# "More of the same sort": vamping Christabel in Hartley's "Ada of Grasmere" and Mary Coleridge's "The Witch"

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WRITING OF HIS FATHER'S INCOMPLETE POEM in the never-finished introduction to the second edition of *Biographia Literaria*, Hartley Coleridge wondered,

> What shall we say of Christabel? I know it was my Father's favourite child—the fondling of his genius, the child in which he recognised himself most and finest. It is not the alcohol but the virgin honey of Poetry. It is a fragment, no doubt, but more of it—like more honey—a thing that has no predefinite shape, could only have been more of the same sort.[1]

Alcohol or not, *Christabel* certainly intoxicated the later generations of the Coleridge family; they used STC's poem as a way to explore personal issues surrounding their sense of their own identity as writers, both in their own right and in relation to STC. Hartley's 'Ada of Grasmere' (tentatively dated to 1844)[2] and Mary Coleridge's 'The Witch' (1893) continued STC's exploration of the intersection between the supernatural and the real. Whether or not Geraldine was intended to be a 'witch or goblin, or malignant being of any kind',[3] that is nevertheless how she came to be viewed by readers of the poem, and the Coleridgean descendents used this idea of the supernatural being to explore notions of literary inheritance and influence. James Twitchell has suggested that,

> vampires are not always foamy-mouthed fiends with blood dripping from extended incisors, but rather can be participant in some ghastly process of energy transfer in which one partner gains vitality at the expense of another.[4]

Although blood remains an important factor (by invoking *Christabel*, both Hartley and Mary instigated a process of poetic communication specifically with their biological forefather STC, regardless of the strong influences they felt from other poets)[5], the vampire itself is not; as Twitchell goes on to assert, 'the Romantics did not care about vampires *as* vampires; instead the vampire

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[1] Hartley Coleridge, *Letters of Hartley Coleridge*, ed. by Grace Evelyn Griggs and Earl Leslie Griggs (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p.213n. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*

[2] Hartley Coleridge, *New Poems, including a selection from his published poetry*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 130n. Hereafter referred to as *HC Poems*

[3] From Derwent Coleridge's Preface to the 1868 edition of STC's poems; quoted in John Beer, 'Coleridge, Hazlitt, and 'Christabel", *The Review of English Studies*, 37.145 (1986), pp. 40-54, p. 52. Hereafter referred to as Beer.

[4] James Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1981), p.3. Hereafter referred to as Twitchell.

[5] Like his sister, Hartley acknowledged Wordsworth as a major influence on his poetry, whilst Mary's father's friendships with such High Victorian Literary luminaries as Tennyson and Browning was acknowledged as having great influence over her poetry.

was the means to achieve various ends'.[6] It was the 'process of energy transfer' that remained crucial to both the Romantics and their descendents, and the classification of the *Christabel*-inspired figure in the poetry of STC's descendents was only one factor in these representations: far more urgent was what that figure suggested about the author, and their relationship to their ancestor.

Twitchell suggests that Geraldine is a lamia,[7] but that was not how she was initially labelled; Hazlitt called her a Witch,[8] and Coleridge himself would say no more than that she was 'a supernatural Being with the stamp of the Evil Ones on her'.[9] John Beer has suggested that this refusal to classify Geraldine is evidence of STC's desire to 'evoke for his readers the constant link in the human mind between nightmare and evil'. Beer continues,

> The evidence suggests that it was neither verbal fastidiousness nor a drying up of his powers of narrative invention that inhibited him from completing the poem; the need to resolve the ambiguity of Geraldine's daemonic powers was the real problem.[10]

It is this question of resolving ambiguity that STC's descendents were to take up in their own writing. Hartley and Mary's choice of supernatural being for their *Christabel*-inspired poems reflects their views about their stance in the literary marketplace. Hartley's 240-line poem 'Ada of Grasmere' reflects the metre and narrative of *Christabel*, and in so doing implies his lifelong consciousness of his own poetic ambiguity; it suggests awareness of his inhabiting a liminal space between poetic creation (as constructed by STC, Wordsworth and Southey) and himself as poet. In the poem the eponymous heroine is taken from the real world, and is somehow ('Who can tell?') absorbed into the 'weird midnight' under the influence of the ghost of her lover, Lord Florian. Ada is, we assume, taken from this world to inhabit whatever supernatural realm death has taken Lord Florian to. Just as Ada is caught between living and dead, Hartley seems trapped in an eternally ambiguous relationship with his own creative identity. Hartley inherited this sense of an uncertain boundary between the real child and the poetic creation; it is established early, and is evident in the compositional process of *Christabel*. In STC's poems, like 'Frost at Midnight' or 'The Nightingale', the poetic-

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[6] Twitchell, p.38

[7] Twitchell, p.40

[8] Hazlitt, for instance, reviewing the poem in the *Examiner* of June 1816, thought that 'this woman [Geraldine]… is a witch. Who she is else, what her business is with Christabel, upon what motives, to what end her sorceries are to work, does not appear at present; but this much we know [—] that she is a witch, and that Christabel's dread of her arises from discovering this circumstance' (*Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by J. R. de J. Jackson (London: Routlege & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 206-7

[9] Beer, p.51 and Barbara Rooke, 'An Annotated Copy of Coleridge's 'Christabel", *Studia Germania Gandensia* XV (1974), pp.179-192

[10] Beer, pp.52-4

Hartley ('Echo Hartley', as he might himself have defined it)[11] is trapped in a textual world of his father's making. STC elided this boundary between his real son and textual creations in a letter to Southey, where the Conclusion to Part II of *Christabel* appears for the first time:

> Dear Hartley! we are at times alarmed by the state of his health, but at present he is well. If I were to lose him, I am afraid it would exceedingly deaden my affection for any other children I may have.
>
> A little child, a limber elf,
> Singing, dancing to itself,
> A fairy thing with red round cheeks,
> That always finds, and never seeks,
> Makes such a vision to the sight
> As fills a father's eyes with light;
> And pleasures flow in so thick and fast
> Upon his heart, that he at last
> Must needs express his love's excess
> With words of unmeant bitterness.
> Perhaps 'tis pretty to force together
> Thoughts so all unlike each other;
> To mutter and mock a broken charm,
> To dally with wrong that does no harm.
> Perhaps 'tis tender too and pretty
> At each wild word to feel within
> A sweet recoil of love and pity.
> And what, if in a world of sin
> (O sorrow and shame should this be true!)
> Such giddiness of heart and brain
> Comes seldom save from rage and pain,
> So talks as it's most used to do.
>
> A very metaphysical account of fathers calling their children rogues, rascals, and little varlets, et cetera.[12]

Hartley is both the 'little child' of STC's real paternal affection and the 'limber elf' of his imagination. The notebooks reveal a similarly intrinsic connection between STC's eldest son and the supernatural aspects of *Christabel*. Six months before this letter, on 27th November 1800, STC wrote in his notebook: 'Hartley taken ill, white as a sheet—'[13] Two entries, and one night, later, he recorded the following:

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[11] Writing to Dorothy Wordsworth in February 1801, STC recalled how Hartley had 'pointed out without difficulty that there might be five Hartleys, Real Hartley, Shadow Hartley, Picture Hartley, Looking-glass Hartley, and Echo Hartley'. Quoted in Derwent Coleridge's 'Memoir' of his brother, in Hartley Coleridge, *Poems, with a memoir of his life by his Brother*, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Moxon, 1851), p.xxxiii

[12] Roy P. Basler, 'Christabel', *The Sewanee Review*, 51.1 (1943), pp.73-95, p. 89

[13] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn et al. (London and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957-2002), 846.4.121

> Friday Night, Nov. 28, 1800, or rather Saturday Morning—a most frightful Dream of a Woman whose features were blended with darkness catching hold of my right eye and attempting to pull it out—I caught hold of her arm fast—a horrid feel —[14]

The natural bodies of the poet and his son are threatened by the intangible illness, which is transformed into this supernatural woman. That this later entry follows the first so swiftly implies that STC's awareness of Hartley's illness informs his own consciousness of his physical ailments. Hartley becomes ghost-like, and the next evening his father imagines being attacked by a spectral, daemonic woman. Hartley later suggested that others 'look on me / A living spectre of my Father dead'. Nicola Healey has observed that Hartley defends himself from this outsider's perception,[15] and part of this defence is constructed through his invocation of his own *Christabel*-like poem: 'Yet have I sung of maidens newly wed'.[16] Hartley has 'sung' of the topics which made his father famous; that the living Ada joins and, we assume, transforms into a spectre reflects Hartley's notion that he, too, is seen as only a 'living spectre'. STC's readers conversely view the real Hartley as the unreal entity: he is the 'spectre' whilst his textual counterparts live on.

Mary's 'The Witch', on the other hand, returns Geraldine to the Hazlittian reading of *Christabel*, but reinvigorates it to reflect her own position on the outside of the literary marketplace. The poem consists of three stanzas; according to Katharine McGowran, the first two are spoken by a Geraldine figure, and the final apparently narrated by the Christabel character, who hurries through her home to invite the 'Witch' in from the cold.[17] Mary wrote that:

> I have no fairy god-mother, but lay claim to a fairy great-great-uncle, which is perhaps the reason that I am condemned to wander restlessly around the Gates of Fairyland, although I have never yet passed them. [18]

Like her 'Witch', and, indeed, like STC's Geraldine, Mary cannot cross over the threshold without an explicit invitation from the inhabitants of the domain; in this case, those writers who have successfully gained entry into the canon. Mary recognises STC's place in Fairyland (he is her 'fairy great-great-uncle'), but as Geraldine had to be invited over the threshold of the castle by Christabel, and merely welcomed by Sir Leoline, so must Mary be invited into Fairyland by a 'fair god-mother'; she must be invited into the female canon

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[14] Ibid. 848.4.123

[15] Nicola Healey, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Hartley Coleridge: The Poetics of Relationship* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.76

[16] *HC Poems*, p. 69

[17] Katharine McGowran, 'The Restless Wanderer at the Gates: Hosts, Guests and Ghosts in the Poetry of Mary E. Coleridge', *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.186-197

[18] Edith Sichel, *Gathered Leaves from the prose of Mary E. Coleridge* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1910), p.11. Hereafter *GL*.

before she is welcomed by the men. Mary's choices of pseudonym reflect this feeling, similar to Hartley's, of inhabiting a liminal zone of STC's making:[19] although she eventually settled on Anodos, or 'wanderer', her first choice of nom-de-plume aligns her specifically with the supernatural. Alison Chapman has noted that this name, Vespertilio, means 'bat', suggesting 'a creature who lives a double life, in the day and the night, as well as the revenant.'[20] This vampiric construction is reinforced by Edith Sichel's memoir, which recalls a quality of immortality about Mary:

> She was never of any age, and excepting that as life went on she grew and ripened, she was much the same at twenty as at forty. She seemed to belong to eternity rather than to time, and the years had hardly power to touch her.[21]

That Mary 'grew and ripened' is reminiscent of Geraldine's 'girded vests' which 'grew tight beneath her heaving breasts'. Twitchell suggests that, in stories of the female vampire, the energy transfer process witnesses the absorption of vitality from a young man to a woman (even in *Christabel*; Twitchell suggests that Christabel is a masculine character).[22] Mary ripens as a poet by absorbing influence from the young STC; it is the body of her poetry, not the actual body, which belongs 'to eternity'. Like Hartley, Mary is excluded from a definite literary state by her association with STC; like Hartley, too, she seeks to create for herself a poetic space in which to engage with her ancestor on equal footing.

Mary's Geraldine-figure is invited into the domestic space traditionally inhabited by the Victorian woman; this witch disrupts the 'angel in the house' at work, just as Geraldine's arrival upsets the familial harmony of Sir Leoline's castle. In the letter to Lucy Violet Hodgkin dated March 21st 1893, in which this poem makes its first appearance, Mary writes that she is

> Home again in the company of this Witch. What do you think of her? Is she very bad? or not so very bad? The metre's all wrong anyway.[23]

As in *Christabel*, the metre seems to be 'irregular', but in fact it adheres to a system inspired by STC's poem. Just as the STC claimed that the lines were defined by accents (four to a line) rather than syllables, so is 'The Witch'

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[19] STC established 'Faery Land' early in his career as the place from which poetic inspiration came: it is from this place that the sounds that 'twilight Elfins make' travel in 'Effusion XXXV: Composed at Clevedon' (*Poems on Various Subjects* (Bristol: Joseph Cottle, 1796), p. 97). However, by the time this poem was published as 'The Eolian Harp' (*Sibylline Leaves* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), p.176) the place had become 'Fairy-Land'. It was this later spelling that STC's descendents employed.

[20] Alison Chapman, 'Mary Coleridge and the Flight to Lyric', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37.1 (2007), pp.145-160; p.150

[21] *GL*, p.1

[22] Twitchell, pp.41-48

[23] Quoted from Kasey Bass Baker, "Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!': Boundaries and Thresholds in Mary Coleridge's Poetry', *Victorian Poetry*, 48:2 (2010), pp.195-218, p.195. Hereafter Baker.

structured around its accents. As in *Christabel* too, the variation in the number of these accents in 'The Witch' are 'not introduced wantonly… but in correspondence with some transition in the nature of the imagery or passion'.[24] Aside from the refrain ('Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!'), the lines alternate between four and three accents, where the lines of four perform an affirmative role and the lines of three supply a negative:

I *have* walked a great while over the snow,
And I am *not* tall *nor* strong.
My clothes *are* wet, and my teeth *are* set,
And the way was *hard* and *long*.
I *have* wandered over the fruitful earth,
But I *never* came here before.
Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!

The cutting wind *is* a cruel foe.
I dare *not* stand in the blast.
My hands *are* stone, and my voice *a* groan,
And the *worst* of death is *past*.
I *am* but a little maiden *still*,
My *little* white feet are *sore*.
Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!

*Her voice was* the voice that women have,
Who *plead* for their heart's desire.
She *came*-she *came*—and the quivering flame
*Sank* and *died* in the fire.
It *never* was lit again on my hearth
Since I *hurried* across the floor,
To lift her over the threshold, and let her in at the door.[25]

Neither number is incidental: the four accent lines self-consciously recall STC's poem, whilst the three accent lines reinforce the identity of 'this Witch'; after all, three is the number of witchery.[26] Those lines constructed of four accents affirm a fact about this 'witch' or her environment: 'I have walked'; 'The cutting wind is'; 'her voice was'. The descriptions in the lines of three accents, on the other hand, operate either by describing what is not ('I am not tall nor strong'; 'I dare not stand in the blast') or by presenting the body in pain; that her 'little white feet are sore' is thus still describing a negative attribute. This pattern of transition is subverted in the two lines preceding the final refrain. The narrative voice shifts in this last stanza, and now the events seem to be related not by Geraldine, but Christabel. Although the words are Christabel's,

[24] Preface to *Christabel* in *Christabel: Kubla Khan; A Vision: The Pains of Sleep* (London: John Murray, 1816), p.vii. Hereafter referred to as *Christabel.*

[25] Mary E. Coleridge, *Poems* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1908), pp.44-5. The notations are my own: the underlined words represent the accents, whilst the italics denote the affirmative or negative words. Hereafter *MEC Poems*

[26] This association of the witch with the number three may be traced back to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and the number remains popularly associated with the occult.

however, the metre reveals the extent to which the speaker has surrendered her autonomy:

> It never was lit again on my hearth
> Since I hurried across the floor.

Here, it is the four-accent line which contains the negative ('never') and the three-accent line which describes the affirmative action ('I hurried'). The original narrator, the Geraldine figure, maintains control over the poem's form even when she is not speaking: she causes the fire to go out, an affirmative action from her viewpoint, even whilst it is a negative for Christabel. That Christabel must hurry indicates that she is already in thrall to 'this Witch', and although the action in the three-accent line appears affirmative, that it is registered in the metre which has, until now, demonstrated a negative suggests Christabel's loss of power to Geraldine.

Kasey Bass Baker has suggested that Mary 'carries *Christabel* into her poem, although it threatens her creativity and poetic individuality, in order to bring her forefather's voice into her own—to inhabit together the same literary space,' just as Christabel must physically lift Geraldine over the threshold and carry her into the castle.[27] This sharing of a literary space is indicated by the refrain. This refrain thus consists of seven accents, the numerical combination of the four-accent lines imported from *Christabel* and Mary's three-accent lines. At the moment where the crossing of the threshold is first requested and then ultimately enacted, Mary brings together the metrical intent of 'The Witch' with that of *Christabel*, creating a poetic space in which she can co-habit with her great-great-uncle.

Hartley seeks to establish a similar poetic space in which to join his father on an equal footing. As Earl Leslie Griggs noted, Hartley's 'Ada of Grasmere' 'endeavoured to imitate the metre and manner of his father's *Christabel*'.[28] Like *Christabel*, Hartley's poem is written in lines of between seven and twelve syllables, and mimics the fouraccent lines; like *Christabel*, too, the choice of metre was not incidental.[29] Russet suggests that '*Christabel*'s orality [as expressed through balladric metre] becomes the proof of its identity,' and it is Hartley's appropriation of this metre which indicates the extent to which 'Ada of Grasmere' should be read through the earlier poem. The narrative too, as Griggs again observed, is heavily derived from Bürger's *Leonore* and thence from *Christabel*.[30] Like Christabel, Ada goes to the woods near her 'father's hall' to pray for her absent lover, Lord Florian. She, too, is visited by a 'strange and weird' faery apparition, but this is no vampire per se, but a 'spectre'. This ghost

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[27] Baker, p.213

[28] Introduction to *HC Poems*, p.xiii

[29] Sara Coleridge observed of her father's response to praise of *Christabel* that 'if people admired 'Christabel', as it were, by nature, he was never easy till he had put them in the way of admiring it more scientifically.' Quoted from Sara Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge, edited by her Daughter*, 4th ed. abridged (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1875), p.157

[30] *HC Poems*, p. xiii

of Lord Florian entreats her to return to the dell in 'the middle of night.' She complies, and disappears, presumably born away to the supernatural realm by Lord Florian. It is here, of course, that the transition occurs, and Ada is no longer Christabel, but Geraldine, transported into the 'fairy chasm' from which she will emerge as a vampire. Her father, Lord Delaval, echoing Sir Leoline's reaction to Geraldine's plight, sends forth a 'stalwart band' of knights to look for her. He is visited by a dream which tells him that his daughter 'lies / Safe in the bowers of Paradise.' Finally, Ada's sister Rosabel hears of Lord Florian's death, which occurred on the same night as Ada's disappearance.[31]

Rosabel is clearly the new inheritor of Samuel Taylor's 'lovely lady'. Her name is a playful invocation of Christabel, inspired, we can safely assume, by Hartley's niece. Upon hearing of her birth, the year before the probably date of 'Ada"s composition, Hartley wrote to his mother expressing his desire to see the child: 'How I should like to see Christabel Rosa,' he wrote, 'though I don't like the names. I told [Derwent] so.'[32] 'Rosabel', then, invokes both the poetic and the baby Christabel; indeed, her physical appearance aligns her with the poet's family. Her 'wild grey eyes / And streaming hair of glossy brown' recall Dorothy Wordsworth's description of her first encounter with Samuel Taylor: 'His eye,' she said, 'is large and full, not dark but grey.'[33] That the poem moves from Rosabel into the extra-poetic world—the reader is directly invoked through the address 'thou' in the final stanza—indicates Rosabel's liminal position between poetic creation and poet.

Ada's physical appearance also positions her between two roles: Christabel and Geraldine. She is 'Ada of the flaxen hair / And eyes as blue as the heaven's sheen'. Her eyes recall Christabel's, 'so innocent and blue', and that we meet her 'in Grasmere's woods' confirms the link. However, it is to another Coleridgean woman we must look to gain a true appreciation of her lineage: the 'nightmare Life-in-Death' of 'The Ancient Mariner' is another of Ada's, and in fact Christabel's, predecessors.[34] Twitchell identifies that apparition with 'a harlot, a tramp, a whore, and she is also quite possibly a vampire.'[35] Like Life-in-Death, Ada's 'locks are yellow as gold', and the red lips of the spectre anticipate Ada, and so Christabel's, imminent vampiric status. As with Christabel, it is Ada's nocturnal activities which introduce her fully into the world of supernatural agency; when she awakes to meet Lord Florian, following an orgasmic dream, she has begun the transformation into Geraldine:

> Ada arose, most beautiful,
> Threw off her silken coverlet

[31] *HC Poems*, pp.124-130
[32] Hartley Coleridge to Sara Coleridge, October 25th 1843, in *Letters of Hartley Coleridge*, ed. by Grace Evelyn Griggs and Earl Leslie Griggs (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p.268
[33] *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, Volume I, ed. by E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935; revised 1970), p.168
[34] 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', in *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (London: J & A Arch, 1798), p.18
[35] Twitchell, p.155

Which her snowy breast had kissen,
And thoughts most strange began to glisten
In her large eyes of violet;

Then, of timorous gladness full,
She robed her in her raiment white,
White as the single lily flower
Braided in her flaxen hair,
And veiled from the voluptuous sight
Of stray spirits of the night,
The loveliness which was her dower.[36]

This description clearly harks back to Christabel's first sight of Geraldine, with her 'neck that made the white robe wan' and the adornments 'entangled' in her hair.[37] It is the white skin of the protagonist which also identifies Mary's witch as Geraldine; like Coleridge's 'maiden', she has 'little white feet.'[38] The 'fragile lily' in Ada's hair is her final link to the natural world of the Lake District; once that fades it is succeeded by 'the ruby bright' which she wears on her finger, and which Geraldine wears in her hair. This ruby is the only physical object which remains of Ada after her disappearance, just as the poet's name, as Hartley ruefully observed in an earlier sonnet, is the only thing to survive of him after death.

Despite Hartley's suggestion that any additions to *Christabel* 'could only have been more of the same sort', his and Mary's poems challenge the view that these poetic descendents were simply derivative. Although they self-consciously tried to align their works with STC's poem, they simultaneously imposed their own 'shapes' upon it. These real children of the Coleridgean bloodline are linked to *Christabel* by their similarly uncertain status as in some sense both textual and actual beings, whilst their negotiations with and re-workings of the metre and narrative of Samuel Taylor's poem encapsulate the ways in which they were undeniably influenced by his works. Simultaneously, these later re-writings reveal the descendents' attempts to 'lift [him] over the threshold' of their works and engage with him in a creative space of their own making.

[36] *HC Poems*, pp.126-7
[37] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Poetical Works of S. T. Coleridge* Volume II (London: William Pickering, 1834), p.31
[38] *MEC Poems*, p.44