A Collaborative Reading of *Christabel* in Hebrew

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THIS PAPER DESCRIBES HOW A NON-ACADEMIC GROUP of Israeli women discussed a Hebrew translation of *Christabel*. The study claims that the group revealed, retraced and revived, in explicit and implicit ways, the poem's meanings as well as historical modes of its reception.

I

Christabel (1816) has been the subject of rich oral group discussions throughout the history of its creation and reception.[1] A complicated history of publication included dramatic rejections and delays that lasted twenty years. Finally, it was published in different collections, read in various contexts and discussed in numerous private and public settings.[2] Introduced into Coleridge's milieu in different variations, it served as a source of inspiration, and was even the subject of outright plagiarism.[3] From its initial publication up until this day, *Christabel* has given rise to hundreds of different—and often contradictory—interpretations that testify to the fact that nothing in this poem should be taken for granted.[4]

Collaborative work on this poem imbued it with unique qualities that are reflected not only in *Christabel*'s creation and reception but also in its poetics. Fragmented, with complex images and double-edged characters, the poem offers several versions of the same plot, conveyed through different perspectives. It is a poem which refuses to tell only one story or serve one

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[1] Earlier participants in recorded group discussions on *Christabel* included Robert Southey, John Thelwall, Lord Byron, Walter Scott, Charles Lamb, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Godwin Shelley, John Polidori, Sara Hutchinson, Catherin Clarkson, Henry Crab Robinson, John Wilson, Clement Carlyon, the Wordsworths, Coleridge himself and many others. Recent scholars referring to these collaborations are Judith Thompson, "'Thy Power to Declare': Thelwall, Coleridge and the Politics of Collaboration" *Romanticism* 16.2 (2010): 164-83; Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (Springer, 2008); Tim Fulford, *Romantic Poetry and Literary Coteries: The Dialect of the Tribe* (Springer, 2015).

[2] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed. E.I. Griggs (Oxford, 1956), i 317, ii 158-159, 337, vi 622), Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Christabel*, ed. E.H. Coleridge (London, 1907), 32-37, Arthur Nethercot, *The Road to Tryerniaine: A Study of the History, Background and Proposes of Coleridge's Christabel* (Chicago U. Press, 1939), 8.

[3] "During the many years which intervened between the composition and the publication of the *Christabel* it became almost as well known among literary men as if it had been on common sale: the same references were made to it, and the same liberties taken with it, ven to the very names of the imaginary persons in te poem". Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1983), ii 283. Here Coleridge referred to works by Southey, Scott and Byron which imitated *Christabel*. See also in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. K. Coburn (London & Princeton, 1957-2002), ii 2880-2882; ; Gavin Hopps, "Inhabiting a Place Beyond 'To Be or Not to Be": The Playful Devotions of Byron and Coleridge", *Coleridge Bulletin*, 25 (2005), 18, 15–39; Sally West and Jen Davis, 'Witchery by Daylight': 'Christabel' unbound, *Coleridge Bulletin*, 45 (2015), 57-65.

[4] Hundreds of interpretations of *Christabel* have been published since its publication, including reviews, parodies, "continuations," scholarly articles and books. See Nethercot, Chris Koenig-Woodyard, "Sex-text: Christabel and the Christabelliads: On Contemporary Parodies of Christabel*" Romanticism on the Net* 15, August 1999; and Lilach Naishtat Bornstein, *Who's Afraid of Christabel: A Story of a Reading Group*, Gama & Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017 [Hebrew], 17-78 .

unequivocal meaning.[5] In short, it is an extreme text that demands extreme reading. I argue, therefore, that its analysis and interpretation demand collaboration.

I claim that in certain circumstances, group interpretation has an advantage over the interpretation of a single reader. This is especially true of a poem whose interpretive history has been shaped by group collaborations. The shared interpretive process unearths the footprints of previous groups and enables fruitful retracing of trodden interpretive paths. Oral group discussions of *Christabel* throughout history have highlighted both the personal dimension of the interpretative work as well as the group impact on the hermeneutic process. Nevertheless, scholarly interpretations of *Christabel* focus exclusively on the outcome and overlook the interpretive process itself; in this way, they fail to encourage discussion. My claim is that more of the poem's meanings can be revealed when read in a non-scholarly group context.

Among the hundreds of interpretations of *Christabel*, there has been no research conducted on a group reading of the poem. Given the wide variety of interpretations of *Christabel* proffered by individual scholars, I was curious as to the quality of interpretations that a group of amateur readers, relying on their personal and group resources, could produce. To explore this further, I conducted an ethnography of reading in a group of Israeli female readers that discussed a Hebrew translation of *Christabel*. This research aims, on the one hand, to provide new insights regarding *Christabel,* and, on the other, to contribute to the understanding of the literary interpretation process. This will be achieved through a juxtaposition of the reception study of the poem and the ethnography of its interpretation by the Israeli readers.

II

I first came upon *Christabel* thirty years ago, when it was assigned as course work in my first year of undergraduate studies at Tel Aviv University. Little did I know then that I would end up devoting decades of my life to decoding this poem. In the first decade of this journey, I used academic tools. I did my utmost to become what Fish describes as "an informed reader".[6] I familiarized myself with the codes of the text, and its language, culture, and history in order to fully decode its vast meanings. However, when I completed my mission I experienced a deep crisis: literature seemed boring and irrelevant, and I could not bring myself to read another word written by literary scholars. I left academia and found my way to a women's reading group, where discussions of texts were conducted in a very non-academic way.

The group consisted of five secular Jewish Israeli women in their forties, mothers of teenagers, who live in central Israel. Most were born in Israel and

[5] Recent scholars who have discussed expressions of unspeakability in *Christabel* include Debra Channick, "'A Logic of Its Own': Repetition in Coleridge's Christabel." *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net:* 50 (2008); Richard Berkeley. 'Jealous of the Listening Air: Silence and Seduction in Christabel", *Romanticism* 20.3 (2014): 261-70; Julie Camarda, 'Pig Looks, Snake Looks: Coleridge's Poetics of the Unsaid.' *European Romantic Review* 28.3 (2017): 333-34.

[6] Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1980), 48-49.

had a bachelor's degree, though not in humanities. Their motives for attending the workshop varied, but their main desire was to create change in their lives through their exploration of literary texts. The facilitator was a native-born Israeli with a degree in behavioral science. Like the participants, she was in her mid-forties at the time, a mother of teenagers. Influenced by Zen and Jungian thought, she had developed her therapeutic method in an autodidactic manner. As she explained it to me, the workshop focused on the relationship between three elements: the literary text, the participants' personal interpretations, and the group dynamics.

I attended this group for five years. During the first two years, the texts discussed in the group were chosen by the facilitator. Then, each participant was invited to choose a text that would serve as the basis of the group work over the following weeks. When my turn came, I suggested we read *Christabel* in its original English. When presented with the text, the group's participants expressed reservations because of the language and asked if I could add a Hebrew translation. My intensive efforts at translating the text subsequently produced a rhymed-metric translation.[7] The group discussions of *Christabel*'s Hebrew translation took place over twelve weekly meetings, each lasting four hours. With the consent of the participants and group leader, I recorded and transcribed the meetings.

The research was conducted based on three sources of data: recorded and transcribed discussions of the twelve group meetings; in-depth interviews conducted with the facilitator and the participants; and multiple choice questionnaires distributed among the group participants as well as participants of other groups in this workshop, for the purpose of characterizing personal identity and participancy patterns. In the first stage of my study, I was looking for each participant's personal interpretation: starting points, obstacles in the hermeneutic process, moments of interest, turning points, and end points. In the second stage, I focused on turning points in the collective interpretation: moments of agreement and disagreement, mutual influence, and role reversal. In the following section, I will present the different interpretations of the participants and the first of two peak moments in which the group experienced a turning point in its understanding of the poem.

III

The four participants in the group offered very different interpretations of *Christabel*. MIKI'S interpretation focused on identification. She began to decode the poem with curiosity, passion and enthusiasm; it seemed that she was encountering no difficulties in the process. Consequently, she did not need any coping strategies, and no turning points emerged. ZOE'S interpretation was about withdrawal. At the beginning, her participation was limited, and she expressed a sense of having very little control over the content of the discussion. The turning point in her interpretation took place when she

[7] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Christabel*. Translation to Hebrew, annotations and illustration: Lilach Naishtat Bornstein (Even Hoshen Press, 2011).

announced her decision to leave the group. In that last meeting, she participated more than she had ever before. For the purposes of highlighting the group's contribution to the interpretation of the poem and the hermeneutic process, I focus mainly on the work of two other participants, and on the dynamics between them.

ILLI embarked on her interpretation from an ambivalent starting point, displaying curiosity, attraction, yet describing her inability "to connect" (as she put it) with the poem and unify it. In her determination to understand, she coped with this dichotomy by posing questions. At the same time, she adopted an "I-don't-know" stance, while stressing her personal failure. In comparison, ELLA'S interpretation was reserved. Her opening position was a blend of resistance and curiosity: she vehemently avoided a thorough perusal of the text but displayed an avid interest in reading *Christabel* as well as the transcriptions of the group discussions that I brought to the group during the process. She displayed resistance to the translation, the documentation, and the psychological interpretation. She voiced a lack of motivation and even resistance to resolving difficulties. She was especially suspicious of the poem's narrator. It seemed to her as though he avoided taking a clear stance and that he was testing her. Later, although she attended regularly, her participation in the group discussions diminished. Her stance did not change from the beginning of the process to the end. At the penultimate meeting, she declared, "Since we first read the story, my feelings regarding the text remain unchanged."

The world of *Christabel* is characterized by a tension between silence and sound. All the characters, including the narrator, touch on the difficulty of representing oneself to the world in words.[8] ELLA'S personal process in the group clearly reflects this tension between speech and silence. She dealt with the complexities of the poem through silence and withdrawal. Like Christabel, ELLA'S ability to put her feelings into words was limited. Like Christabel, she fluctuated between conflicting feelings of curiosity and withdrawal, and her desire to explore and mature contradicted her need to go back and hold on to what was familiar.

ELLA'S reticent interpretation was an appropriate way of coping with *Christabel*, given the inherent themes of silence that characterize the poem's history and poetics. It made a concrete contribution to the collective interpretation, precisely because this silence--contrary to the gap-filling efforts of the other participants, and similar endeavors in *Christabel*'s interpretive history—enabled silence to exist for what it is, and not as a gap that, when closed, leads to another interpretive labelling. In her obstinate silence, ELLA unwittingly adopted Christabel's prominent trait, allowing the group members to confront face-on the miscomprehension and objection provoked by the

[8] Cf. CL IV 601, to Byron. The tension between silence and speech is explained by Jonathon Shears as post structural deferral of meaning, in which language refuses to disclose meaning. Jonathon Shear, "Listening to Christabel: Sound, Silence and the Contingencies of Choice" *Romanticism* 19.1 (2013), 44-56.

behavior of the fictional character.

IV

The sound of pealing bells, which is first mentioned in *Christabel*'s opening sentences, resonates throughout the poem as a reminder of the pathological-familial entanglement. Since birth, Christabel lives in a world in which her father has imposed regular, tonal, repetitive patterns. Day in and day out, he perpetuates the pealing that he heard on the traumatic morning of his wife's death. This is an obsessive neurosis, in which time is no longer perceived as a linear sequence of change and growth, but as a repetitive circle eternalizing a past trauma. Sir Leoline does not suffer alone: he imposes his madness on those living on his estate and especially his daughter, upon whom he impresses a permanent mark in her very name, Christa-*bell*. The reader, too, is drawn into this obsessive neurosis: from the beginning of the poem throughout the entire plot, echoes of the pealing bells are repeatedly heard from various perspectives, times, and places. They are accompanied by additional sounds: the bitch's howls, and the cock's crowing.

One of the central issues in the reception of *Christabel* deals with numbers. In Coleridge's Introduction to *Christabel*, he describes in detail the years during which he wrote the poem, the date of publication, and especially his idea that the poem was written in accentual rather than syllabic metre. Coleridge claimed that the poem deviated from conventional poetic methods and complied with new principles of syllabic variation for metrical expressiveness: "Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line, the accents will be found to be only four."[9] This declaration spurred a long discussion among scholars who were engaged in interpreting the poem. *Christabel*'s meter and the historical discussion that it generated won a special entry in Preminger's encyclopedia.[10]

During the eighth meeting of the reading group, an epiphanic moment took place around the exploration of the number of peals. The clock's peals and the bitch's barks interested ILLI from the start. She used the expression 'rings a bell' to express the affinity that she felt to these themes. In the first meeting, she brought up a question concerning the number of peals in the line "*Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour;*"[11] she wanted to know if the peals were first sounded separately from the beads. I had heard the peals in *Christabel* many times before, but I had not explored them further. Despite my accumulated knowledge about the poem, and the fact that I served as the literary-academic authority in the group, I had to admit that I also did not understand this part of the text and therefore suggested an interpretation of

[9] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works* (J. C. C. Mays) *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (vol. 16. Princeton, 2001), 608.

[10] Alex Preminger and Terry V. Brogan (eds). *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.* (Princeton U. Press, 1993), 202.

[11] *Poetical Works,* 626.

which I was not completely certain, saying, "In the original text, a dozen peals are mentioned for one hour, and four more for a quarter of an hour. Together, it's sixteen, and the bitch responds to the peals with howls. To tell you the truth, I didn't understand the logic in it either."

At first, the group's insistent discussion of the numbers seemed to me marginal and unnecessary. Nevertheless, when I analyzed the discussion transcripts I discovered that the numbers sixteen and forty-five were mentioned repeatedly in the context of age. One participant commented, "When a girl turns sixteen and becomes a woman she is about to get married…" More participants mentioned in their personal interviews with me that age sixteen was a significant turning point in their lives. The number forty-five also became significant in the context of age. In the eighth meeting alone, the age forty-five was mentioned no less than ten times. During the personal interview, a participant mentioned that age forty-five was the turning point that led her to the workshop. The gap between the age of the participants and that of the main character was also mentioned by the facilitator who said: "We aren't exactly… young maidens on the verge of wedlock." The exploration led to the recognition of the age gap between the Israeli group's participants (women in their forties) and Christabel (a young woman of about sixteen years of age).[12] As Elizabeth Long argues, "Reading clubs bring people together in a community that provides its members with insight and support, broadens their critical perspectives on self and world, and develops their own capacities".[13] The Israeli group's meticulous discussion of the number of peals in the poem is, in fact, an examination of the distance between the public and the private, through the question, "what [comes] between us and this text?"

V

There have been hundreds of interpretations of *Christabel* since it was published. However, no study has been conducted on a group reading of this poem. Similar to other works of literature that have been examined in reader response-oriented studies, such as Roland Barthes' reading of Balzac's *Sarazine*, Stanley Fish's reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Umberto Eco's Reading of Narval's *Sur Sylvi,*[14] *Christabel*'s rich intertextuality and mixed genres, which have inspired a long history of versatile interpretations to date, encourage this shared interpretive process.

The Israeli group was linguistically, culturally, and chronologically far-removed from *Christabel's* original target audience. Yet the group interpretation of this foreign text simulated the interpretative conflicts and

[12] The ages sixteen and forty-five mark the polemic ends of female fertility. I would like to thank Amy Warbuton for this comment, proffered at the conference "Writing Romantic Lives," Edge Hill University, November 2017.

[13] Elizabeth Long, "Literature as a Spur to Collective Action: The Diverse Perspectives of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Reading Groups" *Poetics Today* 25:2, 2004, 357-58.

[14] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974); Stanley E. Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in 'Paradise Lost,'* (London: Macmillan & Wang, 1967); Patrizia Violi, Sur Sylvie, *Versus,* 31/32, (1982), 3-33.

complexities of the poem, brought up historic controversies, and even provided new interpretive insights. Explicitly and implicitly, the personal and collective interpretative process illuminated central issues that scholarly interpretations have addressed and grappled with, successfully and less successfully, for two centuries, and even ventured beyond them, as was demonstrated in the implicit interpretation of the tension between silence and speech.

Traditionally, theories that apply to the reading of literary texts rely on the model of a single, abstract, expert reader. Even such concepts as "interpretive communities,"[15] which refer to groups of people that use common interpretative strategies, do not attach significance to the reactions of an actual reader of the text. To bridge this gap, this research presents a model that introduces an actual inexpert reader who engages in group interpretation of a text together with other inexpert readers. This reader is influenced not only by the texts that she or he has already worked on, but also by the social context and specific social event, i.e., the interaction that takes place with the text and with the other participants in the group.

Combining extant historical research on *Christabel* with the present ethnographical study, we can suggest that interpretation is not only a derivative of the characteristics of the text and its readers, or those of Fish's "interpretive community". Rather, interpretation is a product of discourse among people in a given group. It is influenced by the unique circumstances of the event and by group dynamics that are shaped by multiple points of observation and contradictory meanings. It underscores the need to understand reality, yet it also brings the reader to terms with what is incomprehensible. The turning points in this study occurred when authority was undermined and roles were reversed. The tendency to comprehend, to defend, and to proffer a concrete and convincing hypothesis, which generally motivates professional interpretative processes, merely served, in this setting, as the catalyst for deeper exploration and reflection. The participants were urged to decipher the poem as a comprehensive, coherent, and closed unit, but it was the personal and group struggles and conflicts, expressed through resistance, miscomprehension, and disbelief, which best reflected the poetics and themes of the poem and produced a complex, intriguing, and meaningful interpretive process.

[15] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 147–174.