckoning to our own.

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[25] Ted Hughes was the first to pursue the significance of this note: see 'The Snake in the Oak: The Mythos of Coleridge's "new principle" of Metre', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (New York: Picador, 1995), 373-465, 377 *et passim*.

[26] From Bartram's *Travels* and Dampier's *Voyages and Adventures* (1776): see CN I 218 and SWF I 78. His wonderful descriptions of his encounters with lizards on Malta accompanies a fresh joy in life; he describes how he 'fascinated' one, and in doing so expresses his own fascination by the lizards, to the extent that he wants to tame one; he observes how they have 'all the delicacy of the Serpent' (CN II 2144), and takes particular pleasure in 'That beautiful green Lizard with scarlet Tail, yet with a venomous Look' (CN II 2198): see Gregory Leadbetter, 'Coleridge's Lizards in Malta and Sicily: Geraldine under the Sun', *The Wordsworth Circle* 43:2 (Spring 2012), 90-4.