

A Sight to Tell?

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Through the female characters in *Christabel*, Samuel Tyler Coleridge makes visible female homoeroticism. Approaching such eroticism in a rather subtle manner, Coleridge successfully acknowledges the existence of it, but is effective in asserting an end to such eroticism by the female participants before the end of the poem by requiring a return to the culturally *normal* hetero-eroticism. While Coleridge acknowledges the distress of the return, he nonetheless, forces the return.

Accepted by culture as the *other, negative, and unnatural* form of erotic love, homoeroticism in Early Modern England was well regulated by civil law and religious doctrines. But such regulations were concerned primarily with erotic love between men, rather than that between women. In their discussion on the use of civil laws to regulate homoeroticism in England, Alison Oram and Ann Marie Turnbull wrote of a “gender difference” that was “manifested in the legal treatment of homosexuality” in that “sexual activities between men had repeatedly been debated and dealt with punitively,” while “sex between women had been given scant attention” (Orma & Turnbull 155). Unlike the forced emergence of male homoerotic regulations, Oram and Turnball held that erotic love between women had “largely been denied” (Orma & Turnbull 156). Agreeing with their assessment, Nicholas Edsall described female homoeroticism as “invisible” in his history of homosexuality in western cultures (Edsall 28). Later in his history, Edsall wrote that such invisibility did not infer that the English “accepted or condoned” such behavior, but felt that it was impossible behavior given the dominantly held belief that “women responded to sexual stimulation from the male, and from that it followed that whatever two women might do together, they could not have real sex” (Edsall 224-5). To

Edsall and others like him, homoerotic sex between women in eighteenth and nineteenth century England was invisible because it was “unthinkable” (Edsall 225).

Modern critics have refuted this claim of female homoerotic invisibility, contending that the invisibility was not a product of the unthinkable, but more so a refusal of those who lived in Early Modern England to think about what was indeed visible. One such critic, Elizabeth Suzan Wahl, held that “intimacy” between women was visible and that the “erotic possibilities” of them should not be denied (Wahl 5). Wahl theorized that “lesbianism...existed as a...sexual practice across boundaries of time, culture, and class” (Wahl 5) and can be observed through a review of literary works, including those of Early Modern England. While lesbianism may be found in literary works, Wahl noted that such inclusions were “culturally and historically inflected” to the “point where they are difficult for the modern scholar to recognize them [lesbians] as such” (Wahl 5). Like Wahl, Valerie Traub argued in favor of lesbian visibility in Early Modern England’s literature: “early modern England witnessed a *renaissance* of representations of female homoerotic desire” (Traub 7). This renaissance took what was “once considered so unlikely as to be routinely denied” and made it a subtle part of English culture through a “rise” in the “representation” of it in the literature of the day (Traub 278). Like Wahl, Traub felt that the representation of female homoeroticism was also subject to the dominant “social conventions” in that any act that was perceived to be a threat to the dominant social order secured by such conventions was met with resistance. While female homoeroticism was unthought-of in the past, the rise of it by the end of the eighteenth century caused such a threat.

In his discussion on same sex erotic love, Thomas Laquer noted that the love between same sexed individuals becomes “perverse, diseased, and wholly disgusting” when the “honor and status” of the social order is “at stake” (Laquer 53). He added that the erotic love between women was not recorded extensively in the past because there lacked any “immediate social and political consequences” to that love (Laquer 53). By the end of the eighteenth century, female homoeroticism had caused such a concern in that the overall cultural realization that women could sexual please other women widened and led to a growing fear that women would “choose to avoid marriage and refuse to participate in a reproductive economy” (Wahl 19). With this perception of a threat to the social order by female homoeroticism, the dominant cultural authority extended the ideas of *unnatural, negative, and wrong* to such erotic love. Female homoeroticism turned from an unthinkable *possibility* to an actuality. When the threat to the dominant patriarchal order surfaced, the threat was subdued: “By the turn of the eighteenth century, women as same-sex erotic proclivities were certainly deemed unnatural” but were also “not judged...to be outside of nature” (Traub 323). In other words, female homoeroticism was not necessarily *as* unnatural as male homoeroticism, in that culture silently recognized the possibility of it for adolescent females, but simultaneously felt that they were to “naturally, developmentally, and without any visible effort” move from those “intimacies with girlhood friends to marriage with men” (Traub 281).

Lesbian relations were *normal* when young, but *unnatural* when older. Traub noted that this recognition of lesbian relations when young was evident through works of literature, but those same works were also used as remind those females of the unnaturalness of lesbian relations when older. Such works were effective in making

apparent the existence of female homoeroticism, but likewise presented patterns of thought which questioned female homoeroticism beyond adolescent years. Homoerotic love beyond “girlhood” was a threat to the social order, and was thus deemed *unnatural* by that very same order, and works of literature, such as *Christabel* proved effective in encouraging women who appreciated such love to return to that which culture perceived as natural and normal—erotic love between the opposite sexes (Traub 281). Through these works, women like Christabel and Geraldine were “told” to move from “intimacies with girlhood friends to marriage with men” (Traub 281). Women had to put aside their erotic desires for the same sex to conform to that which they were told was natural, hence the positive and correct type of erotic love. Victim to indoctrination of what was perceived as natural, right, and positive, women who partook in homoeroticism were constantly forced into (after adolescents) what Traub called a realization that the “unnaturalness” of the desire meant “the fulfillment [of that desire] was impossible” (Traub 281). With that, many literary characters often cried, questioned, and even “appealed to nature for help” (Traub 280).

Through the female characters Christabel and Geraldine, Samuel Tyler Coleridge made apparent the existence of erotic love between the two, but forced an end to that love by the end of the poem. The two female characters met, made love, and were forced apart with the realization that the love that they felt was not possible—a realization that brought great distress on the characters.

The poem first introduces Christabel, the main female character who wanders in into the woods in the middle of the night because of an inability to sleep due to dreams of her “betrothed knight” that was far from her—dreams that “made her moan and leap”

(Coleridge, lines 28-30). Note Coleridge's use of the signifier "betrothed" in his description of the current status of the relationship between Christabel and the knight. They are not yet man and wife, but instead "engaged for marriage" or better put, "pledged" to each other (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

When wandering in the woods thinking of and praying for the knight to whom she is *to be* married to, Christabel is disturbed by a noise which "moan'd as near, as near can be" (Coleridge, line 41). Following the noise behind a tree, Christabel finds a lady that was "damsel bright" and

Drest in a silken robe of white,
Her neck, her feet, her arms were bare,
And the jewels disorder'd in her hair.

...

A lady so richly clad as she—
Beautiful exceedingly!

(60-3; 64-5)

Christabel approaches the lady and asks why she is there. Responding in a voice which Christabel describes as "faint and sweet," the lady introduces herself as Geraldine (70) and continues in describing a horrible series of events which left her alone, tearing in the woods. She speaks of her earlier abduction by five warriors claiming that they "chok'd her cries with force and fright" and "tied her on a palfrey white" (81-2). After tying Geraldine on the palfrey, which is a "horse for ordinary riding" that is small enough for women (*OED*), Geraldine tells Christabel that the men dragged her, coming to a stop and leaving her behind where they now stand—"underneath" an "oak" tree (Coleridge, line 95). Regardless of the truth of Geraldine's story, Christabel believes it. Christabel is awaiting her own marriage to a knight, and Geraldine describes what seemingly adds to torture and possible rape by the male sex. While Geraldine does not reference any sexual

interactions with the five men, she is quite effective in describing them as distrusting and uncouth. They abduct her, torture her, choke her, tie her, and drag her. Christabel believes Geraldine and is quick to stretch “forth her hand” and comfort “fair Geraldine” (102-3). She instantly connects to her—woman to woman in a unity not only against the five men whom Geraldine had described, but also against the man that Geraldine is to marry. To Christabel, Geraldine is now her focus. She is no longer praying for her knight. She is no longer wandering the woods alone. Christabel attaches to Geraldine by distancing from men. Her thoughts are on Geraldine only, rather than her knight. A change that men themselves brought about by their actions towards Geraldine. The woman in Christabel links to the woman in Geraldine because Christabel’s perception of the whole male sex was radically altered by the actions of five men. Her attraction to the opposite sex becomes second to her attachment to the same sex—disturbing the *natural*, the perceived *truth*, and the thought *normal* that has long been a part of the culture that is Christabel.

Overcome by the horror of men in their actions towards the “fair” Geraldine, Christabel invites Geraldine to go with her to her father’s home. They will sneak into her room and rest until morning: “So to my room we’ll creep in stealth/ And you to-night must sleep with me” (116-7). Geraldine agrees to go with Christabel. Upon their arrival to Christabel’s room, they brighten the lights and “Geraldine, in wretched plight/ sank down upon the floor below” (182-3), while Christabel retrieves wine with “virtuous powers” that her “mother made...of wild flowers” (186-7). They both drink wine and slowly become intoxicated. Geraldine speaks in an “alter’d voice” and Christabel sits next to her on the floor. They continue drinking until Geraldine “stood upright” and

exposes to Christabel a body that “was most beautiful to see/ like a lady of a far countree” (218-19). The earlier attachment becomes something more. It brings about intoxication, wine, bedrooms, bodies, closeness, and recognition in Christabel that Geraldine is more than a person she found in the woods. She is “beautiful” to see and exotic like a person from far countries. The attachment against men becomes an erotic attraction to each other.

With that, Geraldine asks Christabel to “unrobe” herself, a demand to which Christabel quickly complies:

Quoth Christabel, so let it be!
 And as the lady bade, did she.
 Her gentle limbs did she undress,
 And lay down in her loveliness.
 (229-32)

Christabel returns to her bed, but like the dreams of her knight which prevented her sleep earlier, she is again faced with “many thoughts” that “mov’d to and from/ that vain it were her lids to close” (233-34). Rather than seek peace in the woods again because of her inability to sleep, Christabel alleviates her frustration by observing Geraldine: “half-way from the bed she rose/ and on her elbow did recline/ to look at the lady Geraldine” (236-8). Watching Geraldine undress, Christabel asserts an excitement at the view of her bare body, and more so at the fact that Geraldine will sleep in her bed. Geraldine is undressing. She “unbound/ the cincture from beneath her breast...her silken robe, and inner vest/ dropt to her feet, and full in view/ Behold! Her bosom and half her side” (242-6). Displaying an excitement at the full view, Christabel notes that the sight was only for dreams and is not to be told: “A sight to dream of, not to tell” (247). With every minute, the eroticism increases. The two unite against men. They drink. Christabel’s attachment

becomes stronger. The attachment becomes an attraction. The attraction increases as both undress and their naked bodies are within view. The attraction becomes erotic. Behold! Her bosom! Her naked bosom! Christabel can only dream of that bosom! Her breasts! Her naked breasts! Her body! Her naked body! Christabel can only dream of that naked body! They are sleeping together tonight! Christabel will finally sleep. Her mind will rest. She will no longer dream of her knight. Her rest is coming. Her dreams are within her sight—a sight which she can only dream of with dreams that make her “moan and leap” (28-30) all night and keep her awake, frustrated, worried, and wanting of some eroticism. Their attachment against men becomes an attraction to each other and this attraction becomes erotic as both prepare themselves for the relief that Christabel can only dream of.

The naked Geraldine slowly walks towards the naked Christabel and lies “by the maidens side” (250), taking her in her arms—touching her bosom. Christabel sits passively, taking the touch and listening to Geraldine describe the sensation of such a touch—the touch of Geraldine on the bosom of Christabel is like a touch that “worketh a spell/ which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!” (255-6). Christabel lies passive and lets Geraldine work her spell. A spell which is lord of all spells.

While references to actual sexual intercourse between Geraldine and Christabel is not candid in the terminology which Coleridge employs, one must question whether this silence is to be interpreted as evidence of his belief that female homoeroticism is an unthinkable act or a simple attempt by Coleridge to protect his honor and integrity. What is the spell that Geraldine is working on Christabel? Addressing the use of female homoeroticism by Early Modern English writers in her book Passion Between Women,

Emma Donoghue notes that writers often lack a will to directly address the question of female homoeroticism in fear of damaging perception of the public on them:

Information about lesbian existence, once heard, might quickly become a secret to be kept from others. For a woman, to admit to such knowledge could be to risk being thought immodest or having her own friendships suspected. For a man, one fear was that to pass on such knowledge, even in a spirit of condemnation, might advertise and promote lesbian culture by planting ideas in innocent female minds. That something was not stated does not mean it was not known.
(Donoghue 16)

Donoghue contends that writers, like Coleridge, were careful to protect their honor when writing about issues such as female homoeroticism. But, that does not imply that they lacked knowledge of or did not wish to write about the issue. Donoghue holds that authors did indeed address female homoeroticism but often “wrote so coyly that it is difficult to tell how much they knew, how much they were censoring and how much was tongue-in-cheek” (Donoghue 16).

In applying Donoghue’s theory to Coleridge’s *Christabel*, we must attempt to ascertain what exactly is the “spell” that Geraldine is working on Christabel. While the signifier “spell” is often associated with an astronomical experience of sorts, review of the *Oxford English Dictionary* brings to light a connotation that is far from magical. Defining a spell as a “turn of work taken by a person or a set of persons in relief of another,” the *OED* notes many literary uses of such a definition of “spell” that may have been available to Coleridge. Contemporary to his time was the use of such a definition in William Falconer’s *Universal Dictionary of the Marine*, published in 1769. Given

Coleridge's sea-fearing works, such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the possibility of his past exposure of such a definition is indeed a possibility.

Geraldine works a spell on Christabel. Christabel lies on the bed and remains passive as Geraldine touches her naked body. Geraldine promises that she will work the spell. She will relieve Christabel. She will take a turn to work Christabel. Christabel can not sleep. Her dreams keep her awake throughout the night. Her dreams make her moan and leap. She is frustrated. Her knight is far from her. Christabel can only wander the woods and pray. Her thoughts are moving "to and fro" (Coleridge, line 233) and Geraldine relieves those thoughts, those dreams by bringing them to life—by undressing in front of her, walking towards her bed, and by touching Christabel in a way that will make her utter the "lord" of all utterances. Christabel will utter the "moans" that her dreams make her utter. She will "leap" the way her dreams make her leap. But, she will do this with the spell, the relief that the naked and fair Geraldine will work on her.

Given the excitement which Christabel exemplifies at the sight of Geraldine's undressing, her return to calmness when she reclines to watch her undress, her excitement at the sight of Geraldine's naked body, Geraldine's seductive entrance into the bed with the naked Christabel, Geraldine's grabbing the naked bosom of Christabel, I contend that Coleridge implies something different. He implies the unthinkable. He implies fulfillment of female erotic desires by another female. Geraldine works Christabel. The spell that Geraldine "worketh" on Christabel is indeed the relief of Christabel's sleepless nights and the answer to the erotic desires that she experiences at the sight of the naked Geraldine. But, like his own character Christabel, Coleridge can only think of the sight that he saw—he too can never *really* tell.

The night becomes morning. The act is done. The desire is met. Christabel is awake and stares at the sleeping Geraldine. She describes the arms of Geraldine as her prison (Coleridge, line 212) in which she spent one hour. It was the hour when Geraldine worked her spell, and “had thy will” (214). Geraldine was at peace for that hour—the hour when even “the night-birds...were still” (215). But now Christabel must move away from her dream with Geraldine and awake in the reality of her own betrothal to the knight who is so far away. She is to be married. Christabel

Gathers herself from out her trance;
Her limbs relax, her countenance
Grows sad and soft, the smooth thin lids
Close o'er her eyes; and tears she sheds—
Large tears that leave the lashes bright!
(300-4)

She cries. She smiles. She cries. Christabel is compared to a “youthful hermitess” who lives in a wilderness. But, the truth remains. She is not in a wilderness. She is in her father’s home. Christabel cries. The “vision” she had was “sweet” but it is now only a vision—only a past event, only a dream (314). It is not possible and *unnatural* for the erotic love to continue and Christabel “grieves having been cursed by nature” (Traub 281).

With her realization, the bells of the town ring and the sense of wilderness in that town quickly dissipates as words such as “custom,” “law,” and “sin” are introduced. The organization, the *natural* social order begins to reorganize itself. Reality returns and the “dreams” that were “too lively” are told to rest (Coleridge, line 374). While Christabel recognizes the sin in the erotic love itself, she ponders only a moment on its sinfulness, quickly deciding to take Geraldine to meet her father. Mention of the erotic love between

Geraldine and Christabel is put aside, only to be resurrected again when Christabel notices the bosom of Geraldine: “She shrunk and shudder’d, and saw again/...again she saw that bosom old/ again she felt that bosom cold” (442; 445-6). She feels the pain, she fears the vision, the desire, the feeling, the erotic love—Christabel begins to make a hissing noise, begins to become depressed. And it is the vision of the night that makes her smile. It is that vision that comforts her (453).

Christabel still desires Geraldine and Geraldine the like. The vision was the answer to an erotic desire—it was truth and real erotic fulfillment, rather than merely a dream. Christabel is comforted only by the fulfillment of her homoerotic desire. But the desire must remain a dream for the betrothed Christabel. Overcome by the impossibility of what was once possible, she enters a “dizzy trance” (595) and falls to her father’s feet. She is to be married. The erotic love between her and Geraldine is not possible. Asking her what it is that pains her, Christabel remains silent, for she can not tell. It is an *unnatural, negative, and wrong* desire. She is to marry the knight. She must move away from this desire “naturally, developmentally, and without any visible effort” (Traub 281) or she will be chastised as being not *normal* and living in sin. Christabel can only ask her father to send Geraldine away—to take the desire away from her, force her into her *natural* desires: By my mother’s soul do I entreat/ that thou this woman send away!” (604-5).

The night before was the past. The night before was adolescence. It is to be thought of only as a dream. Today is reality for Christabel. Geraldine must leave, Christabel must marry the knight. She must conform.

Through Geraldine's working a "mighty spell" on Christabel, Coleridge makes visible the unthinkable, while protecting his own cultural honor. But, he returns to the cultural norm. He dismisses what is visible as being something that is *unnatural*, *wrong*, and *negative* and effectively returns his culture and the women of his culture to what was thought right—erotic love between opposite sexes.

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