'Witchery by daylight': 'Christabel' unbound

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THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED as a dialogue at The Coleridge Summer Conference 2014, and is reproduced here in the form given.[1]

SW: In 1833, Coleridge explained his unfinished 'Christabel':

> The reason of my not having finished Christabel is not that I don't know how to do it; for 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 – the most difficult, I think, that can be attempted to Romantic Poetry – I mean witchery by daylight. I venture to think that Geraldine, as far as she goes, is successful – but I doubt any one being able to go much farther without recourse to some of the common shifts.[2]

JD: Those allusions to the difficulty of continuing the narrative of 'Christabel' as a poetic romance, and to the necessity of some other, more commonplace form of expression, provided the springboard for this paper. We believe that a convincing case can be made for Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Eliot as two of Coleridge's literary heirs. Coleridgean language, imagery, and preoccupations infuse their work, although these aspects of Coleridgean presence are often adapted and transformed.

SW: We will argue that Shelley and Eliot did 'go much farther' with the ideas of 'Christabel', and that their dramatic and fictional forms of expression are able to contain developments of characters left tantalisingly incomplete by Coleridge. The characters of Beatrice Cenci in Shelley's drama *The Cenci* and Gwendolen Harleth in Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* each embody the characters of both Geraldine and Christabel with the effect of rendering them uncanny, monstrous, silenced and subversive.

In Shelley's rendering of the legend of the Cenci family, he dramatizes the Christabel/ Geraldine dichotomy in the character of Beatrice Cenci. At the outset of the play, Beatrice is characterised in a way that recalls Christabel's characteristics of purity and innocence. This purity is assaulted by the abuse – emotional, physical and sexual – which she experiences from her father. As the play develops, and Beatrice constructs a plot to murder her father, Shelley begins to imbue her with qualities more reminiscent of Coleridge's Geraldine. Shelley situates the ambiguous dynamic between Christabel and Geraldine in the single character of Beatrice in order to expose a particular witchery to daylight by showing how corrupt power – power which is specifically

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[1] It was a novel and highly successful way of presenting a paper. Ed.

[2] TT I 409-10.

patriarchal in nature – contaminates and destroys the innocent.

JD: Eliot combines the characters of Geraldine and Christabel in the character of Gwendolen Harleth. Her motive for doing so is most clearly stated in her epigraph to *Daniel Deronda*: 'Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul.'[3] Rather than presenting a dichotomy of the predatory, bewitching Lady and the 'Maid, devoid of Guile and Sin' [4], as Coleridge does, Eliot presents a woman riven with contradiction, who exists in a state of dread of her own nature. Coleridge's witchery is thus re-presented in the daylight of realist fiction, as Eliot adapts his gothic tropes as a vehicle for her moral agenda.

SW: In the Preface to *The Cenci* Shelley argues that the only moral purpose of drama is 'the teaching the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself'.[5] Shelley locates this 'moral purpose' in the gaze of Beatrice herself. Late in the play, Beatrice's young brother Bernardo recalls his sister as:

> That perfect mirror of pure innocence
> Wherein I gazed, and grew happy and good…
>
> Who made all lovely thou didst look upon.[6]

Bernardo's words suggest an ability in Beatrice to transfer qualities of innocence, goodness, happiness and loveliness to those who look upon her. However, the power of Beatrice's 'look' is conceived rather differently by the conniving prelate Orsino. He observes:

> Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring gaze,
> Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve
> And lay me bare, and make me blush to see
> My hidden thoughts.[7]

Beatrice frightens Orsino precisely because her gaze forces him to know himself. Because Orsino abuses his power and dissembles for a living, he resents and fears this anatomising power in Beatrice.

In his presentation of the power of the gaze and, importantly, the power of innocence and purity to threaten those who lack those qualities, Shelley recalls and adapts features of Coleridge's poem. The fear which Beatrice's gaze inspires in Orsino recalls and reverses the nature of Geraldine's look 'askance' at Christabel. Whilst, as will be explored later, the malign powers of Geraldine's gaze are emphasised, we should also note that her 'serpent's eye' looks 'with somewhat of malice and more of *dread'* on Christabel.[8] Coleridge's

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[3] George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 1.
[4] PW *176* 599.
[5] Percy Bysshe Shelley, Preface to *The Cenci* in *The Poems of Shelley: Volume 2*, eds Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 713-863 (p. 730).
[6] *The Cenci* 5.4.130-33.
[7] *The Cenci*, 1.2.84-87.
[8] PW *176* 586.

emphasis on the power of 'dread' here indicates that it is fear of Christabel, or of what she represents which, at least in part, prompts Geraldine's serpentine assault.

JD: Eliot's presentation of Gwendolen picks up on the same features of Coleridge's characterisation, recombining them so that Geraldine's 'dread' becomes Gwendolen's self-dread: of 110 uses of the word 'dread' or its derivations in the text, it is used to describe her responses 60 times. Eliot's characterisation, though, also incorporates the monstrous, unearthly qualities of Geraldine's character: "Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster"[9] observes Deronda's mother, late in the novel. For much of the narrative, Gwendolen's motives, like her character, are paradoxical, reflecting the tensions between her egotistical desire for self-assertion and her terror of the great unknown beyond the limits of ego. A further correlation with Coleridge's depiction of Geraldine occurs when Eliot's narrator describes Gwendolen as a 'princess in exile' and describes 'the iridescence of her character – the play of various, nay, contrary tendencies.'[10]

In the early parts of the novel, Eliot presents Gwendolen as the monstrous manifestation of egoism, partly through descriptions of her that align her with the uncanny Geraldine. Coleridge is explicit about Geraldine's serpentine nature:

> A Snake's small Eye blinks dull and shy,
> And the Lady's Eyes they shrunk in her Head,
> Each shrunk up to a Serpent's Eye,[11]

In the opening scene of *Daniel Deronda*, onlookers comment of Gwendolen that 'she has got herself up as a sort of serpent now […] it is a sort of Lamia beauty she has'.[12] The Lamia reference may suggest a Keatsian influence in Eliot's depiction of Gwendolen, but Eliot does not render Gwendolen's character with the sympathy that Keats accords his Lamia. Deronda, the only character to see Gwendolen's true nature, is no Appollonius; he offers her kindness and moral guidance, rather than exposing and destroying her. But Eliot's moral purpose in the novel requires her to demonstrate the monstrous dimensions of Gwendolen's egoism, in order to justify her punishment, repentance, and redemption. Like Coleridge, she chooses to feature the malign, sexually predatory qualities of the snake-woman in her initial depiction of her heroine; some descriptions of Gwendolen include references to snake-like qualities in her appearance, which emphasise a supernatural, sexually bewitching power: 'every line in her figure and drapery falling in gentle curves attractive to all eyes except those which discerned in them too close a resemblance to the serpent, and objected to the revival of serpent-worship'.[13]

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[9] *Daniel Deronda,* p. 539.
[10] *Daniel Deronda,* p. 30.
[11] PW *176* 183-185.
[12] *Daniel Deronda,* pp. 32-33.
[13] *Daniel Deronda*, p. 13.

The Coleridgean presence in Eliot's portrayal of her protagonist introduces a note of ambiguity into her realist narrative.

These gothic elements – the instability of categories, the othering of character, the sense of lurking dread – are all prefigured in Bard Bracy's dream:

> I stoop'd, methought, the Dove to take,
> When lo! I saw a bright green Snake
> Coiled around its Wings and Neck,
> Green as the Herbs on which it couch'd,
> Close by the Dove's its Head it crouch'd;
> And with the Dove it heaves and stirs,
> Swelling its Neck as she swell'd hers![14]

Representation of nature in this image is, paradoxically, unnatural. The green of natural growth and nature's benignity, represented by the green herbs, is shared by the unexpected, potentially malign snake. The distinction between embrace and stranglehold here is an unstable one, and the pervasive disquiet it sets up in the narrative is informed by a sense that the benign and malign are in some way indivisible; it is not the opposition of corruption and purity that disturbs, but the possibility that the barrier between the two is permeable, and that contamination can pass unhindered from one to the other. As Mary Douglas observes, 'pollution dangers strike when form has been attacked'.[15] The integrity of forms should guarantee their resistance to contamination; when boundaries are threatened, as they are in the embrace of the snake and the dove, and of Geraldine and Christabel, the horror of contamination is linked to the fear of formlessness, indefinability, and resistance to categorisation and control.

SW: The contagion of corruption is one of Shelley's preoccupations in *The Cenci*. One way of interpreting Count Cenci's rape of his daughter is as an attempt to wound and contaminate her in such a way as to crush the threat which her expressive innocence poses. In addition to the anatomising quality of her gaze, early in the play Beatrice is characterised by her powerful eloquence, an eloquence which threatens her father's rhetorical and social control. In this context, it is significant that Beatrice's primary problem following the rape is one of expression; she cannot name the crime committed against her and so remains trapped in the undefined immediacy of its horrors. As Michael Worton has observed, Beatrice must 'strive[s] to find a new language to express her feelings'.[16] She can only convey her experience impressionistically, through images of physical corruption, 'There creeps/ A clinging, black, contaminating mist/ About me',[17] which then give way to an

[14] PW *176* 548-554.

[15] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 6.

[16] Michael Worton, 'Speech and Silence in *The Cenci*', in *Essays on Shelley*, ed. Miriam Allott (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), pp. 105-124 (p. 119).

[17] *The Cenci*, 3.1.17-18.

acutely felt, if nebulously defined 'spiritual' pollution: 'poisoning/ The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!'[18] Asked the cause of her pain, the signifying power of language fails her:

> What are the words which you would have me speak?
> I, who can feign no image in my mind
> Of that which has transformed me: I, whose thought
> Is like a ghost shrouded and folded up
> In its own formless horror.[19]

We should notice here the imagery of turning inwards: thought is 'shrouded and folded up/ In its own *formless* horror'; what has been done to her cannot be actualised in thought, much less in words, and the result is a psychological estrangement from her experience. Just as Christabel is unable to articulate her fear and foreboding beyond a hissing sound and a heartfelt but unexplained desire for Sir Leoline to send Geraldine away, so too is Beatrice Cenci rendered inarticulate by a contaminating assault. That Beatrice's assault is explicitly sexual in nature may derive from Shelley's reading of the potential sexual undertones in Christabel's encounter with Geraldine; it was, after all, the later omitted description of Geraldine's 'bosom' as 'hideous, deformed and pale of hue' which caused the poet to run screaming from the room on first hearing Lord Byron recite Coleridge's poem at the Villa Diodati in 1816.[20]

JD: Formless horror and foreboding; contamination; the power of the hidden to disturb: all of these elements infuse 'Christabel', and inform both *The Cenci,* and *Daniel Deronda.* Geraldine's unknowable origin – we only have her account of how she came to be in the woods – is mirrored in other kinds of hiddenness, as when

> Her silken Robe, and inner Vest,
> Dropt to her feet, and fell in view,
> Behold! her Bosom and half her Side –
> A Sight to dream of, not to tell![21]

Compare this with Deronda's perception of Gwendolen as 'this fair creature in silk and gems, with her hidden wound and her self-dread'.[22] Like Geraldine, Gwendolen is dressed in silk and gems; both Coleridge and Eliot present a *hidden* wound; an acknowledgment that the hidden has far greater power to disturb than the revealed. Geraldine's dread, like Gwendolen's, is of herself; before she lies down with Christabel, she pauses for a moment, as

> Deep from within she seems half-way
> To lift some weight with sick Assay,

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[18] *The Cenci*, 3.1.22-23
[19] *The Cenci*, 3.1.107-111
[20] John William Polidori, *The Diary of Dr John William Polidori 1816; Relating to Byron, Shelley etc*, ed. Wiliam Michael Rossetti (London: Elkin Matthews, 1911), p. 128.
[21] PW *176* 250-253.
[22] *Daniel Deronda*, p. 482.

And eyes the Maid and seeks delay':[23]

Gwendolen's self-dread bears a startling resemblance to Geraldine's inner burden and sense of self-disgust.

SW: It is this unformed dread which Geraldine's spell seeks to pass to Christabel in a transference of qualities from one woman to the other. As Geraldine promises: 'Thou knowest tonight, and wilt know tomorrow,/ This Mark of my Shame, this Seal of my Sorrow'.[24] This transference is completed later in the poem through the power of the gaze:

> So deeply had she drunken in
> That Look, those shrunken serpent Eyes,
> That all her Features were resigned
> To this sole Image in her Mind;
> And passively did imitate
> That Look of dull and treacherous Hate!
> And thus she stood, in dizzy Trance,
> Still picturing that Look askance
> With forc'd unconscious Sympathy[25]

At the start of *The Cenci*, Shelley demonstrated, in Beatrice, the power of such transference centred in the gaze to do good. As his drama moves towards its tragic conclusion, he meditates instead on the corruptive potential of precisely such 'forc'd unconscious sympathy'. Not content with engendering in Beatrice a sense of physical corruption, Cenci expresses his further desire 'to poison and corrupt her soul'.[26] Imagining Beatrice's future ruined fame, he prays that: 'what she most abhors/ Shall have a fascination to entrap/ Her loathing will'.[27] Just as Christabel is forced to imitate the looks and speech of Geraldine, so too does Beatrice Cenci absorb and replicate the malign characteristics of her father.

In her decision to murder, Beatrice becomes 'what she most abhors'. Her sense of physical contamination gives way to a moral contamination by the ideology embodied by her father; an ideology of power, of life characterised as a battle between 'the oppressor and the oppressed'.[28] Shelley registers this transference of qualities from father to daughter linguistically and theologically, as Beatrice, like Cenci, begins to believe that God is guiding her actions. The Beatrice who describes the proposed murder of her father as 'A high and holy deed'[29] and who assures her hired assassin Marzio that he is 'a weapon in the hand of God/ To a just use'[30] unconsciously allies herself with Count Cenci,

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[23] PW *176* 257-259.
[24] PW *176* 269-270.
[25] PW *176* 601-609.
[26] *The Cenci*, 4.1.45.
[27] *The Cenci*, 4.1.85-88.
[28] *The Cenci*, 3.1.284.
[29] *The Cenci*, 4.2.35
[30] *The Cenci*, 4.3.54

who is sanguine that 'The world's Father/ Must grant a parent's prayer against his child'.[31] In her arrest and subsequent trial, Beatrice lies about her involvement, glibly offers up Marzio as sacrificial victim and castigates her family for confessing under torture. Her gaze retains its power, but it is a power to subdue more reminiscent of Coleridge's Geraldine. Shrinking from her in the courtroom, Marzio cries: 'O, dart/ the terrible resentment of those eyes/ On the dead earth! Turn them away from me!/They wound'.[32] His response is eerily reminiscent of Beatrice's terrified reaction to the approach of her father earlier in the play.

JD: For Gwendolen, as David Carroll observes, '[e]ach moment of 'exultation' carries its 'infusion of dread'[33], as when she calculates her way to a socially profitable, but emotionally agonising, marriage to Henleigh Grandcourt. If the 'Dread' of Geraldine's look is manifested in Gwendolen's sense of the terror lurking just beyond the boundary of ego, the 'Malice' of the gaze is attributed by Eliot to Grandcourt. Just as Geraldine commands Christabel's speech, preventing her from speaking her horror, Grandcourt wills Gwendolen into silence with his cruelty, which is demonstrably emotional in nature, although suggestive of sexual oppression – another example of hidden dread in the narrative. Becoming 'Lord of her utterance',[34] Grandcourt is 'the husband to whom she felt she had sold herself […] had sold her truthfulness and sense of justice, so that he held them throttled into silence.'[35] Gwendolen is implicated in the deceit and injustice perpetrated by Grandcourt, because she has colluded in the betrayal of his mistress, Lydia Glasher, and so even her Christabel-like silence is contaminated by a Geraldine-like mark of shame. Eliot's narrator describes the 'poison' that has 'entered into this poor young creature'[36] as a consequence of her betrayal of Lydia Glasher and her children. The subsequent displacement of serpentine imagery from Gwendolen onto Grandcourt, who becomes for Gwendolen 'a dangerous serpent ornamentally coiled in her cabin without invitation'[37] further emphasises the subtext of contamination or contagion originated in Bard Bracy's dream. Eliot ensures that the process of moral redemption is truly purgatorial for her protagonist, whose remorse is signalled by her silence and increasing passivity; because she contains elements of both Geraldine and Christabel, however, her moral reversal is far from clear-cut or certain. The gradual awakening of her conscience is accompanied by a 'vindictiveness' towards her husband, 'something like the hidden rites of vengeance with which the persecuted have made a dark vent for their rage, and soothed their suffering into dumbness.'[38]

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[31] *The Cenci* 4.1.106-107.
[32] *The Cenci*, 5.2.30-33.
[33] David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 296.
[34] PW *176* 268
[35] *Daniel Deronda*, p. 573.
[36] *Daniel Deronda*, p. 303.
[37] *Daniel Deronda*, p. 575.
[38] *Daniel Deronda*, p. 576.

These 'hidden rites', reminiscent of Geraldine's sorcery as well as Christabel's bewitched silence, inform Gwendolen's dread, self-dread, and lack of agency, which culminate in her failure to act as she watches her husband drown.

SW: James Gillman claimed that Coleridge's intent in 'Christabel' was 'partly founded on the notion that the virtuous of the world save the wicked'.[39] Stuart Curran has written that in *The Cenci* 'Shelley […] demonstrated with resolute calm the inadequacy of the good, the innocent, to deal with an evil world.'[40]

JD: Eliot, too, ensures that perceptions of 'good' or 'evil' are never entirely uninflected; here, she characterises the potential for moral goodness:

> Goodness is a large, often a prospective word; like harvest, which at one stage when we talk of it lies all underground, with an indeterminate future: delicate green blades, and by-and-by the trembling blossoms are ready to be dashed off by an hour of rough wind or rain. Each stage has its particular action of the foul land which rears or neighbours it, or by damage brought from foulness afar.[41]

In a further echo of 'Christabel', and of Bard Bracy's dream, contamination, foulness, the potential to corrupt and spoil, is either already present or can be brought, as Geraldine brings it, from afar. Coleridge's narrative disquiet is recalled and expanded by Eliot within the framework of the realist narrative.

SW: In Shelley's drama, before she completely loses her faith in any form of justice, human or divine, Beatrice chides her stepmother, Lucretia, for believing that:

> power is as a beast which grasps
> And loosens not: a snake, whose look transmutes
> All things to guilt which is its nutriment.[42]

Once again, the corruptive power of the 'look', characterised here as specifically serpentine, recalls Geraldine and Christabel. Unfortunately for Beatrice, the conclusion of the play, which sees the Cenci family tortured to confess and sentenced to execution, vindicates Lucretia's belief. In her decision to murder her father, Shelley deliberately makes his audience see the foulness of Cenci *in* the purity of Beatrice precisely to demonstrate the potential of corrupt power to 'transmute[s]/ All things to guilt'. In this way, the unresolved ambiguities of 'Christabel' are tragically concluded in *The Cenci*. Beatrice's innocence *is* inadequate; the only way she can fight her father is on his own terms. In doing so, it is arguable that, like Christabel, she is forced to reflect and embody precisely what she fears and abhors. This is the tragedy of *The*

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[39] James Gillman, *Life of S. T. Coleridge* (London: William Pickering, 1838), p. 283.
[40] Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 10.
[41] *Daniel Deronda*, p. 56.
[42] *The Cenci*, 4.4.173-75.

Cenci.

JD: Having punished Gwendolen for her moral shortcomings, Eliot provides her with both resolution and recognition of the causes and effects of her suffering. Unlike Geraldine and Christabel, Gwendolen is freed from her curse: the curse of egoism. At the end of the novel, she feels she has been

> following a lure through a long Satanic masquerade, which she had entered on with an intoxicated belief in its disguises, and had seen the end of in shrieking fear lest she herself had become one of the evil spirits who were dropping their human mummery and hissing around her with serpent tongues.[43]

Geraldine's masquerade and human mummery, as well as the serpentine hissing of the bewitched Christabel are all adapted by Eliot to expound her ethical manifesto.

But does Eliot's realist narrative reconcile the narrative strands of Coleridge's poem? By rendering her female protagonist deeply uncanny, then depicting her suffering as a route back to stability, both personal and narrative, Eliot *appears* to construct a boundary between the Heimlich and the unheimlich that remains permeable in 'Christabel'. Eliot's resolution of Gwendolen's story, though, remains troubled by a sense of indistinct threat. After her husband's death, Gwendolen is unable to sleep, because 'Things repeat themselves in me so. They come back – they will all come back'. Having opened up her narrative to profoundly destabilising Coleridgean elements, Eliot's realism remains haunted by them.

[43] *Daniel Deronda*, p. 652.