Transformation or Transgression?

Graham Davidson and Perdita Davidson

THE TWO PAPERS THAT FOLLOW AROSE FROM A DOMESTIC DISCUSSION. The editor read a draft of his paper to his wife, by which she was not convinced. They then read the poem again together, several times, and talked about it at length. No agreement was reached, so the editor suggested that Perdita write a paper setting down her views, while he revised his. Both were given, in the order below, at Halsway last year.

Transformation: *Christabel* as an epithalamium

Graham Davidson

Marriage—or not?

As defined by the OED, an epithalamium is 'a nuptial song in praise of the bride and bride-groom'. Wiki defines it as 'a poem written specifically for the bride on the way to her marital chamber.' As a genre, it was short-lived in 17th century England, and though the best-known version is Spenser's demure poem, many lesser known examples, some of which are to follow, are much raunchier, and have as their central concern the transformation of maid to woman.

But first, is there any evidence that the poem progresses towards, or is much concerned with, marriage? Christabel is betrothed, and she knows her mother will hear the castle bell ring on her wedding day; on the other hand her lover is far away, and the poem, as we have it, makes no further reference to marriage. In 1823, Coleridge thought of the unwritten part three as Christabel's song of desolation (CN IV 5032), which makes it no easier to see where the poem was going. Yet if we are to believe James Gillman, which some critics prefer not to, the poem was to develop like this:

> Over the mountains, the Bard, as directed by Sir Leoline, "hastes" with his disciple; but in consequence of one of those inundations supposed to be common to this country, the spot only where the castle once stood is discovered,—the edifice itself being washed away. He determines to return. Geraldine being acquainted with all that is passing, like the Weird Sisters in Macbeth, vanishes. Re-appearing, however, she waits the return of the Bard, exciting in the mean time, by her wily arts, all the anger she could rouse in the Baron's breast, as well as that jealousy of which he is described to have been susceptible. The old Bard and the youth at length arrive, and therefore she can no longer personate the character of Geraldine, the daughter of Lord Roland de Vaux, but changes her appearance to that of the accepted though absent lover of Christabel. Next ensues a courtship most distressing to Christabel, who feels—she

> knows not why—great disgust for her once favoured knight. This coldness is very painful to the Baron, who has no more conception than herself of the supernatural transformation. She at last yields to her father's entreaties, and consents to approach the altar with this hated suitor. The real lover returning, enters at this moment, and produces the ring which she had once given him in sign of her betrothment. Thus defeated, the supernatural being Geraldine disappears. As predicted, the castle bell tolls, the mother's voice is heard, and to the exceeding great joy of the parties, the rightful marriage takes place, after which follows a reconciliation and explanation between the father and daughter.[1]

Even if it removes the bloom of mystery that hangs about an unfinished work, this is both consistent with the poem as we have it, and contains no points of conflict. Simplicity of plot does not mean simplicity of expression, for the two existing parts could as easily be reduced to a comparable outline. For such reasons, I have little difficulty in accepting that this or something like it was how the poem would develop and include, if not conclude with, a marriage. For whether that marriage was the ultimate intention of the poem is more of a question, as it is reconciliation of father and daughter with which Gillman ends—as it is the division of father and daughter which ends part 2. It is also questioned by another intention that Gillman attributes to the poem:

> … that the virtuous of this world save the wicked. The pious and good Christabel suffers and prays for "The weal of her lover that is far away," exposed to various temptations in a foreign land; and she thus defeats the power of evil represented in the person of Geraldine. This is one main object of the tale.

This account has significant inconsistencies. Christabel prays for her lover far away and exposed to temptations—which is fine—but surely when Gillman says 'and she thus defeats the power of evil' represented by Geraldine, that 'thus' conceals a non-sequitur: nowhere in the poem are there any hints that Geraldine shape-shifts to the Far East in order to tempt the absent knight, for her key relationship is with Christabel, and in one form or another, she hangs about Sir Leoline's castle. And if we marry the two accounts, how come 'the pious and good Christabel' is burdened with a sense of sin? Where the two accounts may overlap is that Geraldine imitates the knight prior to his return, and Christabel's disgust at his or her presence may be a mark of her moral or spiritual revival—that having 'fallen', she is again pious and good, for she can distinguish between appearance and reality, which her father signally fails to do. However, that the substantial focus of the poem might be the relationship between father and daughter, Sir Leoline and Christabel, and their reconciliation, rather than Christabel's marriage to an unnamed and absent

[1] James Gillman, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, (London, 1838), Ch.IV.

knight, is part of Perdita's thesis, and the subject of one of our formative discussions.

In the nuptial chamber

The etymology of 'epithalamium' is Greek—'epi-'—near or beside, and 'thalamos'—the bridal chamber. It was a tradition, both in ancient Greece and seventeenth century England, that a song or songs were sung as the married pair were on their way to bed, and sometimes even during the consummation, the achievement of which the bridegroom had to come to the door and announce. But the genre often celebrated something particular—the change in the bride, always the bride—from an original innocence, a virgin-shame, an unawakened awareness of her being, to a full consciousness of herself as a woman. That change of condition, or transformation, is the refrain of John Donne's 'Epthalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn', which runs, 'Today put on perfection and a woman's name.' The poem follows the bride through the day of her marriage, ringing all the changes in her condition that the day will bring. As she prepares for the wedding night, Donne re-assures her that nakedness is her rightful state—like Christabel, she is to lie down in her loveliness:

> Thy virgin's girdle now untie,
> And in thy nuptial bed, love's altar, lie
> A pleasing sacrifice;…[2]
> for thou, alone,
> Like virtue and truth, art best in nakedness… .
> No more be said, "I may be," but "I am,"
> To-night put on perfection, and a woman's name.

Seventeenth century epithalamia regularly take on two related matters—what should happen in bed, about which they are surprisingly open—and anxieties around the loss of maidenhead. Robert Herrick in his 'An Epithalamie to Sir Thomas Southwell and his Ladie' rather sweetly addresses the bride:

> Deare, is it this you dread,
> The losse of Maiden-head?
> Beleeve me; you will most
> Esteeme it when 'tis lost:
>
> These Precious-Pearly-Purling teares,
> But spring from ceremonious feares.
> And 'tis but Native shame,
> That hides the loving flame:

[2] Cf. *Christabel* I 248-51: Geraldine prepares for the night: '… she unbound/ The cincture from beneath her breast:/ Her silken robe, and inner vest,/ Dropt to her feet…'. Ironically, perhaps, a cincture, or Donne's 'virgin's girdle', is a priestly belt or rope symbolizing chastity. It may seem odd to associate chastity with Geraldine, but whatever the symbolism, chastity is being abandoned, and both women are 'best in nakedness'.

> And may a while controule
> The soft and am'rous soule;
> But yet, Loves fire will wast
> Such bashfulnesse at last.

This is both frank and gentle, acknowledging what worries the maid, but re-assuring her that all will be well when she allows herself to express the love she feels, when she overcomes her virgin shame.

Crashaw, lines from whose 'Hymn to St Teresa' Coleridge said might have 'by some subtle process' suggested the thought inspiring *Christabel*, appears to blur the boundaries between spirituality and sexuality, and one can read the Hymn as an epithalamium for Teresa's espousal to Christ, echoing her own last words, '*O my Lord and my Spouse, the hour that I have longed for has come. It is time to meet one another.'* I raise this because I want to make clear that I don't think that either poet was intent on some kind of sublimation, or that their imagery or their attitudes to sexuality were out of control. If Coleridge was intent on anything, he was trying to give what he called 'the organic energies of the universe', the daemonic and the bacchic, their rightful place in an ordered human life. He believed that St Teresa had not recognized her organic or sexual energies for what they were, and thus her spirituality was significantly disordered. He was not going to have this for Christabel. And it would be easy to suppose that Richard Crashaw, a young celibate Catholic, could make a similar mistake, and so his Hymn might be read, for it is not easy to decide which force is leading which. But another, secular, epithalamium he wrote celebrating the loss of maidenhead makes it clear that he himself was not subject to such a confusion:

> A fine, thin negative thing it was,
> A nothing with a dainty name
> …
> A froward flower whose peevish pride
> Within itself itself did hide,
> Flying all fingers, and even thinking much
> Of its own touch.
>
> this fool
> Whose froward pride
> Love's noble school
> And courts denied,
> And froze the fruit of fair desire
> (Which flourisheth in mutual fire)
> Gainst Nature, who 'mong all the webs she spun
> Ne'er wove a nun.

With many pretty, peevish trials
Of angry yielding, faint denyings,
Melting Noes and mild denials,
Dying lives and short-lived dyings,
With doubtful eyes
Half smiles, half tears;

With trembling joys
And jocund fears,
Twixt the pretty twilight strife
Of dying maid and dawning wife,
Twixt rain and sunshine, this sweet maidenhead
Alas is dead.

This verges on contempt for the loss, but the poem ends very tenderly, celebrating the marital future:

May their whole life a sweet song prove
Set to two well-composèd parts
By music's noblest master, Love,
Played on the strings of both their hearts;

Twixt the pretty twilight strife/Of dying maid and dawning wife

Those examples provide some idea of the material making up an epithalamium. But given that *Christabel* doesn't celebrate a marriage, how can it be described as an epithalamium? If there is no marriage, there is a wedding-night, together with the suppressed anxieties that go with it, and an outcome, which though very mixed, celebrates some kind of renewed or revived energy, the consequence of Christabel putting on a woman's name. Geraldine first appears to Christabel as 'a Damsel bright/ Drest in a silken Robe of White'—something like a wedding dress, perhaps. They spend the night together, Christabel naked in Geraldine's arms. And if this is anything more than a slightly troubling sleep-over, then it is, in my reading, as important a fact as it is a simple one that the one hour that is Geraldine's is not preceded by anything analogous to the ceremonies of marriage. To put it lightly, what is the status of Christabel's maidenhead the morning after? Did Geraldine prove to be her demon lover? Coleridge gives Geraldine a distinct status and a distinct purpose: 'A woman she: and in her mood/ Still wrought the soul of Womanhood'—wrought that soul in Christabel, we presume (PW II 660). Whatever the event, the consequence of that wedding night is that Christabel puts on a woman's name, grows in beauty, gains a sense of sin, but is not yet, nor perhaps even ready to be, the wife that Coleridge apparently planned she would become towards the end of the poem.

Why he chose this narrative path is a puzzling question. But choose it he

did—and not just once, but on several occasions in several ways. In two poems written in the same month, two years before the first part of 'Christabel', and with very similar titles, 'To an Unfortunate Woman whom I knew in the Days of her Innocence', sex has succeeded a courtship without the intercession of marriage. Coleridge provides different answers for what the future might bring a fallen woman. In the first, she will at best remain an outcast:

> Lightly didst thou flutter, foolish thing!
> Heave and flutter to his sighs…
>
> Gaily from thy mother stalk
> Wert thou danc'd and wafted high
> Soon on this unshelter'd walk
> Flung to wither and to die. (PW 148)

'When lovely woman stoops to folly', Coleridge says with Goldsmith, her only remedy '… is—to die'. This image of a fallen woman as a leaf torn from the 'mother stalk' may inform a delightful if apparently digressive passage in *Christabel*, significant in that it occurs just after she is conscious of a presence behind 'the huge broad-breasted old Oak Tree' and just before she steals to the other side and sees Geraldine:

> 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.
>
> Hush, beating heart of Christabel!
> Jesu, Maria, shield her well!

Is Christabel the last of her clan? The leaf about to be torn from the maternal tree? Though her mother has died, her spirit lives on as Christabel's guardian angel, rendered temporally ineffective by Geraldine's spell. Is this why Jesu and Maria are evoked, but not her mother?

In the companion poem, Coleridge imagines a reversed resolution, in that the fallen woman rather than being separated from, goes home to her mother:

> Loathing thy polluted Lot,
> Hie thee, Maiden! hie thee hence
> Seek thy weeping Mother's cot
> With a wiser Innocence! (PW 149)

And then comparing the fallen maiden with a moulting sky-lark, in the concluding verse Coleridge offers her redemption if not a husband,

Soon with renovated Wing

Shall She dare a loftier flight,
Upwards to the Day-star sing
And embathe in heavenly Light!

In relation to *Christabel*, the role of the mother in each poem is significant. Without either the presence of or a return to the mother, the fallen girl can but 'wither and die'. Christabel's hearing the voice of her mother at the proposed conclusion of the poem is an influx of 'heavenly Light'. Coleridge's paradoxical imperative, 'Hie thee, Maiden!', paradoxical as the maiden is now no maiden, arises from his confidence that her return will lead to 'a wiser Innocence'. That's another paradoxical phrase, for by convention she is no longer innocent, and it grated enough on the conventional Joseph Cottle, preparing the poem for publication, to change the line to 'With the wreck of Innocence'.

In those last two verses, I see a paradigm for the progress of *Christabel*. The sky-lark is given two stages of life: first with a fledgling plumage with which she skims over 'the tender corn' and the 'od'rous blooms' of the beanfield—delighting and possibly over-indulging the senses—and then 'a renovated Wing' with which to dare a loftier and heavenward flight. As a result of her 'sinning' with Geraldine, Christabel sheds the 'firstling plumes' of her innocence, and is then rendered mute and folorn—which is where, as we have it, the poem ends. But if the poem was to conclude as Gillman imagined, then Christabel would, after her song of desolation, have regained her innocence and been embathed in the heavenly light of her mother's voice.

A Necessary Fall?

Coleridge creates some kind of a fall for Christabel, a pattern not only found in poems of love and courtship but embedded in his poetry, a fall which might, for instance be compared to the Mariner's shooting of the albatross, a sort of 'Sin is Behovely', an awakening of a new form of consciousness. And commenting on *The Ancient Mariner* as his initial shot at writing a supernatural poem, Coleridge adds that he 'was preparing, among other poems, the "Dark Ladie", and the "Christabel", in which I should have more nearly realized my ideal than I had done in my first attempt.' (BL II 7) Coleridge never clarified what he considered unsatisfactory about *The Ancient Mariner*, and his linking of *Christabel* with 'The Ballad of the Dark Ladie' remains largely unexplained—the latter, as we have it, an unfinished poem of 60 lines. But it does follow the pattern of the two earlier poems, a fall or disorder in the liturgy of courtship and marriage. It opens with the unnamed lady sitting on a mossy rock below her pledged lover's castle all day waiting for him—fretful, anxious, 'in silent pain', sending her page three times to the castle. Something is wrong, and when Henry, Lord Falkland appears, she rebukes him thus:

My Henry! I have given thee much!
I gave what I can ne'er recall!

I gave my Heart, I gave my Peace—
O heaven! I gave thee all.

Henry, 'a *solemn* Scoundrel' according to Coleridge, attempts to comfort her by promising that if they wait until the stars peep out, 'thro' the Dark we two will steal' to the finest of his father's nine castles. This stealthy nocturnal progress has echoes in *Christabel*—who tells Geraldine 'So to my room we'll creep in stealth', (l.120), and 'They steal their way from stair to stair' says the narrator (a variant of l.168). However, if Christabel is up for this subterfuge the Dark Ladie is not and, appalled, thinks to herself

The Dark? the Dark? No! not the Dark!
The twinkling Stars? How, Henry? How?
O God! 'twas in the eye of Noon
He pledged his sacred Vow!

And in the eye of Noon my Love
Shall lead me from my Mother's Door,
Sweet Boys and Girls all cloath'd in White
Strewing flowers before. (PW 182)

As in *Christabel* noon and midnight are morally opposed; seduction is associated with the dark, and marriage, and sacred vows, with 'the eye of Noon'. But that the Dark Lady looks to her white wedding suggests either that Coleridge is ironically pointing out its unlikelihood, her sense of unreality—or, which I think more probable, he is preparing the Dark Lady's progress towards 'a wiser Innocence', becoming 'pious and good' again. But Coleridge's difficulty is Henry, her seducer and 'a *solemn* Scoundrel'. If she is on a redemptive path, what about him? To get him into a marriageable state would necessarily make it a poem more about him than her. Best get rid of him. But how could she then marry another and still maintain her innocence? Henry's presence would haunt the wedding. The seduction of a girl by a woman is a neat answer. Having precipitated the necessary fall, the woman, witch, vampire, whatever, can disappear, having done her stuff, like the witches in Macbeth. So Coleridge takes a leaf out of Bill Clinton's book, enabling both Geraldine and Christabel to claim 'I never had sexual relations with that woman.' However, Christabel is more honest than Bill, as she is sure she has sinned.

The context in which 'The Dark Ladie' was conceived may further illustrate why Coleridge considered it of a kind with *Christabel*. A poem now called 'Love' was to have been an introduction to 'The Dark Ladie'. It is the happiest poem Coleridge ever wrote, immensely popular in its day, and tells of an

entirely successful courtship—not so much an epi- as a pro-thalamion—or what happened before they got to the church, or bridal chamber. It begins with a magnificent, unreserved declaration: 'All thoughts, all passions, all delights, / Whatever stirs this mortal frame, / All are but ministers of Love, / And feed his sacred flame.' After telling Genevieve a story of a knight scorned by the Lady of the Land, his descent into madness, and her nursing him as he died, the narrator concludes with these verses—which Wordsworth thought too sensual:

> All impulses of soul and sense
> Had thrill'd my guiltless Genevieve—
> The music and the doleful tale,
> The rich and balmy eve;
>
> And hopes and fears that kindle hope,
> An undistinguishable throng;
> And gentle wishes long subdu'd,
> Subdu'd and cherish'd long.
> ***
> I saw her bosom heave and swell,
> Heave and swell with inward sighs—
> I could not choose but love to see
> Her gentle bosom rise.
> ***
> She half-inclos'd me with her arms—
> She press'd me with a meek embrace;
> And bending back her head, look'd up,
> And gaz'e upon my face.
>
> 'Twas partly love, and partly fear,
> And partly 'twas a bashful art,
> That I might rather feel than see,
> The swelling of her heart.
>
> I calm'd her fears, and she was calm,
> And told her love with virgin pride;
> And so I won my Genevieve,
> My bright and beaut'ous bride. (PW253)

Here is the unseen courtship that has preceded the opening both of 'The Dark Lady' and *Christabel*. The question that still puzzles me, and I haven't succeeded in answering except to say that it is so, is why this wonderful wooing has to be succeeded by a fall? Why don't they just nip off to church, and so to bed?

All seems right, which is probably why the poem was so popular, and yet

there are some puzzling phrases: why does Coleridge feel the need to call Genevieve 'guiltless'—a word which he subsequently changed to 'guileless', itself inconsistent with her 'bashful art', as if conscious of some inappropriateness; 'guiltless' is what Christabel is initially, and yet she is made to take on a sense of sin, with which the tale of 'The Dark Ladie' begins. And Genevieve's hopes and fears are described as 'An undistinguishable throng', indicating confusion if nothing else, but a phrase that may have stuck in Coleridge's mind, because it re-appears in 'The Pains of Sleep' as 'a trampling throng' describing his conflicting and disordered feelings, all associated with guilt. And should we think there is any disorder in that her 'gentle wishes' have been 'long subdu'd', and yet 'Subdu'd and cherish'd long'—that is what has been suppressed, in our terms, has also been cherished, or nurtured, we might say. Does this indicate some deep-seated conflict, an essential disorder, or only something temporally unresolved, necessarily part of courtship? It is probably those gentle wishes that take Christabel out to pray—her poem begins where 'Love' leaves off, for the action of *Christabel* takes place in the inter-regnum or hiatus between her betrothal and her marriage, and in Christabel we witness the fall that happens off-stage between the end of 'Love' and the beginning of 'The Dark Ladie', that fall which Coleridge appears to believe a necessary part of the progress from maid to matron.

Too sensual said Wordsworth of 'Love'. And the question is, Did Coleridge agree with him? Although he wanted the power of the senses to be given their due, he feared their gaining a life of their own, and he struggled to find the balance, always distinguishing between desire and love. He says, in a later note on Sara Hutchinson,

> Could I feel for a moment the supremacy of Love suspended in my nature, by accidents of temporary Desire… were the Rebel to sit on the *Throne* of my Being… I should feel myself as much fallen and as unworthy of her Love… as if I had roamed like a Hog, in the rankest Lanes of a city… (CN II 2984)

What I think Christabel might have been about had it been completed is the ordering of sense, and all the powers of sense, in the light of love, or another version of the relationship between Understanding and Reason at the core of Coleridge's thinking. The apparent paradox is that as she puts on power and a woman's name, Christabel is overcome by a feeling of sin, probably because the power, in my reading, has yet to be rightly ordered in relation to love. Coleridge has decided to inspect the relationship between desire and love, which is compressed in the traditional epithalamium, as it in his version, 'Love', by the rapid and untroubled transition from courtship to marriage. In the hiatus between those two states, Coleridge has located the action not only of *Christabel*, but several other of his poems, indicating that the right balance between the two states was not something he believed necessarily achieved by a successful courtship. Coleridge placed his 'Sonnet to Asra' as an epigraph to

one manuscript version of the poem. In it, there is a line in which he likens his love to 'vernal waters springing up through snow'—the warm, the genial, the powerful, even a slightly suppressed mighty fountain perhaps, surrounded by the white, the clean, the cool, the pure. That is where I think Coleridge hoped to take Christabel, or as he said much later, marriage turns 'the water of our animal life to the Wine of *Human Gladness*' (SWF II 1507).

Conclusion

It is easy, and gratfying, to mystify a fragment—and a certain amount of nonsense has been promulgated, originally by Lamb, about *Christabel* being a 'complete' fragment—even confining the idea of completion to Part 1. This is burying one's head in the evidential sand in order to preserve the weirdness or wildness of the poem, probably from fear of reducing it to some kind of redemptive or conclusive narrative, such as was once the fate of *The Ancient Mariner*. But just as transformation does not exclude transgression, so looking for a narrative intention does not exclude the strangeness of the forces Coleridge invokes—Leadbetter's comparison of Christabel's initiation with the powers of Pan a case in point. In respect of key narrative stages, as Coleridge implied, *Christabel* bears comparison with *The Ancient Mariner*. Both start in an ordinary or unenlightened state of consciousness, which is disturbed by a wilful and deliberate act, resulting in a sense of sin; this is followed, for Christabel, with alienation from her world, and rejection by her father; similarly the Mariner enters a world which becomes alien to him, and this would surely have been paralleled by what Coleridge projected as Part III of *Christabel*, 'the song of her desolation'.[3] Around both protagonists hang guardian spirits and saints in heaven. Initial recovery from his desolation is achieved, in the Mariner's case, through an attempt at prayer—'Sure my kind saint took pity on me'; and Christabel knows 'That saints will aid if men will call'. Prayer is to set both on a path to a complex recovery: before she finally marries the real thing, Christabel is going to upset her father again by rejecting someone whom everyone else takes as her betrothed—another hospitality error. In both instances, of course, we realize she was right, and in the second instance it indicates her recovery from a form of misperception, a confusion of appearance and reality, from which Sir Leoline still suffers.

Not to look to the context of *Christabel* in some such way risks ignoring Coleridge's 'idea' of the poem, preserving the incidental rather than the essential—as if *Macbeth* were about the witches, not the man, his ambition and his murders. However, the narrative structure I have outlined still doesn't answer the question as to whether this poem is about an irreparable breakdown of relationship between Christabel and Sir Leoline, as Perdita will suggest, or the arduous progress towards a happy marriage, which is my reading.

[3] CN IV 5032; 20/21 October 1823: 'Were I free to do so, I feel as if I could compose the third part of Christabel, or the song of her desolation.'

Christabel, a Poem of Transgression

Perdita Davidson

Graham has set 'Christabel' in the context of other poems in order to interpret the path of his idea of the narrative, written and unwritten. Our domestic discussion—without the benefit of scholarly clergy—arose from a close reading of the poem, and an attempt to follow its tense and sometimes powerfully subversive forces. It felt to me that I was being faced with a series of contradictory and irreconcilable energies. I could not decide whether Coleridge had an over-arching argument that would finally bring the unresolved elements together or whether he had identified currents of energy so subversive that finishing the poem became impossible.

All agree, I think, that 'Christabel' is a poem concerned with love and desire. But I could not shake off a sense as I read, of the danger of the passions described, of the almost impossible task of managing various forces. To see it, as Graham does, as a transformation from maiden to wife, felt to me too hopeful, to pay insufficient attention to the much less idealised sense of the transitions at the heart of the narrative. The word that best describes the movements within the poem, affecting more than just Christabel herself, is 'transgression'. Literally this means to cross a line, a boundary. It has come to carry a moral weight, however, and suggests movement from innocence to sin, from unconsciousness to knowledge and of the consequent loss of idealised hopes.

From the beginning there is a sense that the figures of Christabel and Geraldine are hard to disentangle from each other, that they seem almost to be different aspects of one being. This is framed by the poem's setting, a world often described in opposites, which create a series of boundaries, places where these opposites meet, and situations where the boundaries are dangerously crossed. We have a sense of duality from the very outset. As early as the second line, 'the owls have awakened the crowing cock' we learn that the boundaries of night and day are uncertain, and this is the time about which Geraldine boasts, 'this hour is mine…'tis given to me'. Both these birds have supernatural connotations —the owl, night hunter and witch's familiar—and the cock, whose crowing, as in *Hamlet*, banishes a ghost back to the world of spirits. Both are uncannily simultaneously present here. Is a supernatural being, summoned or banished? At the same time the moon, symbol of womanhood and Hecate, is 'at the full', and yet its powers are 'both small and dull'. It is hard to see how these all things can co-exist.

In the characters of Geraldine and Christabel, we have two apparently contrasting figures, taking up the opposing positions of villainess and heroine. Both are high born daughters of noblemen and both are at a stage where girlhood makes the transition to womanhood. One seems at this moment still unfallen, while the other has apparently been 'seized', 'choked', tied', used with 'force and fright' and then abandoned. One, apparently the innocent party, is an active agent who 'stole' out into this wild midnight space, as if to some

clandestine assignation, while the other, apparently the villain, is passive, a victim, who has been left there, apparently against her will. Our narrative instincts tell us that the innocent heroine should have been left there helplessly, while the sinister villainess should have made her way there on purpose. Actually, the two 'maidens' seem to occupy confusingly transposed situations, and perhaps there is less to choose between them in this respect than we might imagine. If one has already known physical love, the other, betrothed, is certainly ready to do so.

And the dividing lines within the poem continue. Christabel has crossed from the defended and regulated 'castle gate' to the wilderness of the wood. The line between life and death divides her mother and father. The lover is 'far away' and on the other side of consciousness in Christabel's 'dreams'. But all the action seems to take place on the very line itself. It is day and night. And the most significant location in this opening section seems to be the place where the two women meet, where Christabel discovers Geraldine 'on the other side' of the tree. She has placed herself directly beneath its moss and mistletoe encrusted trunk. While this tableau is infused with the archaic power of the oak tree itself, moss is said in herb lore to represent maternal love and charity, two chaste forces that are going to provide one important aspect of love in the poem. The mistletoe, meanwhile, is full of virile pagan associations as a magical aphrodisiac. Its berries are said to be the sperm of the gods. According to Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*, a girl standing under a sprig of mistletoe was asking for something more than a kiss. It is said that, even today, mistletoe should not be brought in to decorate a church. Does Christabel's chosen position as she prays encapsulate the tension between the various kinds of love that the poem might deal with and the dangers of transgressing the boundaries between them? Is this her Tree of Knowledge?

Christabel approaches stealthily, with an implied passion in her 'sighs' which were 'heaved… soft and low'. Instinctively making her way to the tree in this hour which Geraldine will soon say 'belongs to me', she kneels beneath it and 'prays' in the anticipatory 'silence'. There is an immediate response to her petition, in the answering 'moan', fit accompaniment to Christabel's own 'sighs', which is so close that it is, 'as near as near can be'. The nearest something can be is quite simply so near as to be in the same place. Despite the dividing presence of the aptly described 'huge, broad-breasted, old oak-tree', in relation to which the two sighing and moaning figures are almost united, Christabel does not hesitate for an instant to cross this boundary and join whatever lies on the other side. Coleridge describes the 'beating heart of Christabel' but he does not elaborate on what has caused its palpitation. Is it fear, which we might expect? Or excitement? Or even passion, which might best fit with the previous 'sighs' and 'moaning'? This might especially be the case when taken in conjunction with Coleridge's first-printed version of Christabel's dream of the previous night which 'made her moan and leap / As in her bed she lay in sleep'. This seems an apt prelude to the night to come, in which Christabel invites Geraldine to 'share' the same bed which then is

transformed into 'your couch' rather than Christabel's own. Now Coleridge petitions, 'Hush, beating Heart of Christabel', for protection against her own heart rather than the risks attached to whatever he delays revealing on the other side of the oak, asking that 'Jesu, Maria shield her well'. For the appearance of the stranger behind the tree seems almost to be the answer to Christabel's prayer.

What does she see, to echo Coleridge's own question? What she encounters is quite unexpected, given the time and the place. As 'near as near can be' she meets some strange counterpart of herself, called out by Christabel's prayer and released into this wild space, freed from the restraining power of the castle whose entry is a 'gate that was ironed within and without'. These seem strong enough defences against 'an army in battle array', but no proof against a young woman who seeks to leave the protection of her parental home. The invocations of both Coleridge and Christabel herself are to recognisable Christian figures, 'Jesu, Maria', 'Mary mother' and 'the Virgin', tied up together in a web of chaste family relationships. Three of these are manifestations of Mary, the mother of Jesus, a sanctification of the role of motherhood, but carefully divested of all traces of sexuality. They seem summoned up as direct protectors in this highly charged atmosphere of passion and desire.

A fatal and irrevocable decision is the crux upon which Milton's 'Paradise Lost' depends. Coleridge creates an equally irrevocable moment in Christabel's response to Geraldine's twice repeated entreaty, 'stretch forth thy hand'. The narrative delays and repeats the words to add a weight of foreboding to the action. The third iteration is 'then Christabel stretched forth her hand'. The echo of Eve's response to the serpent, when she with 'her rash hand in evil hour forth reaching', adds a dark significance to the occasion. Coleridge's parallel creates a clear reference to this ultimate and archetypal transgression. It seems equally to prepare the way for the moment of Adam's fall, when Milton picks up and countinues this image as 'From his slack hand the garland wreathed for Eve / Down dropped and all its faded roses shed /… How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost, /Defaced, deflowered and now to death devote'.

Back in the wood, that troubled counterpart to the Garden of Eden, none of the usual protections against this turbulent energy are able to operate in this separated moment, in which we see the two women already acting as one body, as 'Christabel with might and main / Lifted her up'. They cross the defensive 'moat', pass through the fortified castle gate. The watch dog is there but is 'old' and 'did not awake'. The protection of the father is impotently represented by 'the shield of Sir Leoline tall / Which hung in a murky old niche in the wall'. Is it Christabel's prayer or Geraldine's spell that carries them unscathed through these mortal protections so that they feel, twice repeated, 'free from danger, free from fear'? All the boundaries placed in their way are physically crossed: the moat, the gate, the dog, the shield, the hall, the fire, the stairs, the baron's room, the chamber door, to the very centre of 'the chamber floor', where Geraldine's 'unsandalled feet' evocatively 'press down' the rushes, suggesting

that she is an embodied woman, and no mere spirit.

A central uncertainty of the poem is exactly what happens between Christabel and Geraldine that night. It is true that this is not described, but we have too many suggestions of the erotic, I think, to be in much doubt. And this view was pervasive even at the time of publication and led to accusations of indecency, which Coleridge strove to repudiate in his subsequent alterations and notes. What is clear, however, is that the young women spend the night together, undressed in the same bed, breast to breast. When she awakes the first thing Christabel notices are Geraldine's 'girded vests' which 'grew tight beneath her heaving breasts', and her first words are, 'Sure I have sinn'd!'. Her memory, controlled by Geraldine's spell which has been activated at 'the touch of this bosom' and combines the ideas of knowledge, shame and sorrow, is vague and feels like the residue that 'dreams too lively leave behind'. It is hard not to associate this with the previous night's dream of her faraway lover that made Christabel 'moan and leap' in that same bed. Hard, too, not to think back to the idea of the Fall, the first sign of which was a consciousness of nakedness and erotic passion.

Coleridge, in his thinking over the years about the poem's impulse and direction, has given us some clues. A common theme in much of his reflection is a focus on love in its idealised and material forms and its capacity to confuse us or make us struggle with these two aspects of the same passion. His addition of the idealistic sonnet to Sara Hutchinson, which is an epigraph for the second manuscript version, shows us his thoughts about the relationship between what he terms 'love' and 'happiness'. Strikingly, in a sonnet addressed to someone whom he could never marry, the verse is full of associations with marriage whose 'rich dower' will 'see each evermore to grow' in 'mutual love' and 'welling' heart. It reaches its climax in the 'living fount' which is said to 'heave and fall', finally 'overflowing' 'like vernal waters springing up thro' snow'. There can be little doubt that this is a vision of idealised consummation. The sonnet paradoxically unifies the polar opposites of chastity and desire. We feel all these elements jostling with each other within the poem's opening, introducing questions about the nature of love, and its manifestations.

The night together has been the occasion of a struggle between the three female figures of the poem. Christabel, as the uninitiated maiden, Geraldine as the recently inducted woman, and Christabel's deceased mother, who acts, ineffectively, as the guardian saint of Christabel's innocence. Between them they sum up the phases of female life as mirrored in the mutations of the moon, which that night is 'at the full'. These periods of life, too, identify significant transitions or boundaries to be crossed, usually with due form and ceremony, as appropriate to acknowledged rites of passage. The mother's position however, is worth examining. She has been the maiden, the chosen bride of Sir Leoline. As Christabel's mother, she has also put on a woman's name. Now as a spirit or ghost, she is associated with another archetype, Maria the virgin mother, and a saint in heaven. In whatever form she appears, she has crossed all those boundaries that separate the phases of womanhood and the

worlds of the living and the dead. But she is not like, and is opposed to, whatever it is that Geraldine represents. If she put on a woman's name in marrying Sir Leoline, she also regained innocence enough, in life or death, to make her a saint in heaven. The freedom in having crossed the major thresholds of womanhood gives her an omnipresence, called to mind and perhaps even visible in 'my lady's shroud' each time the bell tolls for the quarter and the hour. She has promised to 'hear' the bell strike twelve on Christabel's wedding day and, sure enough, as it strikes its inverse, midnight, she is summoned and fought off by the more knowing or sexually conscious Geraldine. Christabel has shared with Geraldine the 'virtuous powers' of her mother's 'cordial wine' associated with 'wild flowers', simultaneously unrestrained and virginal. Once again we have the sense of the unity of the figure of Christabel with that of Geraldine, who utters the seemingly heartfelt hope that Christabel's mother will 'pity' her. But the mother is banished by the visitor's undoubted power to see her, hear her and exile her. If the ghost is a 'guardian spirit ' of Christabel's virginity, she is clearly sent on her way, disempowered for the duration of the 'hour' that belongs to the awoken sexual consciousness represented by Geraldine.

How hard it is to maintain the evenness of our sympathies. Prior to their coming together in their nakedness, Geraldine prays, reflecting the moment at which Christabel has done the same, in summoning her up in the midnight wood. Similarly she undresses, and while Christabel is admired 'in her loveliness', Geraldine's naked bosom is much more ambiguously described as 'a sight to dream of, not to tell', and which becomes, in Part II, 'that bosom old /… that bosom cold', and in which some versions was 'lean and old and foul of Hue' (PW 2.1.634). Geraldine's reluctance at the prospect of what she is about to do, despite the power she has to do it, surprises us and makes us pity the 'stricken' lady. She is' doleful' and 'sick' at the prospect of what is to follow, with a reluctance that breaks through the distinction between the two female figures. It is Christabel who seems eager and ready, as 'so many thoughts moved to and fro' leaving it impossible for her to close her eyes, wanting only 'to look at the lady Geraldine'. From the moment when she stretched forth her hand and reached towards her, Geraldine has seemed to be some strange counterpart of Christabel herself, perhaps the embodiment of a new aspect of her womanhood just emerging, or the darker counterpart of her preparation for marriage when she, the bride to be, took on the role of groom to Geraldine as bride and 'with might and main / Lifted her up, a weary weight / Over the threshold of the gate'.

The conclusion to Part I continues to surprise us with its tendency to cross boundaries. Christabel's awakening after their night together blurs the distinction between them further. Her act of prayer at 'the old oak tree' seems to have been eroticised, with her 'slender palms together pressed/Heaving sometimes on her breast'. As Christabel wakes 'from out her trance' it is reminiscent of Geraldine's description of herself as 'entranced' in the wood. Christabel is described as 'beauteous in a wilderness', so like Geraldine's

appearance outside the castle as 'beautiful exceedingly'. And just as Geraldine's 'blue-veined feet unsandalled were', now for Christabel 'the blood so free/Comes back and tingles in her feet'. Are they still different people, or simply different guises, moods or phases of the same?

It is not until Part II, the next morning, that we see Sir Leoline, whom we know initially as a bereaved husband, with a daughter whom he 'loves so well'. This begs the question, how does he love her? Coleridge has established a convergence between Christabel and Geraldine that is going to prove dangerous indeed to Sir Leoline's engagement with either of them. Their entry to Sir Leoline's presence, where 'The lovely maid and the lady tall/Are pacing both into the hall' is reminiscent of a wedding scene, especially calling to mind the moment in the Mariner, where 'the bride hath paced into the hall'. The bond of allegiance between Sir Leoline and Sir Roland should ensure that Geraldine is as secure as a daughter in his presence, that the same taboo protection that allows a father to recognise the attractions of his daughter, without wishing to violate her innocence should operate to safeguard Geraldine from Sir Leoline's sexual interest.

But it seems as if Christabel is going to 'give away' Geraldine to Sir Leoline; who, as the father of Christabel, ought to be giving her away to 'her own betrothed knight'. Sir Leoline behaves more like the groom at the wedding, than the father of the bride. He waits for the two figures to pace towards him then he 'rose' and 'prest his gentle daughter to his breast'. At the same time he looks beyond her and 'With cheerful wonder in his eyes / The lady Geraldine espies'. It is soon clear that this is the manifestation of womanhood that has the power to trouble him. Although credibly regulated on the surface, the exchanges between Sir Leoline and Geraldine have a darker and more subversive undercurrent. Sir Leoline 'stood gazing on the damsel's face'. Like the burnt ashes in the fireplace the night before, which 'were dying' but at Geraldine's presence burst into life with 'a tongue of light, a fit of flame', he seems to awaken from a state where 'Each matin bell, the Baron saith / Knells us back to a world of death'. He 'forgot his age'. 'His noble heart swelled high', 'He swore'. Emotion runs so strongly that the 'tears were on his face' and 'he, who saw this Geraldine / Had deemed her sure a thing divine'—which we know the inverse of the truth. Geraldine herself actively reciprocates when 'fondly in his arms he took' her, she 'met the embrace / Prolonging it with joyous look'. Sir Leoline's response to the daughter of his best friend is mistaken and unsettling.

There is a strange coming together of emotions normally kept apart. The now not so innocent and virginal daughter, together with the embodiment of her newly awoken womanhood, and the father 'who loved her so well', are complicit in a kind of shared madness, controlled by Geraldine, who has cast a spell of silence over Christabel, and a spell of sexual power over Sir Leoline—who 'rolled his eyes' and 'his eyes were wild'. Christabel too 'rolled her large bright eyes divine / Wildly', so like the moment before the night in bed when a troubled Geraldine 'slowly rolled her eyes around'. She too has

been associated with the unrestrained in our first glimpse of her where the 'gems entangled in her hair' … 'wildly glittered'. So these three here are linked together in a turbulent and passionate complexity, in a scene that opens as a bride pacing into the room and ends with a groom escorting out his new, but troublingly inappropriate bride, when 'turning from his own sweet maid / The aged knight, Sir Leoline, / Led forth the lady Geraldine'.

Bard Bracey alone remains outside the spell's effects, and seems to have a clearer view of the dangers they are all exposed to. In his dream, once again bringing to the fore the unconscious truth that can lie beneath a more civilised rational knowledge, he has been 'warned by a vision in my rest'. He clearly identifies 'that dove / That gentlest bird, whom thou dost love / And call'st by thy own daughter's name'. The moment of the vision is 'the midnight hour', the exact time of the girls' shared night and appearance of Christabel's mother, Sir Leoline's wife. The dove is 'uttering fearful moan'. The 'snake' is 'green as the herbs on which it couched', reminding us of Christabel's request to Geraldine to 'share your couch with me'. Their movements are also reminiscent of the girls, as the snake 'with the dove it heaves and stirs'. For Bracey, this 'dream … would not pass away / It seems to live upon my eye!' so very like Christabel's experience following her night with Geraldine which left her 'in such perplexity of mind / As dreams too lively leave behind'. Bracey is in no doubt following what he sees in the dream that he must 'clear yon wood from thing unblest'. Immediately, however, the strange unity we have seen between Christabel and Geraldine is picked up by Sir Leoline, who identifies Geraldine with the dove, not the snake, and with 'eyes made up of wonder and love' calls her 'Lord Roland's beauteous dove'. What the two women are is once again confused as Christabel succumbs to Geraldine's 'serpent's eye' and 'shuddered aloud with a hissing sound'. Appearance and reality have changed places.

The poem ends with a conclusion written for a different occasion, but seeming to echo some of the poem's conflicting elements. The child is 'singing, dancing, to itself', and 'always finds, and never seeks'. In this unconscious innocence, the charms of the child remain safely on the right side of the boundary, not seductive or flirtatious, but captivating and delightful. The reaction of the father moves from one side of the regulating border where the vision of the child 'fills the father's eyes with light' to the dangerous unregulated aspect of love, where 'pleasures flow in so thick and fast'. It is seen as safe 'to dally with wrong that does no harm'. It is dangerous, however, if actions are allowed which 'force together / Thoughts so all unlike each other'. The mood is different in this conclusion, both more idealised in the figure of the child as 'a limber elf', and more dangerous with the father's appreciation of it to the point that he experiences 'love's excess'. But when the father 'must needs express' this, the results are the 'words of unmeant bitterness', words that Christabel has just heard from Sir Leoline. That boundary between proper love of a father for a daughter, the formalised end of which is the ceremonial giving of her to her husband at the wedding, is a crucial one, whose

transgression suggests one of society's greatest taboos. To allow the one to slip across to the other would result in the concluding 'giddiness of heart and brain'— feeling first and thought second— and would create 'a world of sin'. As the narrator says, 'O sorrow and shame! should this be true'.

The force of love has an ancient, anarchic power, as symbolised by the old oak tree, hung about with symbols of parental and erotic love. This was the place where Christabel knelt, where the sexually uninitiated young woman encountered the sexually experienced aspect of herself, which she and her father were unable to manage. The transgression here is between the proper boundaries separating father and daughter from husband and wife, which the ceremony of a wedding holds tensely apart, while acknowledging their connection. The result is to act on 'each wild word', so that what was unconscious becomes conscious, temptation is acted upon and innocence gives way to knowledge. The conclusion's ideas of 'sin', 'sorrow and shame' pick up the echoes of Geraldine's consummation incantation, 'Thou knowest tonight and wilt know tomorrow / This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow'. Returning to the idea of transgression, we see a stepping over the proper boundaries, a breaking of regulation and a reminder of the great fall of Adam and Eve, who ate from the tree of knowledge, and moved from the innocence of unconscious pleasure, to consciousness, which brought 'shame' especially in relation to nakedness.

Coleridge's sonnet to Sara Hutchinson touches on the boundary between chaste and consummated love. Love in a family can be complex, ambiguous, and the absence of the mother or wife leaves an empty space in which Christabel's womanhood and Sir Leoline's manhood do not have the traditional guardian of that very dangerous threshold. The sense of struggle as boundaries are approached and then crossed, or transgressed is evident in Geraldine's words to Christabel following their night together, when she draws her under the spell, warning her 'But vainly thou warrest' and finally in the poem's conclusion where we see the dangers involved when 'thoughts so all unlike each other' are 'force[d] together', resulting in 'giddiness of heart and brain'. The father who has allowed consciousness of the child's desirability to transgress its cultural boundaries must banish her if he is to survive either to complete the act or to live with his own knowledge of himself. It is one of the nice ironies of the poem, of course, that he banishes just the person he should have preserved, and preserves the figure who will finally vanish in a puff of smoke, demonstrating just how wrong he was.

Conclusion

Those aspects of love and desire that society seeks to confine to certain channels burst out of control in this poem and ultimately prove too powerful for the narrative to contain. Law and taboo are not there because the transgressions they seek to regulate are unthinkable. It is precisely because the impulses they address are so rooted in the dark soil of human experience that such efforts must be made to control them. An older man's rekindling of

desire when confronted by the epitome of youthful charm; the complicated cross currents inevitable when a father recognises that his own daughter has become an object of desire to other men; the potential for erotic force to disrupt the flimsy fabric of domestic relationships when bereavement or isolation limit opportunities for healthy relationships and perhaps distort judgement. All these seem to be active within the poem, too full of life to be willing to lie down and be neutralised in narrative form.

An editorial last word

I have set out our debate as transformation or transgression, but that is a false polarity. In *Christabel*, transgression and transformation go hand in hand, breast to breast. Whatever the narrative intent, the question is whether the transgressions and transformations were finally intended as benign, or not. The answer to that question still divides us.