

‘Christabel’ & the Possibilities of the Witching Hour

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THE CRITICISM OF ‘CHRISTABEL’ HAS GENERALLY BEEN PLACED upon the effect of Geraldine on Christabel herself. Tim Fulford views the poem as representing ‘internalised, psychological trauma’ caused by ‘the fall from innocence into guilt, and the redemption from this guilt.’¹ Anya Taylor sees it as an exploration of ‘understanding selves as fluctuating between strength and weakness and male and female.’² Gregory Leadbetter considers the exchange between Christabel and Geraldine as being spoken with ‘the language of chivalry’, but argues that they ‘use it as the conduit for a hidden desire which bypasses and subverts a hypocritical and inadequate patriarchal order.’³ Perdita Davidson suggests that the poem explores ‘the potential for erotic force to disrupt the flimsy fabric of domestic relationships when bereavement or isolation limit opportunities for healthy relationships and perhaps distort judgement.’⁴ My aim in this article is to build in particular on Taylor, Leadbetter and Davidson’s arguments, by examining the relationship between the witching hour portrayed in the poem and the poem’s form, prosody and style, which, I argue, replicate that hour by its effects on readers and audiences. In particular, I have found that little attention has been paid to the relationship between Sir Leoline and Lord Roland. I will examine this relationship, and that of Christabel and Geraldine, by way of exploring how Coleridge’s narrative creates a world in which conventionally male, as well as female, gender and sexual identities become fluid.

The Witching Hour

By the eighteenth-century, the brutality of the witch hunt had subsided. Melanie McGrath explains that, ‘British witches began to re-emerge in the 18th century, in the guise of cunning men and wise women [who] ministered to broken hearts and neighbourhood grievances.’⁵ Thus, the witching hour itself has less sinister associations; the increasing rationality of the eighteenth-century established that ‘witchcraft was inherently implausible.’⁶ The popularity of the Gothic novel combined with Edmund Burke’s work on the power of ‘terror, curiosity and exultation’ within the aesthetic sublime, resulted in ‘psychologizing ... the supernatural’.⁷ Such novels capitalised on ‘the Burkeian

¹ Tim Fulford, “‘Manly Reflection’: Masculinity in Coleridge’s Criticism”, *Romanticism and Masculinity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 13.

² Anya Taylor, ‘Coleridge’s “Christabel” and the Phantom Soul’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500 - 1900*, 42: 4 (2002), p. 711.

³ Gregory Leadbetter, ‘The “true wild weird spirit” of “Christabel”’, *Coleridge Bulletin*, 50 (2017), p. 20.

⁴ Perdita Davidson, ‘Christabel, a Poem of Transgression’, *Coleridge Bulletin*, 50 (2017), p. 51.

⁵ Melanie McGrath, ‘The witching hour’, *The Guardian*, 28 October 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2000/oct/28/weekend7.weekend3>, [accessed 2 November 2021].

⁶ Gijswijt-Hofstra, Marijke, et al. *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 5: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001.

⁷ Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, Brian Levack and Roy Porter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 5: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), p. 249.

obsession with dread and the infinite unknown.⁸ Painters like Goya and Fuseli also represented witches, including Shakespeare's Weird Sisters, in a more theatrical and artistic manner. In the Romantic era, Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra explains, 'it would principally be writers and artists who would explore the issues of innocence and evil, the worldly and the eternal, so long the territory of the theologians.'⁹ According to Ronald Hutton, the literary witch was represented in three modes: 'evil-doers, victims and heroes (or heroines).'¹⁰ Hutton also acknowledges that the 'evil witch' was often presented in a more 'comic mode', 'which was rip-roaringly present at the opening of the period'; nonetheless there were poems which maintained a 'more chilling treatment', such as Robert Southey's 'The Old Woman of Berkeley, which 'portray[ed] its subject as a villainess.'¹¹ Southey's fable, according to Jean Raimond, featured many 'internal rhymes, which helped to 'confer a hallucinatory quality on the poem,' in which he 'twice substitutes an anapaest for an iambus', by which 'Southey actually paved the way for the "new principle" on which the metre of Coleridge's 'Christabel' is founded.'¹² David Chandler, however, argues that Southey took issue with Coleridge, suggesting that his issue with Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' employed a 'universe of frightening chance events' which came into conflict with Southey's "[r]elatively [. . .] comfortable" world of "rules".¹³ Southey did not wish to follow in Coleridge's footsteps in 'evolving a modern type of horror in which the mind is haunted by its own capacity for delusion and apparently irrelevant details mimic the bizarrely illogical foci of real dreams.'¹⁴ In 'Christabel', this sense of delusion permeates not only the reader, but the characters within the poem, due to that inexplicable confusion of the witching hour in which it is set.

In today's understanding, Shelley Weaver-Cather defines the witching hour as 'the time of night when the veil between life and death is thinnest, allowing spirits and ghosts to travel between two worlds.'¹⁵ Folklore associated it with dark female forces.¹⁶ Coleridge referred to the 'true witching time' in speaking of Martin Luther's visions of the Devil, so vivid that he hurled an inkpot at the vision, leaving a stain. As Mike Jay notes, 'The nervous effects of his indigestion would have been most pronounced... in his "unconscious half-sleeps, or rather those rapid alterations of the sleeping with the half-waking

⁸ Ibid, p. 250.

⁹ Ibid, p. 250.

¹⁰ Roy Hutton, 'Witches and Cunning Folk in British Literature 1800-1940', *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural*, 7:1 (2018), p. 2.

¹¹ Hutton, p. 3.

¹² Jean Raimond, 'Southey's Ballads Revisited', *Études anglaises*, 61:1 (2010), p. 50.

¹³ David Chandler, Southey's "German Sublimity" and Coleridge's "Dutch Attempt", *Romanticism on the Net*, 32 (November 2003), part 5.

¹⁴ Chandler, part 12.

¹⁵ Shelley Weaver-Cather, 'Should You be Afraid of the Witching Hour?', *Tuft and Needle* (5 April 2021), <https://www.tuftandneedle.com/resources/what-is-the-witching-hour/>, [accessed 3 November 2021].

¹⁶ Icy Sedgwick, 'What Time Is The Witching Hour and Does It Even Exist?', *Icy Sedgwick* (3 March 2019), <https://www.icysedgwick.com/witching-hour/>, [accessed 10 August 2021].

state, which is the true witching time”.¹⁷ Coleridge described these particular dreams as when ‘Images and Sounds from the Brain blend with those from the Outward Senses’, and Jennifer Ford explains that ‘Coleridge believed this unique species of dream could account for a number of apparently inexplicable phenomena.’¹⁸ Within ‘Christabel’, Coleridge psychologises the witching hour to signify the porous boundary between the inner world of dreams and desires, and their relation to the outer world.

Coleridge’s exploration of psychological fluidity in this way ties back to his idea that ‘his idealised notion that ‘a great mind must be androgynous’, as he wrote in 1832.¹⁹ He suggested that there was a ‘feminine ingredient’ found in the minds of ‘the best and greatest of men, most eminently, and less so yet still present in all but such [as] are below the average worth of Men.’²⁰ McGavran explains that he believed the genius imagination was formed by a ‘synthesis of opposing but complementary—and thus figuratively masculine and feminine—elements.’²¹ Coleridge was aware that his notion was decidedly idealistic, as he longed for a ‘reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.’²² McGavran explains that he was promoting these ideas ‘against the background of a world where ... sexuality and gender roles more often lead to conflict and limitation than to harmony and growth.’²³ In fact, Julia Deisler views Geraldine as being ‘related to that feminine ingredient, that woman in the man, which he dare not allow to be totalized or brought to the surface.’²⁴ Geraldine herself has been analysed in many ways,²⁵ but I argue that the eve of Christabel’s sexual awakening triggers the temporary dissolving of gendered performances, as she teeters on the edge of womanhood in which more ordered roles will be established; not only does Christabel experience this dissolving, but the introduction of Geraldine simultaneously encourages the same experience for Sir Leoline.²⁶

¹⁷ Mike Jay; extract from Coleridge’s ‘The Friend’, ‘The Fruitful Matrix of Ghosts’, *Mike Jay*, <https://mikejay.net/the-fruitful-matrix-of-ghosts/> [accessed 3 November 2021].

¹⁸ Jennifer Ford, *Coleridge on Dreaming* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 94.

¹⁹ Coleridge, 1 September 1832, *TT*, II, 190–91.

²⁰ *The Notebooks of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Merton Christensen and Anthony J. Harding, 5 vols (London and Princeton, 1957–2002), V, 6197.

²¹ James Holt McGavran, ‘Coleridge, the Wordsworths, and Androgyny: A Reading of “The Nightingale”’, *South Atlantic Review*, 53: 4 (1988), p. 59.

²² Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), II, 16.

²³ McGavran, ‘A Reading of “The Nightingale”’, p. 59.

²⁴ Julia Deisler, *Coleridge’s Androgynous Mind: The Woman in the Man of Genius* (Rhode Island: Brown University, 1996), p. 131.

²⁵ She has been viewed as a cross-dressed man (William Hazlitt), a lesbian (Camille Paglia, Roy P. Basler), a feminized representation of Coleridge himself (Margery Durham), plus an embodiment of Coleridge’s repressed sexual desires and negative feelings towards women (Norman Fruman, Geoffrey Yarlott, David Beres, Edward E. Bostetter).

²⁶ Much of this work on androgyny seems to come from the imbalance in his relationship with Wordsworth. Of their partnership, McGavran describes Wordsworth as ‘the dominant, productive, respectable, manly poet’ whereas ‘Coleridge came to embody the gender-bending dark side of male Romantic poetic identity.’ (‘Coleridge, the Wordsworths, and Androgyny: A Reading of “The Nightingale”’, *South Atlantic Review*, 53: 4 (1988), p. 59.) Camille Paglia writes that ‘Wordsworth kept the hierarchical advantage and Coleridge surrendered himself to ritualistic self-abasement.’ (*Sexual Personae* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 213.)

The ambiguity and dissolving of norms is emphasised the use of metre. Coleridge believed that metre was key in conveying emotional effect: he wrote in 1816 that 'a legitimate poem ... must be one, the parts of which mutually support and sustain each other ... supporting the purpose and known influences of the metrical arrangement.'²⁷ He explains that it is not the 'pleasure of the metre itself' that attracts the attention, but it is 'dependent on the appropriateness of the thoughts and expressions, to which the metrical form is superadded.'²⁸ He compares it to 'yeast', which is 'worthless or disagreeable by itself, but giving vivacity and spirit to the liquor with which it is proportionally combined.'²⁹ Effective use of metre transforms all other elements of the poem. For 'Christabel', Coleridge chooses a form vaguely reminiscent of the traditional ballad, but alters it entirely by scattering it with irregularities, unfinished lines, extra syllables, pauses and repetitions and combines this with the evocation of the supernatural to create a sense of inauthenticity and performance that indicates clearly that the story is exuberant fantasy, heavily relying on the sense of mystery and the unknown for its effect. It has been dubbed the 'Christabel' metre for its focus on accent rather than syllable. Brendan O'Donnell explains that Coleridge claims 'that it is purely accentual, that is, that it regulates only the number of stressed syllables, allowing theoretically unlimited variation in the number and disposition of unstressed syllables.'³⁰ Coleridge creates a spell, or hypnotic lullaby, through heavy and accentuated stresses which repeat and repeat.³¹ For example, there tend to be three or four stressed syllables per line, such as: 'Sir **Leoline**, the **Baron rich** / **Hath** a **toothless mastiff bitch**' (PW I.1, 6-7). However, alternative lines move the stressed syllables to the beginning of the line, such as: '**Hush**, beating **heart** of Christabel! / **Jesu**, **Maria**, **shield** her **well**!' (53-54). In this second example, the accentuated syllables have shifted position, moving towards the end of the words; instead of the first syllable in 'toothless' and 'mastiff', the words 'Jesu' and 'Maria' use a stress in the second. This creates instability as the stresses do not appear in their expected position each time. Jonathan Shears has noted, 'The balladeer's use of chiasmus, gaps and echoes [show] that the purpose of Christabel is to deliberately resist articulation'³²—Shears' argument is that these spaces left by syllable omissions and irregular line lengths are a direct cause of the poem's ambiguity.³³ O'Donnell explores Geraldine's entrance into Christabel's chamber: 'And now doth Geraldine press down / The rushes of the chamber floor.' He concludes: 'So closely woven is the passage that even the last, unrhymed syllable of the

²⁷ Coleridge, *BL*, II, 13.

²⁸ Coleridge, *BL*, II, 69.

²⁹ *BL*, II, 67.

³⁰ Brendan O'Donnell, 'The "Invention" of a Meter: "Christabel" Meter as Fact and Fiction', *The Journal of English and German Philology*, 100:4 (2001), p. 522.

³¹ See also O'Donnell, p. 525, 531.

³² Jonathan Shears, 'Listening to Christabel: Sound, Silence and the Contingencies of Voice', *Romanticism* (Edinburgh), 19:1 (2013), p. 45.

³³ See also Christian La Cassagnère, 'The Strangeness of "Christabel"', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 32:2 (2001), p. 85.

penultimate line ("down") not only does not stand out as an anomaly... but seems the inevitable choice in its place... To compare small things with great, the syllable describing Geraldine's entrance to Christabel's chamber seems, like Geraldine herself ... to have been waiting there all along.³⁴ Coleridge also stifled readers' prior expectations of rhyme and syllable. As McKin explains, at the time of publication, 'readers were still habituated to a prescriptive emphasis on accentual and syllabic regularity.'³⁵ O'Donnell explains: 'We tend to forget ... that the metrical practice of the age is, with few exceptions, a great deal less adventurous.'³⁶ As such, the stanzas 'do not impress themselves upon a reader a priori, but depend on a sort of attention different from that required either by blank verse or by poems in fixed rhyme schemes.'³⁷ The reader cannot predict how lines may end or unfold; This 'rhythmic uncertainty'³⁸ compliments the use of setting, in creating an unstable and peculiar listening experience. Coupling this with Karen Swann's notion that the poem became Coleridge's 'lady', of whose 'charms' he was 'both master and possessor',³⁹ I contend that 'Christabel' is a literary embodiment of fluid and changeable identity which, likewise, refuses to adhere to expectations; it absorbs the dangerous possibilities of the witching hour.

Part I – Bewitched Fluidity

Throughout 'Christabel', both sexual and gender identity remain in flux, never settling into one discrete shape but rather adapting based on external influence. Displays of sexual affection and practice are varied and unpredictable, as well as performances of gendered roles. Sexual identity itself is subjective; Michel Foucault explains: 'the subject is constituted through practices of subjections ... from a number of rules, styles, and conventions that can be found in the cultural setting.'⁴⁰ This is what Judith Butler calls 'entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence.'⁴¹ She asserts that 'gender ... must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender.'⁴² Coleridge is removing some of those 'rules' through his use of setting and metre, and thus permitting the characters to explore a less socially-determined subjectivity. Butler's illusion, referring to reality, is revealed for what it is, by Coleridge's own use of supernatural illusion. From the opening, he introduces

³⁴ O'Donnell, 'Invention of a Metre', p. 532.

³⁵ McKin, A. Elizabeth, "'Not, Properly Speaking, Irregular': The Metre of 'Christabel'", *The Wordsworth Circle*, 24:2 (1993), p. 75.

³⁶ O'Donnell, 'Invention of a Metre', p. 525.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 528.

³⁸ O'Donnell, p. 528.

³⁹ Karen Swann, 'Literary Gentlemen and Lovely Ladies: The Debate on the Character of Christabel', *ELH*, 52:2 (1985), p. 402.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence', *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), p. 452.

⁴¹ Butler, Judith, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40:4 (1988), p. 524.

⁴² Ibid, p. 519.

a setting of uncertainty; the 'crowing Cock'⁴³, usually a signifier of the morning, has been awakened by the owls—"Tu-whit! Tu-whoo!" (3)—and crows 'drowsily' (5), in the middle of the night. This unsettled sense is heightened by the question of 'Is the night chilly and dark?' and the description of the 'thin gray cloud' that 'covers but not hides the sky' and the 'moon' which is both 'at the full' and 'small and dull' (14-20). There is something uncanny about this night, characterised by the contradictions that unnerve the reader. The witching hour itself, the time when the barrier between the visible and invisible world opens, acts as a direct enabler of the events, and reflects the discordance between Christabel's inner desires and her outer world. She is dreaming of 'her own betrothed knight' and praying 'in the midnight wood ... for the weal of her lover' (23-30). However, Coleridge discards this prospective relationship as he quickly removes Christabel from the position of anxious lover with the introduction of Geraldine. The speed of this transition indicates her capability to perform a variety of roles; she moves from the sighing maiden—"The sighs she heaved were soft and low" (32) – to the bold and assertive guardian and protector – 'Christabel stretcht forth her Hand' (104) – within a matter of moments. The fact that Christabel has been dreaming 'all yesternight' of 'her own betrothed Knight' (27-28) indicates that she is dealing with strong sexual desires regardless, and is more receptive to the possibility of a sexual encounter with Geraldine. Coleridge's psychologising of the witching hour allows elements of her inner world, dreams of freedom and expression, to interfere with her previous presentation of herself as maiden and fiancée.

This conflict between Christabel's inner and outer self is emphasised by the delicate descriptions of her in the moments leading up to discovering Geraldine; she is the 'lovely lady' with a 'ringlet curl' (46-47) brushing her cheek, with a 'beating Heart', for whom the narrator appeals to 'Jesu, Maria' to 'shield' (53-54) from whatever threat approaches. Arguably, Christabel's confrontation with Geraldine's own hyper-femininity and vulnerability—"a wretched maid" (103) appears to undo her own sense of feminine weakness; however, we might also suggest that Christabel's own femininity is simply paired with a more protective instinct (her femininity not cancelling out her power). Either way, she is no longer sighing or silencing her 'beating Heart' or praying to 'Maria' for help; rather she performs bold actions such as 'she stretched forth her hand' and 'comforted' her, moving 'forth with steps they passed / That strove to be, and were not, fast' (112-113). Coleridge wrote of these lines: 'The strange lady cannot rise, without the touch of Christabel's Hand: and now she blesses her *Stars*. She will not praise the *Creator* of the Heavens, or name the saints.'⁴⁴ Christabel is given significant power here, reinforcing Geraldine's reliance on her, but Coleridge also further denotes Geraldine as a mystical, supernatural creature who resists convention, this time in the form of religion. Christabel's second attempt at masculine power and

⁴³ S.T. Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C.C. Mays, 6 vols (London and Princeton, 2001), I, 1, p. 483, l. 2. Henceforth *CPW*.

⁴⁴ Coleridge, *PW*, p. 486.

chivalry comes through her invitation to 'share your couch with me' (122) and then opening the door with the phallic symbol of the key – 'took the key that fitted well' (124)—an interpretation whose crude Freudianism might be rather laughable nowadays. Nonetheless, these behaviours contrast with passive Christabel wandering through the words, afraid and alone: it is the entrance of this hyperfeminine figure, the 'damsel bright', who wears the 'silken robe' and 'gems' in her hair, who makes her behave like this (58-65).

Yet even Geraldine's femininity is only temporary; it serves its purpose to enter Christabel's chamber, but before long, Geraldine becomes a strange combination of refinement and wildness. While she has a 'stately neck' and is 'richly clad' in a 'white robe', the gems are 'entangled in her hair', and her 'blue-veined feet' are 'unsandl'd' (60-67). From her first appearance, Geraldine represents that which cannot fully be defined. Her appearance seems to mould itself based on the desired response she wants from Christabel; in this moment of transparency, Geraldine's power, witch-like in itself, is to draw out Christabel's suppressed characteristics, and allow her to act upon them.

Geraldine's story of the 'five warriors' who 'seized me yesternorn' (81) functions as a means by which to gain Christabel's trust. It bewitches her; as Geraldine bookends her story with her command 'Stretch forth thy Hand, and have no fear' (75) and again, 'Stretch forth thy Hand' (102) to close her, immediately followed by Christabel doing just so: 'Then Christabel stretcht forth her Hand' (104). Christabel steps into the role of protector and guardian, just as Geraldine has instructed her to do. She behaves as an ideal aristocratic would, questioning Geraldine's own background before taking pity on her. However, Christabel quickly transfers this aid to a masculine source; '...may you command / The Service of Sir Leoline' (106-107). Yet, she collectively involves herself in this service, claiming 'our stout Chivalry' (108) although seems to instantly revoke this by the suggestion that she will be 'safe and free' in 'your noble Father's hall' (110-111). Christabel's suggestion is that Geraldine ought to be protected from men by men, bypassing the fact that it was Christabel herself who saved Geraldine. Christabel is attempting to act in accordance with social codes, while having moments of inconsistency that suggest her desire to play the protector too. Ironically, as they return to the castle, Christabel admits that 'Sir Leoline is weak in health', transferring the aid back to herself (118). This frequent transference of protective aid illustrates Christabel's conflicted gendered expression, encouraged by Geraldine's bewitchment. As they enter the castle, she lingers longer on her role as protector. While the castle is not protected by Leoline himself due to sickness, the gate is described as 'ironed within and without' (127). This vast strong door protects the castle from intruders, and yet Christabel enters in through the 'little Door' at its centre (125). The size of the door in comparison to the gate invites masculine and feminine forces to combine, reinforced by Christabel lifting Geraldine 'over the threshold of the gate' (131-132) like newlyweds. Nonetheless, just as before, Christabel counteracts this action through a cry to 'the Virgin all divine' who 'hath rescued thee from thy distress!' (139-140)

Christabel praises the Virgin to distance herself from the role she has just played; ironically, the rescue does remain feminine, rather than masculine. Geraldine, on the other hand, protests – ‘Alas, alas!’ she calls, admitting that she ‘cannot speak for weariness’ (141-142). Geraldine, therefore, silences Christabel’s excuse, and re-establishes her spell; as Coleridge’s marginal gloss states, ‘The Strange Lady makes an excuse, not to praise the Holy Virgin.’⁴⁵

The subsequent stanzas describe the quiet stealth with which Geraldine and Christabel cross the floor; they move ‘lightly’, ‘softly’, ‘steal[ing] their way from stair to stair’ (155, 164, 168). We question the need for silence; Geraldine is a maiden in distress, whom Christabel has chanced to meet. If she had woken her father, it would not have been a complete disaster in his eyes; while he is unwell, being awoken to protect a vulnerable woman would not have been the worst decision. However, it would have destroyed her opportunity to share her room with Geraldine. Her choice let him sleep is less of a concern for her father’s wellbeing than a chance to escape the confines of socially-sanctioned living and relish a fluid encounter beyond her father’s knowledge. She sees the ‘boss of the shield of Sir Leoline tall’, which reminds her to ‘softly tread’ (162, 165); this is a brief glimpse into the authority which will return in Part II, but although she is reminded of her need to remain quiet, she only does it to remain uninterrupted. Rather, it is his image that reminds her of her transgression – the boss of the shield symbolising Leoline as warrior, representing his position of male power and authority – and yet she chooses to ignore it and instead move stealthily; in Coleridge’s variation, he wrote: ‘They cheat the echo, stair by stair’, which again indicates her desire to remain hidden.⁴⁶ She allows the silent power of the witching hour to guide her. Ironically, it is the one night on which the Baron ‘sleepeth well’ (165) that Christabel encounters Geraldine; the witching hour, perhaps, has also enchanted the Baron, as his absence, coupled with the departed army, enables Christabel in her night of self-exploration and unfettered expression. The weather also conspires to allow it; ‘the moon’ only ‘shines dim’, and ‘not a moonbeam enters’ (175-176) to alert anyone of anything unusual in the castle; even the ‘silver lamp burns dead and dim’ (184). Nonetheless, Christabel and Geraldine ‘without its light can see’ (177). There is a shared knowing between them, reinforced by the images of the ‘Chamber’ which ‘carved so curiously’, with ‘figures strange and sweet’ (178-179). This intimate, blurry image of the two women simultaneously acknowledging the strangeness of the carvings in the murky darkness, continues to promote the possibility of transgression; the evocative power of the witching hour permits their moment of understanding.

Whether from instinct or fear, Christabel then decides to light the lamp; she ‘trimm’d the Lamp, and made it bright, / And left it swinging to and fro’ (186-187). The light startles Geraldine into despair; she is sent into ‘wretched Plight’, and ‘sank down upon the Floor’. With the light brought back, it appears that some sense of normality or convention returns; Christabel mentions her

⁴⁵ *PW*, p. 488.

⁴⁶ *PW*, p. 488.

mother, who wanted to 'hear the Castle Bell / Strike twelve upon my Wedding Day' (200-201). The revealing light panics Geraldine, (unable to bear the light possibly as a reminder or fear of being found by her attackers) and evokes something demonic within her. as she denies the mother entry and seeks to replace her. She speaks in a bold and assertive tone, contrasting with earlier descriptions of her voice as 'faint and sweet' (72):

And why with hollow voice cries she,
'Off, woman, off! this hour is mine—
Though thou her guardian spirit be,
Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me.' (210-213)

Christabel's mother momentarily re-establishes conventional gendered obligation that both women feel they must uphold, in the yellow glow of the lamp; the darkness did not necessarily command this of them. The darkness, the very fabric of the witching hour, gives the women power and makes them a threat. As if in order to dispel this threat, for a moment, Geraldine too attempts to celebrate the mother, and submit to her presence as she declares 'I would... she were!' (203) – suggesting her desire for the mother – but this also awakens further panic, triggering a demonic 'altered voice' (204) in response to the convention and structure she is built to resist. Possibly, Geraldine can 'espy' 'the bodiless Dead' (208-209), the witching hour bringing forth a resurrected image of Christabel's mother that only Geraldine can notice – but this does not explain her declaration that 'this hour' is 'given to me' (211-213). Here, it is implied that this moment has been planned; the witching hour and the forces of Gothic fantasy have conspired to let this happen. It was supposed to happen in the dark, uninterrupted, and the memory of Christabel's mother, and her death-bed desires, threaten to dissolve that space into one of convention and rule.

In the Conclusion to Part I, the existence of some outer spiritual force is clearly implied, which is driving Christabel's sexual initiation, in phrases like 'a Star hath risen', Christabel's 'Trance' and 'Saints will aid if Men will call, / For the blue Sky bends over all' (302, 312, 330-331). As such, the threat is enhanced, furthered by Christabel's tears and the description of Geraldine as 'the worker of these harms' (298), while Coleridge maintains an eerie peace through the description of Geraldine holding Christabel 'still and mild, / As a mother with her child' (300-301) as well as the 'jubilant' (308) sounds of the birds and Christabel's 'smile / As infants at a sudden light' (317-318). Part I ends on a mingling of these two states, which have been simultaneously battling for prominence throughout the poem. Coleridge is permitting lesbian intimacy in a manner that might be previously interpreted as merely motherly and nurturing; their intimacy reaches a level previously unrecognised, an intimacy that is both emotional and sexual, both motherly and romantic, both safe and threatening. This is what Taylor is referring to when she describes

Geraldine as 'the (M)other she has lured to her bed.'⁴⁷ It is Christabel who initially invites Geraldine inside, yet the dynamic becomes increasingly unclear, through the undressing, the replacement of Christabel's mother, and the position in which they sleep. Adam Roberts describes the poem as 'supernatural erotic frisson', the very joy of which is its 'impurity and indecency'⁴⁸. The allure of Part I lies in its failure to ever conform to one state, taking risk upon risk as the two women break first social codes, intermingle the spiritual and supernatural, cross thresholds of sexual closeness and insert unsanctioned behaviour into private spaces.

Part II – Re-establishing Gender & Homosocial Panic

While Part I is Coleridge's evocation of the undefinable and unknowable, Part II represents the fallout of those unknowable things by the introduction of concrete reality. With the control returned to its 'rightful' place, the sensuality and range of possibility is short-circuited. The power of the witching hour dissipates, and its consequences must be played out; as Leadbetter explains, 'Coleridge recalled his task in Part II as "witchery by daylight" (TT I 410).'⁴⁹ Butler notes that 'there are strict punishments for contesting the script [of gender and sexuality] by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations.'⁵⁰ This second part is Christabel's punishment, as she confronts the events of the night. This begins with the bells that are heard from 'Bratha Head to Wyn'dermere' (344). While Part I ends with the women drifting off in an ambiguous mother-daughter-lover clasp, Part II begins with an abrupt disturbance from that sleep by the 'matin bell'; the same as that which awakened Sir Leoline on the morning of his wife's death, which continue to ring in the early morning to arouse the court. The bells are described as 'heavy', 'a warning knell' and 'a death-note' (340, 342, 355); they remind Christabel of her mother's absence and put us in mind of Leoline's own (supposed) continued mourning. The use of the Baron's name, as opposed to 'the castle clock' in Part I, places the court under his power; it is under his instruction that the bells continue to toll, whereas in Part I, the castle is shrouded in the night's power. The witching hour has been lifted. This subtle shift in authority, from nature to man, moves the overall tone of mystery and potential to one of clarity. This reminder returns Christabel to the 'World of Death' (333) in which her mother's absence is central and deeply significant; it evokes guilt within her, indirectly condemning her for willingly accepting a replacement for her mother and for betraying her father by keeping it secret.

However, Christabel's guilt is accompanied by a pang of desire: '...her girded vests / Grew tight beneath her heaving breasts. / "Sure I have

⁴⁷ Taylor, p. 718.

⁴⁸ Adam Roberts, 'Sinning Heinously Against Purity and Decency: Coleridge's 'Christabel' (1799-1801)', *Samuel Taylor Bloggeridge* (27 November 2015), <http://samuelbartaylorbloggeridge.blogspot.com/2015/11/sinning-heinously-against-purity-and.html>, [accessed 5 March 2021].

⁴⁹ Leadbetter, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Butler, 'Performative Acts', p. 531.

sinn'd!" (379-381). She cannot deny her arousal at Geraldine's appearance, noting that she is 'fairer yet! and yet more fair!' (374) than the previous evening, finding herself plunged into a 'Perplexity of Mind' (385), wanting to forget about the previous evening and her 'Sins unknown' (390); it does not seem to be the 'sins' themselves, but the fact that they are 'unknown' that unsettles her. It is the confusion about what happened in the night that has left her uneasy, haunted by 'dreams too lively to leave behind' (386). As a result, her instinct is to gain clarity from her father. While the darkness of the night seemed to bolster her actions, the light of day has awakened her to reality, and she becomes fearful of what occurred. The enchantments of the witching hour have worn off, but the actions still remain.

Once she has been sufficiently cleansed, appealing that 'He... Might wash away her Sins unknown' (389-390), Christabel takes Geraldine to meet her father. Whether this is to seek his approval, to reintroduce order, or to seek reassurance in the arms of familiarity, is unclear, but nonetheless the night's secrecy is dissolved. She is self-imposing those 'certain familial modes of punishment and reward'⁵¹ that Butler refers to. Instead of maintaining risk, she 'forthwith led fair Geraldine / To meet her sire, Sir Leoline' (391-392). Worlds collide here, through the juxtaposing of 'fair' and 'sire'. The strangeness, the wildness and the sexual threat of Geraldine comes into contact with the strait-laced authority of Leoline. Coleridge sets this up as a moment of tension; we do not know how he will react or how he will take the news. The earlier signs, such as the bells and the his mourning, suggest that the interaction will bring order back to the court. However, the response is radically unexpected; upon recognising Geraldine, Sir Leoline turns 'pale' (405), exclaiming how 'Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine', Geraldine's father, was a dear childhood friend; they fell out long ago, but nobody had been able to replace the other (405, 407). The story of their troubled love provides a stark contrast to the expected response; it seems that what occurred during the witching hour has interfered with the status quo, disrupted the order of things, as they now unfold in the daylight.

This is first demonstrated through the ambiguity within Leoline and Roland's relationship. Admittedly, it is difficult to ascertain Leoline's true feelings towards Roland, who demonstrates both subdued, and less-so, sexual longing. Alongside this, he implies innocent friendship, deeply emotional affectation and emphatic self-reflection. Firstly, the description of the 'youthful Lord' (429) implies that he is thinking of Lord Roland in childhood but could also suggest his perception of Lord Roland as looking 'youthful' or handsome. The phrase 'came back upon his heart again' (430) is loaded with desire, suggesting that this relationship has occupied his affections throughout his life; this phrase could simultaneously be entirely pure and sexless, the phrase 'upon his heart' only referring to his care for his friend. There are other phrases that suggest this too, such as 'best Brother' (417) or 'Friends in Youth' (408).

⁵¹ Butler, 'Performative Acts', p. 526.

Nonetheless, the relationship is also characterised by multiple symbols of clandestine sexual desire, such as 'swell'd high with Rage', 'murmuring', 'whispering Tongues' and 'hollow Heart' (431, 406, 409, 420). Yet the sexual implications are less poignant than the emotional ones; Leoline's desire to reconnect with Roland is sudden and emotional, declaring that he 'swore by the wounds in Jesu's side' (433) that he would avenge Geraldine's attack. He also states that 'to be wroth with One we love / Does work like madness in the Brain' (412-413). However, the strength and passion of his relationship as he discusses it now, is in clear contrast with the metaphor he uses to describe the aftermath of their disagreement; he describes them as 'like Cliffs which had been rent asunder' (422). The image of the 'cliffs', and the argument itself characterised as a 'dreary Sea' (423) which 'neither Heat, nor Frost, nor Thunder... shall wholly do away' (424-435) characterises the men as cold and unmovable. Nonetheless, their masculine stoicism has been dissolved: with the introduction of Geraldine, Leoline softens.

Leoline's façade of ever-mourning husband is shattered as he reveals his true affection for Roland and his fascination for Geraldine, deeming her a 'thing divine' (475), and forgetting his grief. However, I find his 'seduction' of Roland more intriguing; he effectively woos Roland, encouraging Bracy to play 'your music so sweet' as he approaches Roland's castle, and to flex his power by asking Roland to anticipate Leoline's own approach 'With all his numerous array / White with their panting palfreys' foam' (509-510). There is undoubtedly a deeply erotic and sexually demonstrative undertone here; 'panting', 'foam', 'numerous'? Coupled with the fact that he asks Bracy to bring 'the youth whom thou lov'st best' (487) presenting Roland with a loving same-sex union on which to project their own bond – the whole performance is soaked in charm and seduction. So, instead of becoming frustrated with Christabel for hiding Geraldine, Leoline demonstrates emotional fragility. Rather than fearing that Christabel has been sexually sinful, he is distracted by Geraldine's presence, reminding him powerfully of Roland. Ideally, this is Coleridge's own reflection of what Butler calls 'an imperative to acknowledge the existing complexity of gender... and to bring that complexity into a dramatic cultural interplay without punitive consequences.'⁵² He allows the characters their complexity, and refuses to punish it in the way one might imagine. The punishment in itself resists the homogenous framework; the consequences of Christabel's exploration are not 'punitive' as Butler anticipates, but rather open up further deviation from the norm.

The embrace between Sir Leoline and Geraldine leads Christabel to another panic. Leoline 'fondly in his Arms he took / Fair Geraldine' (448-449), and Geraldine is happy to oblige, 'prolonging it with Joyous Look' (450). It is this 'joyous look' that Christabel responds to, with a 'vision of Fear, the Touch and Pain', causing her to '[shrink] and shudder' (453-454). The reason for her response is that Christabel is seeing her mother's replacement, but it is unclear

⁵² Butler, 'Performative Acts', p. 530.

whether by her own sexual partner or by her father's close male companion, mirrored in Geraldine's body.⁵³ Christabel experiences a physical parallel to the witching hour itself, the crossing over between the world of dreams and reality, in which Sir Leoline represents Christabel's concrete existence and Geraldine her dreams, to which Christabel recoils and panics, as it entirely complicates her understanding of herself and those around her. Christabel's homosexual desire for Geraldine results in her jealousy, Sir Leoline's same for Lord Roland results in her embarrassment, and the sexualised mother role that Geraldine plays is further complicated in her embrace with Leoline, essentially creating an incestuous love-triangle, not to mention the guilt and shame that Christabel feels at betraying her mother. All of these things are triggered by the events of the night before; this is indeed 'witchery by daylight'.

Ignoring Christabel's panic, Sir Leoline creates a plan to reunite Geraldine with her father; by doing so, he grounds Geraldine within the familiar and local, which is to Christabel more terror-inducing than the night itself and all its possibilities. By asking Bracy to go with another page to Lord Roland, and tell him that Geraldine is safe 'in Langdale hall!' (502), Leoline invites more people in—'He bids thee come without delay... And take thy lovely daughter home' (505-507)—and thus undoing the sense of excitement of the night. In fact, by seeing it as an opportunity to reunite with his friend—I will say, / That I repent me of the day / When I spake words of fierce disdain / To Roland de Vaux of 'Tryermaine' (511-514)—Leoline commandeers the relationship between Geraldine and Christabel as his own, imposing his own authority on the events and thus removing the veil of disguise and mystery, but yet unconsciously taking steps towards disruption of the heterosexuality that rules the court. Bracy's dream is another indicator of this potential disruption. He sees Christabel as a dove—'call'st by thy own Daughter's Name' (531-533)—making fearful sounds, and follows it; he finds it on the ground, and goes to rescue it—discovering that there is a green snake 'coiled around its wings and neck'; 'Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!' (550-554).

The dream has haunted him, and he has vowed to ensure that the forest is free of evil or 'unholy' (563). Repeatedly, he states this intention, to 'clear yon Wood from Thing unblest' (529), 'Lest aught unholy loiter there' (363). I am less concerned with Geraldine and Christabel as the dove and snake, and more interested in Bracy's ongoing anxiety about the danger that lingers in the forest. This is because Geraldine's appearance is not truly affecting Christabel herself; the spell upon her means she cannot remember what happened at night. The real panic that Bracy refers, though without his knowledge, to is the connection between Leoline and Roland, that Geraldine will cause. For example, on hearing this dream, Sir Leoline responds: 'Thy sire and I will crush the snake!' (571). Geraldine accepts this declaration, turns to Christabel, and gives her the 'snake's small eye' (583). It is the union of the two men, 'Thy sire

⁵³ It might be argued that Sir Leoline pictures Lord Roland when he embraces Geraldine; his previous affection shown for this man might instil panic in Christabel, as she realises that he is thinking of Lord Roland in a way reserved for her mother.

and I', that pleases her. If the snake is Geraldine, she has gained the upper-hand as Sir Leoline remains ignorant of this fact. The on-surface disruption to order has moved beyond the fog of night, and now has genuine practical consequences; Roland cannot replace a dead wife, but Geraldine has intervened to make this happen. By targeting Christabel only, with the 'Snake's small Eye', 'shrunk up' in her face 'somewhat of Malice, and more of Dread', Geraldine identifies the threat with herself, distracting Christabel from the more practical threat that exists in front of her (583-586).

Having recovered from her 'dizzy Trance' (589), Christabel rendered speechless as she is 'O'er mastered by the mighty Spell' (619-621). Geraldine's plan has worked; Christabel cannot speak against her father, and he eventually disregards her for wanting to banish Geraldine from the castle. He is hurt by her response – 'His heart was cleft with pain and rage' (640) – feeling betrayed by Christabel, who would send Geraldine away, and repeats his request that Bracy should go to Lord Roland. He turns from Christabel, and takes Geraldine by the hand; 'turning from his own sweet Maid, / ... Led forth the Lady, Geraldine!' (653-655). So, Bracy continues to go and collect Roland, implying that the reunion would take place and Roland would effectively replace Christabel's mother. Sir Leoline declares: 'Yet ne'er found I a friend again' (517), indicating that the relationship with his wife was never satisfactory to replace Roland. So, one mode of rebellion is replaced by another. There is no way by which the fallout of the events of Part I and Part II can result in something socially acceptable; Coleridge's choice to avoid creating an ending ensures this, implying that one act of rebellion will only lead to another, and so on. He does not have to deal with the moral panic of aligning himself with a certain outcome. Ironically, this is perhaps the poem's most dangerous threat—not the replacing of Christabel's mother by Roland, not the reunion of two male lovers, not Christabel's seduction or Geraldine's dark power, but the inconclusive ending of the poem that removes any adequate punishment or victory. There is no moral conclusion or lesson to be taught, because no individual character rises above the rest. While Leoline and Geraldine appear to have teamed up and the poem seems to be leading in the direction of their reunion, this is never made clear. Coleridge's intention does not seem to be to side with any particular individual, but rather to explore the effect of possibility and potential upon the human psyche, when restriction is removed.

Throughout 'Christabel', Coleridge never consolidates any sexual relationship. Rather, he opens up the possibility of homosexual encounters, both between Christabel and Geraldine, and Leoline and Roland. By employing the witching hour, enforcing a fantastical setting, and one which refuses to settle formally into the ballad tradition while simultaneously employing its performed and emphasised rhythms, and coupling this with the exchanges of power that move back and forth between the women, (stemming from the absence of Christabel's mother, who may represent the heteronormativity that Christabel fears, on the eve of her marriage), Coleridge creates a hazy, unstable world in which nothing can be fully determined, and

thus the social order is threatened. This poem is a fundamental example of Romantic writing decoding constructed gender and sexual identities, and how individual choices of metre, genre, and form contribute to that deconstruction. 'Christabel' provides an important gateway into understanding how writers were resisting categorisation, representing women in positions of power and masculinity, feminising and eroticising homosocial relationships, and removing the locus of legally recognised heterosexuality to do so.