Marjean D Purinton [1]

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Rethinking the Romantic Era: Androgynous Subjectivity and the Recreative in the Writings of Mary Robinson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Mary Shelley

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by Kathryn S Freeman

KATHRYN S. FREEMAN'S "RETHINKING" of Romantic-period writing seeks to disrupt oppositional readings of male and female writers—their genealogies, biographies, and traditions—and to reintegrate their writings in the kind of literary conversations by which they were generated. As *Rethinking the Romantic Era* synthesizes segregated studies based on gender, genre, and generation, it seeks to dismantle the Western canonical/non-canonical binaries that that have dominated scholarship for over thirty years, a practice that replicates bifurcations of British Enlightenment thinking that posits self and other with paradigms of masculine writing and feminine writing. While the conventional line of enquiry has been particularly strong in Coleridge studies, Freeman argues that Coleridge does not adhere to such a lineage, that he in fact worked against it by disrupting the binaries of Enlightenment association and German idealism, and through the representation of an ambivalent subjectivity as androgynous. Her examination uses as case study the triangular literary fellowship enjoyed by Mary Robinson, Coleridge, and Mary Shelley. These writers' works share a common epistemology that Freeman calls "nondualism." The three writers engage in a literary conversation that deconstructs normative assumptions about evil, explores erotic constraints of patriarchy, and challenges traditional storytelling with contaminating metanarrative.

The kind of literary conversation Freeman reconstructs puts texts in tension, generating for Coleridge, in particular, "a revolutionary impulse of recreative imagination onto the masculinist model of British and European philosophical tradition" (17). While Robinson's and Shelley's gendered education explains their escape from contextualizing their writings as resistance to the same philosophical traditions as those of Coleridge, their texts nonetheless move from unity to fragmentation through an active and unresolved play of recreative energy as equally subversive and liberating as Coleridge's. The recreative energy deployed by all three authors creates a "bewitching" effect that can be perceived in their writings. To demonstrate various texts in dialogical tension, Freeman's study is structured so to challenge the assumption of influence as linear, biographical, systematic, thereby

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[1] Marjean D. Purinton is professor of English and Affiliate Faculty in Women's Studies at Texas Tech University. She is the author of *Romantic Ideology Unmasked: The Mentally Constructed Tyrannies in Dramas of William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Joanna Baillie* (1994) and essays in *European Romantic Review, The Wordsworth Circle, Gothic Studies,* and *Women's Writing*. She is working on projects on Romantic Gothic grotesques and ghosts as well as Romanticism and criminal justice.

mirroring in its organization the very argument it poses.

The first chapter features Coleridge's separation from the classical standards of William Wordsworth's poetics. Coleridge's "effusion," the outpouring of subjectivity from egotism, differs from Wordsworth's containing and controlling spontaneous feelings recollected in tranquility. Freeman illustrates Coleridge's resistance to Wordsworth's poetic harmony and coherence with "The Eolian Harp," a poem ostensibly about Coleridge's courtship and marriage to Sarah Fricker. In Freeman's account, Coleridge impersonates the traditionally female instrument and liberates the harp-playing breeze from the feminine in a gesture that subverts the patriarchal notion of a male-driven creativity. The "witchery" effected in the poem exposes both Sarah's sexual unresponsiveness and a subjectivity grounded in materialism. Freeman contrasts "Kubla Khan" with Wordsworth's "Nutting," pointing to the ways Coleridge's poem shifts subjectivity in its second stanza to a powerful female nature—a female erotic energy, simultaneously sacred and demonic. Unlike the boy in "Nutting," the male aggressor Kubla refuses to identify with patriarchy, emerging as "bewitched" and androgynous. This nondual posture occurs in the poem's Preface, where its fictional editor fails to find coherence in explaining the poem's origin and incompleteness. Similarly, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* scrambles moral binaries as it problematizes evil. Although the Mariner promises a tale that will be his redemption, the story he tells is contaminated. The added editorial voice of the gloss forces readers to question the story's authority and their interpretations.

Here Freeman examines two key Coleridgean concepts that inform her readings: "willing suspension of disbelief" (*Biographia Literaria*, Chapter VIV) and "secondary imagination" (*Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIII). A willingness to suspend belief, Freeman asserts, is the ability to suspend reason, the ability of a permeable self to fragment and share identity with the other. The function of secondary imagination dismantles and reconfigures traditional epistemes. The Wedding Guest's interjections in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* for example, suggest that he is unwilling to suspend disbelief. Readers of the Mariner's tale are called upon to exercise secondary imagination in challenging the structures that would otherwise give the account credibility and coherence.

Chapter 2 brings Robinson in dialogue with Coleridge over gender and epistemology. Freeman demonstrates how "Kubla Khan" and Robinson's "The Maniac" and "To the Poet Coleridge" are part of a poetic conversation that began for them in correspondence. Impelled by the "minstrel of the witching hour," the narrator of "The Maniac" eventually celebrates a mental state liberated from bifurcated Enlightenment reason when he provides a voice for the insane creature without objectifying him. In "To Coleridge," Robinson connects the energy of Coleridge's Abyssinian maid, who in turn reflects the minstrel of "The Maniac." Freeman points out that the title of Coleridge's poem mourning Robinson's death is "A Stranger Minstrel."

A sustained literary conversation occurs between Robinson's novel *Walsingham* and Coleridge's narrative poems *Christabel* and *The Rime of the*

Ancient Mariner. The cross-dressed Sir Sidney of Robinson's novel shares androgyny with Geraldine of Coleridge's poem, both being nondual representations of gender, both in tension with patrimony, and both challenging the representation of eroticism through heteronormative narrators. Walsingham's privileged masculinist perspective, like that of Sir Leoline's, gives way to engendering empathy for female oppression under patriarchy. The character Old Griffith of Volume IV of the novel mirrors the Ancient Mariner. Griffith narrates a story of lost love from which he, like the Mariner, receives no redemption. His story also resonates with the fisherman's tale in Robinson's "The Haunted Beach." *Walsingham*'s embedded poetry further challenges a single masculinist narrative subjectivity and shares Coleridge's concerns with subjectivity represented in the hybridity of a genre called "lyrical ballads."

As Chapter 3 demonstrates, *Christabel*, like "Kubla Khan" and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, is comprised of fragments. Sir Leoline's repressive patriarchy is subverted by the contamination spread sexually and textually by Geraldine, who embodies the "witchery" of a recreated imagination freed from epistemological binaries. Like Life-in-Death from the *Ancient Mariner*, Geraldine resembles the feminine ideal of sentimental fiction, but as a nonbinary figure she diffuses active contamination. *Christabel* also depicts crucial misinterpretations by the poem's prudish narrator, the virginal Christabel, the misguided bard Bracy, and the patriarch Leoline. Furthermore, the poem features a series of failures. Christabel fails to narrate her story; Leoline fails to protect his daughter and castle; the maternal spirit fails to rescue passive female victimization. The poem's coda fails to provide satisfactory resolution, and like the Mariner, it disrupts the conventional time/space continuum that frustrates causal relationships.

Freeman argues that "Dejection: An Ode" is Coleridge's most textually androgynous poem and marks his departure from Wordsworth. A poem about Coleridge's desire for Sara Hutchinson, "Dejection" reflects the self-fragmentation that accompanies nondualism in its vacillating addresses to Sara and Wordsworth. Freeman points to the influence of *Kabbalah* (*Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XII) in shaping Coleridge's representation of androgyny in subjectivity as a repressed feminine principle of creativity. His playful and ironic subjectivity deconstructs the oppressive patriarch figure central to Wordsworth's poems and Western thought.

This resistance to masculinist poetics is what brings Mary Shelley into the Coleridge-Robinson literary conversation in Chapter 4. All three represent storytellers who promise their audiences a moral lesson. All three represent storytellers who hope to achieve redemption through their narrative acts. All three represent storytellers who fail at redemption as a result of the subversive contamination foundational to their tales. *Walsingham* and *Frankenstein* are dialogical. Walsingham receives a Rousseauistic education, his favorite books being those shared by Frankenstein's creature: *La Nouvelle Heloise* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Like *Frankenstein, Walsingham* is an extended epistle, and the epistolary structure of both novels destabilizes the central authority

and voice of the protagonist. Walton's and Frankenstein's quests are connected to the Mariner's shooting of the albatross, a gesture that undermines the seemingly benign brotherhood established between Shelley's scientists. Both novels include embedded poetry. While Shelley's references to Coleridge underscore his representation of narrative contamination, her references to Wordsworth and P. B. Shelley offer ironic commentary that diminish Frankenstein's egotism. Coleridge's androgynous Life-in Death is like Frankenstein's creature. When Frankenstein and Henry Clerval travel through the Lake District, Frankenstein quotes "Tintern Abbey" and feminizes Clerval. *Frankenstein* replaces heteronormative erotic desire with male homosocial bonding, replacing P. B. Shelley's feminine ideal, epipsyche or his Alastor, with a feminized doppelganger. Frankenstein quotes P. B. Shelley's "Mutability" and recreates human flesh as an ideal transcending death, a grotesque literalizing and parody of the epipsyche.

Freeman also finds literary fellowship between Coleridge's *Christabel* and Shelley's *Mathilda*. Whereas Geraldine's contamination seeps into Leoline's patriarchal world slowly and insidiously, Mathilda directly equates her tale with contamination. The two are also connected through the father's resentment of the daughter for the death of the wife. Coleridge subverts the patriarchal view through the narrative voice that objectives Christabel; Shelley casts Mathilda as subject/victim who comes to objectify herself in a sexualized vision as she appears to her father. Leoline acts on his attraction to Geraldine as a result of her contamination; Mathilda's father commits suicide for breaking the incest taboo, a cruel act that contaminates Mathilda's mind.

Robinson's *Walsingham* and Shelley's *The Last Man* share literary conversation with Coleridge's poetic narratives. Shelley's introduction to *The Last Man* frames the tale with an allusion to Coleridge's 1817 collection *Sibylline Leaves*, and Shelley's novel represents the relationship between narrative and contamination allegorically. The mad, monstrous Sibyl casts doubt on the authority of Lionel's narration of a plague that is about both physical and moral disease and that marks the novel's transmission itself, a series of stories that parallels the spread of the disease. Like Sibyl, the plague is a female force. While the plague vanquishes patriarchy, Lionel alone is left to tell the story of the plague, which no one will read. *Walsingham* is invoked through Shelley's character Perdita, the Shakespearean role with which Robinson was associated and the nom de plume she adopted in correspondence with the Prince of Wales. Raymond and Perdita's relationship in *The Last Man* unravels like the moral disease connected to the plague. Raymond's lover Evadne is an androgynous figure, like Life-in-Death of Coleridge's poem, who cross-dresses as a soldier, like Sir Sidney of Robinson's novel. Lionel's wife Idris, like Perdita, is the long-suffering female paragon modeled on P. B. Shelley's epipsyche. Like Frankenstein and his creature, Lionel is cursed by Life-in-Death and forced to outlive those he has ignored. Lionel's name echoes the regal paternity of Sir Leoline of Coleridge's *Christabel*. Lionel becomes the fulfillment of Frankenstein's wish for a deathless man.

Despite the unorthodox organization of the literary analysis, Freeman's study synthesizes connections, reviews concepts, links texts and shared ideas of nondualism, androgynous subjectivity, contamination, and storytelling. Importantly, Freeman's dialogical readings of Coleridge's, Robinson's, and Shelley's works reveal new and fascinating meanings that render her discussion accessible and compelling. I am not aware of extended scholarship on Coleridge that brings his texts into dialogical readings with those of Robinson, whose works span an array of genres, and Shelley's, whose works are primarily fiction. It is interesting how Freeman demonstrates Coleridge's resistance to Wordsworth's poetic vision, and his sharing more in common with the female writers with whom he corresponded than with his masculine mentor. Similarly, Freeman shows us how Mary Shelley deflects P. B. Shelley's world view, eschewing utopianism for the ambiguity and non-binary perspectives advanced by Coleridge. I appreciate Freeman's acknowledgement of her scholarship being generated by and emanating from her pedagogical interactions with students. I routinely teach many of these works in both undergraduate and graduate Romantic-period classes and *Rethinking the Romantic Era* has suggested to me effective ways of sequencing texts so that students can appreciate their influences and tensions. Freeman's study will help me to edge students out of their own binary and bifurcated thinking. It has given me an alternative interpretive lens to offer students who become grounded in biographical readings. For those of us who teach and interpret Coleridge's poetry and works by women writers, *Rethinking the Romantic Era* is an engaging and valuable study.