**Coleridge's Representation of Sexuality: A Re-interpretation of *Christabel* (Part I)**

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Students of English literature, in West Bengal at least, are introduced to Romanticism very early in their academic calendar, and while explaining the features of Romanticism, the concerned teacher never fails to highlight Walter Pater’s famous characterization of Romanticism as the "addition of strangeness to beauty" (258). In defence of Pater, the Romantic poet whose name is most often quoted is Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The erratic Coleridge, whether under the influence of drugs or outside it, often came out with startling lines like "Is that a DEATH? and are there two? / Is DEATH that woman’s mate?" (193) in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or "A savage place! as holy and enchanted / As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By woman wailing for her demon lover!" (297) in "Kubla Khan", which makes him the sine qua non of Romantic supernatural poetry. However, if students of Romanticism are directed to isolate one poem from Coleridge’s oeuvre which is typically supernatural, then almost always it is the popular *Christabel* (in two parts and characteristically unfinished), whose Part I forms a part of many syllabi. And quite rightly so, because *Christabel* — with its midnight setting, a full moon that appears both "small and dull" (216), dogs with unusual behaviours, a strange lady moaning at midnight in the middle of the forest, dead mothers as guardian spirits, and finally "a sight to dream of not to tell" (224) — contains all the ingredients of a horror story par excellence.

The last sentence should be read with a caveat, because if *Christabel* is read only for its supernatural content, then it becomes a mere children’s fairy tale, that too with the pejorative message of the victory of evil over good. As Julie Carlson points out, women never did figure prominently in the poems of Coleridge (206), and *Christabel* being a notable exception, it would be wrong to portray women in this exceptional poem as mundane hobgoblins and banshees irritating unwitting, innocent heroines. As a reaction to traditional readings of *Christabel* (Part I) as a poem of ghosts and ghostly happenings, I would like to submit my own reading of the poem as being an exercise in woman’s sexuality, and not supernaturalism.

In this paper, I propose to examine the fact that Geraldine, the beautiful woman that Christabel meets in the forest, is not a spirit, not even a separate being, but a projection of Christabel’s own self, a product of her own fantasy. Christabel is a young woman with an abnormally repressed sexuality, and Geraldine is the sexual figure that she wants to become. How she is successful in her venture, how she appears to transmigrate from a "hermitess" to a woman with sexual knowledge, from the point of their first meeting to the final moment when Geraldine casts the spell, is the story that Coleridge narrates in this seemingly innocuous poem.
Christabel lives in a place where there is no opportunity for sexual illumination. Her mother had died when she was born, and it may be assumed that her father Sir Leoline had had no sexual stimulation ever since — as is indicated by her words later on to Geraldine: "My father seldom sleepeith well" (221). Coleridge may well have used "keepeth" for "sleepeth" (without disturbing the rhyme) had he desired to highlight the Baron’s general illness or infirmity. But by using a word normally associated with sex, he accentuates the general sexual frigidity in the place. If this is not enough, Sir Leoline’s hunting dog is described as a "toothless mastiff" (216), indicating not just its advanced age but also its concomitant sexual barrenness. And if the spring season is symbolic of earth’s sexual resuscitation (as depicted by Chaucer in the opening of his Prologue to the Canterbury Tales), then sadly "spring comes slowly up this way" (216).

Into this desert of sexuality is injected the potentially provocative image of Christabel’s impending marriage. Christabel is so enamoured of "her own betrothed knight" (216) that she often dreams of him and does not mind undertaking nocturnal adventures for the sake of his well-being. But the problem is that she is, by the poet’s own admission, "holy Christabel" loved by "all they who live in the upper sky" (223), a "youthful hermitess ... who, praying always, prays in sleep" (226). Even her name contains the word "Christ". In Coleridge’s philosophy "... sex, love, and marriage form the base, middle section and apex of a pyramid. Man’s animal sexuality is the base underlying the uniquely human capacity for the spiritual feeling he calls love. This feeling, in turn, supports the institution at the apex called marriage, which belongs to man only as a civilized and Christian being" (Spatz 107). Christabel’s marriage with the knight had already been fixed, and her love for him was adequately proved in her bold action of foraying into wilderness at midnight to pray for his good health. But the sexuality in Christabel — the all-important base of Coleridge’s pyramid on which love and marriage are founded — is repressed in the unproductive sexual atmosphere of her surroundings. Coleridge’s deliberate description of Christabel in terms of piety indicate that this disciple of Jesus and Mary is doomed to suffer from a broken marriage because the all-important quality of sex was missing from the relationship. Christabel’s apotheosis would prove to be her own undoing if she did not do something soon enough that would liberate her from her repressed sexuality.

Keats had once pointed out that there is a budding morrow in every midnight, and if there is evidence of suppressed sexuality in Christabel’s life, there are also indicators that in this poem Coleridge would show how this lovely woman would try to overcome the sexual barriers in her life, gaining knowledge of sex and becoming a complete woman. She would thereby be completing Coleridge’s triangle and providing, with her new-found sexual knowledge, a secure base on which love and marriage could rest. In such a scenario then, one may argue that contrary to the popular belief that the temporal setting of the poem is "middle of night" (215) in order to facilitate the appearance of devils and spirits, it is midnight because it is demanded by sexuality and not supernaturalism. This conjecture gathers strength from the second line of the poem — "And the owls have awakened the crowing cock" (215). The poet here makes a (vulgar) pun on the word "cock", and if the line is read not as a record of the abnormal event of a rooster crowing in the middle of the night (rather than at dawn), but as the male organ...
sexually excited at night, then the sexual premise of the poem is buttressed from the very beginning.

In such a sexually-stimulated atmosphere, we find Christabel on her mission of heading deep into the nearby forest to pray to her fiancé. Unlike women of her age who are tucked up fast asleep at midnight, Christabel seems to be pulsating with a desire for sexuality as is indicated by her being awake at night. While in the forest, she kneels down to pray for her lover, which can also be construed as a prayer for sexual liberation. As if in answer to her prayer, she hears a moaning sound which later turns out to be made by Geraldine.

In keeping with the supernatural basis of the poem, it has been traditional to regard Geraldine as a witch who casts a spell on Christabel. There are many lacunae in this supposition, the greatest being travesty of poetic justice in the fact that a "holy" figure like Christabel, who is a beloved of the Gods and renders service before self, should so easily be injured by evil. Then there is also the question why Geraldine should choose to harm a person who had helped her from the very beginning. It seems as if the equations cannot be solved. But if we transform the coordinates of the setting from the supernatural into the sexual, then we can consider Geraldine to be Christabel's "other", a sexually liberated person that Christabel desires to become (in order to establish the triangle of love and marriage) but cannot because of the forcible repression of her sexuality.

Many clues are available in the poem to attest the fact that Geraldine is Christabel. Like Christabel, she comes of the same aristocrat family — "My sire is of a noble line" (218). Christabel is often described as "lovely lady" (216, passim) and Geraldine is described as "beautiful exceedingly" (218). From the start of the meeting till the end, Geraldine and Christabel remain together and never separate, and once Christabel is even found carrying Geraldine across. But the most important reference comes when the pair crosses the hall on the way to Christabel's bedroom. The poet says that Christabel "saw the lady's eye, / And nothing else saw she thereby" (221). How can she, since Geraldine and Christabel are one and the same person? It is precisely because of this reason that the mastiff bitch does not wake up when Geraldine and Christabel walk by in front of it. If Geraldine had been a separate physical entity, she would have been attacked as an unknown stranger.

The only difference between Christabel and Geraldine is that Christabel is a virgin while Geraldine is not. The abduction that is described by Geraldine is not the typical case of kidnap for ransom. Had it been so, the ruffians would never have left her unattended underneath the oak tree and fled in spite of swearing that "they would return with haste" (219). If one considers Shakespeare's use of the word "ride" to denote the sexual act (in Sonnet 137 he considers the genitalia of his dark mistress as the "bay where all men ride" 40), then the line "And they rode furiously behind" (218) leaves us in doubt that Geraldine was gang-raped by the warriors. After the sexual assault ("And once we crossed the shade of night" 219), she is deposited in the forest. Clearly, it is sexual experience that demarcates the two ladies. Thus when Christabel and Geraldine stretch
forth their hands in a bond of friendship, it is nothing but a projection of Christabel's latent desire to be sexually stirred by her lover when he 'rides' her after marriage.

Having thus embarked on the road to a sexual Xanadu (to corrupt a phrase coined by John Livingston Lowes), Christabel returns to her castle with her sexual alter-ego. Since she is returning to a place where sex is taboo, she perforce has to "move as if in stealth" (220) in order not to wake up the arch enemy of sexuality — her own father Sir Leoline. While entering the castle, an interesting incident occurs — Geraldine seems to collapse from pain and weariness, and Christabel has to lift her up and haul her over the threshold. This has usually been interpreted as the devil requiring the support of a living person to enter the abode where it plans to launch its nefarious schemes. In my interpretation, the action could mean that Geraldine being an embodiment of the sexual (and therefore evil by cultural standards), she has to be voluntarily carried into the abode of sexlessness (symbolized by the castle) by Christabel who wants to shatter her sexual reticence. Once Christabel does so, she proves her sexual ardour and thereby releases Geraldine to move "as she were not in pain" (220).

Having in this way become "free from danger, free from fear" (220), that is free from sexual inhibition, Christabel and her sexual other proceed to her bedroom. The bitch, who as I have pointed out earlier had lost her own sexuality, moans in disapproval of Christabel's new sexual avatar. When the two pass through the hall, Coleridge says that, "when the lady passed, there came / A tongue of light, a fit of flame" (221) in the fireplace where the brands were almost extinguished and the embers scattered. This otherwise supernatural incident is nothing but a symbolic depiction of the gradual increase in sexual arousal in Christabel. It is the fashion to represent libido symbolically with fire (for example the Sanskrit word 'kāmāgni') and here, the incident of the sudden appearance of fire represents the initiation of Christabel into a new sexual experience. In this context, Christabel's action of brightening the flame of the lamp in her room (Geraldine beside her) is a continuation of Coleridge's depiction of Christabel's libidinous arousal that will result in consummation of Christabel's earlier prophetic invitation to "share your couch with me" (220).

The wine-drinking ceremony is a prelude to the climactic sexual act. Standing in a place where sex was banned and about to engage in a potentially illegal act, Christabel wanted to ensure that her sexual other experienced no nervousness before engaging in the sexual act. Note that the wine is made of "wild flowers" underlining the wild act that they were going to engage in. When Geraldine is partaking of the wine, the ghost of Christabel's mother makes an appearance. As Christabel's guardian spirit, she probably does not approve of her daughter's desire to come out of her sexual cocoon and sexually emancipate herself, against the culture of her home. So she comes to dissuade Christabel before the Rubicon is crossed. But her warnings remain unannounced and her powers prove inefficacious in front of her daughter's desire, and she is forced to "peak and pine" (223) away from the scene.

We now come to the final climactic scene in which Christabel attains full sexual knowledge and understanding. Geraldine and Christabel undress and lie on the same bed.
In a most epiphanic moment, Christabel has a sight of Geraldine's breasts, and the poet's interjection — "a sight to dream of, not to tell" (224) — highlights the importance of the scene and not its horror as claimed by all. The subsequent sexual encounter — "in the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell" (224) — completes Christabel's sexual illumination. The resultant experience leaves Christabel both happy and sad, as after coitus:

the smooth thin lids
Close o'er her eyes; and tears she sheds —
Large tears that leave the lashes bright!
And oft the while she seems to smile
As infants at a sudden light! (226)

The sadness comes from the fact that a special knowledge — like the forbidden necromantic knowledge of Doctor Faustus — sets her apart from the other members of her house. Simultaneously, she is happy that this knowledge will not lead to damnation as in the case of Faustus, but provide the all-important base to the triangle of love and marriage that she was going to build with her beau. Consequently, Tim Fulford's suggestion that Christabel's contact with Geraldine brings her a sexual knowledge which "as a woman who identifies herself as an innocent and dutiful daughter, she is unable to accept as anything other than guilt and sin" (56), cannot be accepted. The very line "A star hath set, a star hath risen" (226) indicates that the protagonist had bartered her innocence for the healthy purpose of gaining sexual realization and the benign, positive concluding couplet of Christabel (Part I) — "That saints will aid if men will call: / For the blue sky bends over all!" (226) — seems to attest the poet's and even God's approval of Christabel's act.

In this paper, I have tried to give a radically different interpretation of Coleridge's poem Christabel (Part I), based on sexuality and discounting the conventional theories of supernaturalism. One should not baulk at associating sexuality with Coleridge, for as Jonas Spatz points out, "Coleridge was unsystematically developing, in his notebooks and letters, definite ideas about the nature of human sexuality and its relation to love and marriage. In a series of poems, culminating in 'Christabel,' he dramatized these ideas" (107). In an ecocritical article, Karen Mahar has demonstrated the hidden sexuality in mundane nature descriptions of "Kubla Khan":

His reference to a "pleasure-dome" is followed by descriptions of scenery that can easily be associated with the female anatomy, thereby indicating that the "pleasure" to which he refers is sexual: "[...] that deep romantic chasm which slanted down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover" (2, 12, 13). The "chasm" or "slant" is suggestive of a vagina, and its "cedarn cover" recalls pubic hair. Coleridge also refers to a "woman wailing for her demon-lover" and describes "turmoil seething" from the chasm (16, 17). These metaphors invoke visual and audible interpretations characteristic of a woman experiencing orgasm. … The auditory image of "fast thick pants" calls to mind a rapid, heavy breathing that occurs as orgasm nears. The "mighty fountain [...] forced" and "huge fragments vaulted" are equated to ejaculation and emphasized by the "half-intermitted Burst" which is characteristic of the pulses of male climax. He
is using the earth and nature to personify this very human experience, even emphasizing the passionate joining of man and woman with rushed and vigorous words: "forced," "vaulted," and "flung" as a crescendo is reached with the "dancing rocks" (the ejaculate) going up the "sacred river" (the vaginal tract).

So a gendered reading of *Christabel* (Part I) is very much feasible. But critics who have looked upon Geraldine as a separate person (and not as a figment of Christabel's fantasy as I have done) have brought the charge of lesbianism against the poem. One wonders how far lesbianism was developed during the Romantic Age and to what extent Coleridge (who had knowledge of a great many things) had knowledge of it. Without going into such complications, it may be argued that the poem is a very imaginative account of the heroine's attempt to come to terms with her erotic impulses, to recognize their essential role in her love for her absent knight and to progress from adolescence to womanhood.

**Works Cited:**


