

The Power of the Gaze/Gays: A Queer Analysis of S.T. Coleridge's *Christabel*

Samuel T. Coleridge, one of the “Big Six” poets of the British Romantic Era, is known for texts such as his 1816 poem *Christabel*. His relationship with fellow poet William Wordsworth was undoubtedly very intense and intimate. The duo collaborated on *Lyrical Ballads*, originally published in 1798. An early draft of *Christabel* was originally anticipated to be included within this collection, but ultimately was left out (Sisman). While this text is usually examined from a psychoanalytic lens, what readers typically fail to pick up on when examining *Christabel* is the occurrence of homoerotic desire. There are two relationships that display this within the text: that of Christabel and Geraldine, as well as their fathers Sir Leoline and Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine. When examining these relationships through a queer theoretical lens, it can be argued that Coleridge uses these characters as an outlet to express repressed homoerotic desire. I argue that the Queer Gaze, a concept which I have derived from Jill Soloway's idea of the Female Gaze, is important in understanding the impact of society on those who are queer, as well as how it can be recognized as one approaches a text such as Coleridge's *Christabel*.

In her 2016 TIFF Talk “On the Female Gaze”, Jill Soloway discusses her concept of the Female Gaze. The Male Gaze, a term popularized by Laura Mulvey, is essentially the way in which women are objectified by men's sexual desires. As she explains, the Male Gaze is everything that society is constantly seeing and hearing. Soloway claims that the male gaze is “everything you have ever seen”: every representation of women in the arts, literature, and media, that we are exposed to throughout our lives. For example, the shots of women in television shows and movies often focus on their features, such as their breasts or behinds. Panning, and imposing emphasis, on these regions and features are not depicting *who* these women are, but *what* they are. Throughout her presentation, Soloway shifts the conversation in

order to give an understanding of what the Female Gaze truly is. One point she clarifies about her argument is that the Female Gaze is not just the opposite of the Male Gaze, or women objectifying men with their sexual desires. Instead, Soloway explains, the Female Gaze is one of feeling and seeing. As victims of the Male Gaze, women know how it feels to lose the individualism and uniqueness that comes with individuality and identity within humanity. Instead of being seen as a person, they are turned into an object of desire. Not only this, but Soloway states that the Female Gaze also dares to return the Gaze. By doing so, these women are saying “I see you seeing me”. They no longer want to be the object. Instead, they wish to take back control and let those who have subjected them know how it feels to be objectified. To view *Christabel* through a queer gaze, then, it is important not to simply acknowledge the male gaze, but know that someone is always there, always looking.

Expanding from the Female Gaze is the Queer Gaze. Soloway mentions that even when various forms of media, such as television shows like *Game of Thrones* and *The L Word*, depict homosexuality, the way it is being portrayed and received is being tainted by the Male Gaze. Because of this, there is no perception of what a true queer experience is like. Instead, it is being fetishized. This is why the Queer Gaze carries so much significance. When examining anything with the Queer Gaze, there are always important questions in mind: What are the stakes? Will there be consequences for looking at someone this way? Do they want to be looked at in this way? Due to often being “closeted”, a term that the LGBTQ+ community uses to define the inability to openly express one’s sexuality, queer people understand what it feels like to live in a society that is constantly looking at, and often shaming, that which is the observed. Even in those moments when members of this community are not being shamed, society still often identifies this group as objects of pleasure for the straight observer, as well as a threat to the standard

social norms. An example of this is the exploitation of lesbianism, which is a wildly popular category for heterosexual viewers of pornography. While the focus of this genre of pornography depicts sexual relations between two women, that does not make it “lesbian”. To be a lesbian is more than just the sexual acts. It is the feelings, connection, and intimacy that comes with all relationships. This objectification, a product of the Male Gaze, is why the Queer Gaze is important in literary theory.

Queer Visibility in 18th Century England

Before approaching *Christabel*, it is important to distinguish the difference between homosocial and homoerotic desire that was prevalent in the 18th century. Critic Eve Sedgwick defines homosocial desire as “social bonds between persons of the same sex,” whereas homoerotic desire is defined as sexual desire between two people of the same sex. While homosocial relationships were especially common among men in the Romantic Era, homoerotic acts were punishable by law. The Buggery Act of 1533 was passed by the Parliament of England when Henry VIII held reign. This Act punished those men who partook in instances of sodomy, whether it be in private or in public, and was considered a capital offence. This act was repealed in 1821, before the end of the Romantic Era in Britain, although the final execution for buggery was not until 1836 (Huston). These homosocial and homoerotic relationships were not only exclusive to men, however.

At the time in which this text was written sex being thought of as an act of pleasure was almost exclusively limited to men, therefore the idea of two women sharing a sexual relationship could not be conceived by this society, in turn condemning its existence to silence. As Roy F. Baumeister explains in his article “Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality”, “the double standard of sexual morality has condemned certain sexual activities by women while permitting

the identical actions for men” (166). This double standard that he mentions is the reason that lesbian relationships were not being acknowledged at this time. This way of thinking therefore led people at this time to only think of homosexuality as an act possible between men. History, however, shows that Coleridge was exposed to a female homoerotic relationship during his life.

The Ladies of Llangollen, Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, were a well-known same sex couple in the 18th century. Before eloping, Butler and Ponsonby had been companions for over a decade. Eventually, as these women continued to age yet failed to get married, their families began to propose solutions to this “problem”. For Butler, this was her family encouraging her to become a nun. Ponsonby’s family, on the other hand, suggested that she accept the hand of a suitor (Bloomsbury). After much correspondence, both women coming to the decision they could no longer handle their situations, the duo disguised themselves as men and set off in the night. After a failed first attempt, the women were caught and returned to their guardians. Despite their failure, the women were later freed and fled to Wales (Telegraph). The duo wound up in Llangollen and built their home in Plas Newydd, where they were frequently visited by companions such as fellow Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and Anna Seward, the latter of which composed a sonnet and poem reflecting the visits there.

Female Gays

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler claims “[sexuality] is a mode of being disposed towards others, including the mode of fantasy, and sometimes “only” in the mode of fantasy” (33). It is important to keep in mind, however, that being queer in 18th century Britain was not the same as being queer in the world that exists today. In a world where homosexuality was punishable by law, writers could not openly write about queer relationships within their works. What they could do, however, was use fantasy to leave homoerotic messages in plain sight. Examining *Christabel*

with Butler's ideas of queerness in literature, the connection can be made that Coleridge is expressing homoerotic desire, by employing a heterosexual fantasy, to disguise this in plain sight.

The poem opens with Christabel venturing away from the castle at midnight to say a prayer in the woods. After experiencing a night full of dreams about her "betrothed knight", she wanted to pray "for the weal of her lover that's far away" (Coleridge 30). On her venture to the tree she wishes to pray under, Christabel finds a young maiden, Geraldine, who tells her of the tragic experience that has left her here. Geraldine claims she was kidnapped and left, the men saying that they would be back for her. Christabel immediately offers Geraldine refuge, saying "But we will move as in stealth, / And I beseech your courtesy, / This night, to share your couch with me" (Coleridge 120-22). While this in itself does not seem like an invitation to physical intimacy (it was not uncommon during this time for women to share a bed) it is important to examine the suggestion of gender inversion in a later stanza:

The lady sank, belike through pain,

And Christabel with might and main

Lifted her up, a weary weight,

Over the threshold of the gate (Coleridge 129-32)

This image of Christabel carrying Geraldine in her arms through the threshold is mirror to the image of a man carrying his new wife through a threshold on their wedding day. In this, Christabel is performing a masculine action. This inversion, referring to it in the sense of strange or odd, is queer. The suggestion of moving in stealth is interesting as well, when thinking of it relation to the previously mentioned idea of queer people being closeted. When queer people

cannot openly express their identity, once they develop a relationship they constantly live with the burden of having to conceal their actions from any public eye as well as fear of repercussions for their actions if caught. Though they have done nothing wrong Christabel still carries a fear that they could be punished, the same experience as those who identify as queer.

After this interaction, the ladies quietly sneak back into Christabel's chambers. There is a moment here that, when trying to identify the presence of a lesbian relationship within this poem, could easily be overlooked. Christabel says:

I have heard the grey-haired friar tell

How on her deathbed she did say

That she should hear the castle-bell,

Strike twelve upon my wedding day (Coleridge 198-201)

In the third stanza of the poem, Coleridge specifies "And she in the midnight wood will pray" (29). In "Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes: Prefiguring Modern Sexuality in S.T. Coleridge's *Christabel*", Charles Teke states "this poem points to the reshaping of a hegemonic male-centered tradition into a feminine voice" (4). Connecting this with the gender inversion of Christabel carrying Geraldine through the threshold, it can be inferred that Coleridge was foreshadowing the experience that these women would share would be like that which comes once a couple is married.

After this, Geraldine commands Christabel to "Now unrobe yourself; for I / Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie" (Coleridge 233-34). Christabel responds to Geraldine's request without any hesitation. Subsequently, Coleridge writes:

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 (235-39)

Gerladine is watching this woman Christabel, whom she has just met, undress, which begs the question, what does this gaze mean? Does it carry sexual interest or intent? We might find the answer in what she is looking at and how. In the stanza following this, the narrator allows the reader insight as to how Christabel is responding to this situation. While it is stated there is “weal and woe” throughout her brain, ultimately “half-way from the bed she rose, / And on her elbow did recline / To look at the lady Geraldine” (Coleridge 242-44). Any doubt about the effect of Geraldine looking at her this way is erased soon thereafter as we get this look into how Christabel is feeling about this situation.

Equally imperative is the way that we see Christabel return the gaze upon Geraldine. This is also an important time to acknowledge the following stanza was not the passage which occurred in the original text. As it is explained in Duncan Wu’s *Romanticism: An Anthology*, the original text describes what Geraldine is exposing to Christabel as, quite literally, monstrous. There were suggestions of scales, which dominated her side, therefore implying fear and the idea of her being some form of evil. This occurrence of othering, an experience in which one is seen as different because they do not confine to societal norms, is also prevalent to those who identify as queer. For example, often times women who present themselves as masculine are referred to as butch or dyke. Like Geraldine, due to their image differing from what society deems as acceptable, they are therefore excluded and seen as a form of threat. The stanza reads “Behold!

Her bosom and half her side – / A sight to dream of, not to tell! / O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!” (Coleridge 252-54). Clearly, we have a case of elevator eyes, and the narrator suggests that the gaze is fraught with desire, and wonder, but also shame. Of course, one could argue that this is Coleridge’s gaze and by association, the reader’s looking through Geraldine, but in effect we have a woman staring at another woman in wonder and apparent desire. After this Coleridge writes:

Ah! what a stricken look was hers!

Deep from within she seems half-way

To lift some weight with sick assay,

And eyes the maid and seeks delay (256-59).

Again, a queer reader would recognize this as the guilt that some queer people experience after their first time feeling unambiguous desire for someone of the same sex. Succeeding this, these previous desires become more than just that. Instead of simply gazing upon each other from a distance, Geraldine “lay[s] down by the maiden’s side!– / And in her arms the maid she took” (Coleridge 262-63).

From guilt stems a sense of shame, an instance of this being included within the conclusion to Part One. Whilst Geraldine “holds the maiden in her arms / Seems to slumber still and mild”, Christabel, on the other hand, is described as gathering out of a trance (Coleridge 299-300). Although the narrator says she was weeping, they also mention “and oft the while she seems to smile” (Coleridge 318). These mixed emotions after such an experience are something that, more often than not, the queer reader can relate to. In a moment that has been anticipated for so long, it

can be anticipated that joy will follow. Despite the joy, nevertheless, it does not overpower the remaining sense of guilt if anyone were to discover what happened.

Interestingly enough, in the conclusion to Part One the narrator voices their opinion on what they felt at the sight of Christabel and Geraldine in such an embrace, as well as the events leading up to it. To this point in *Christabel*, we have heard no personal voice from the narrator. The fact that they recall this scene, in fact acting as if they were witnessing it in real time, mirrors the role of the male gaze: it is always there, always watching. “Fearfully dreaming, yet I wis,” the narrator states, “Dreaming that alone, which is – / O sorrow and shame!” (Coleridge 291-93). Wis, as stated in *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, means to know well. In this, the narrator is saying they know what they witnessed was so horrific that it must have been a dream. While he refers to Christabel as “a lovely sight to see”, he titles Geraldine as “the worker of these harms” (Coleridge 279, 298). Seeing that she was the one who admittedly was the first of the two to make advances, they then label Geraldine as predatorial.

Male Gays

In Andrew Elfenbein’s *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*, he focuses on the relationship displayed between the fathers of Christabel and Geraldine, Sir Leoline and Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine, and claims that it is one of homosocial desire (194). It is not until Part Two of *Christabel* that the reader learns of Leoline’s prior relationship with Roland de Vaux. The passage reads:

And when she told her father’s name,

Why waxed Sir Leoline so pale,

Murmuring o’er the name again –

Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine? (392-395)

In this moment, Coleridge reveals to the reader that Sir Leoline has been repressing thoughts of de Vaux. What is interesting, though, is the use of the word “pale”. These men had once shared a bond so significant that Sir Leoline physically flushed at even the mention of Lord Roland de Vaux’s name. Admittedly, Elfenbein’s claim about this being only homosocial desire is accurate to this point in the text, and appears accurate with the next lines:

They parted, ne’er to meet again!

But never either found another

To free the hollow heart from paining –

They stood aloof, the scars remaining

Like cliffs which had been rent asunder.

A dreary sea now flows between,

But neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder

Shall wholly do away, I ween,

The marks of that which once hath been. (406-415)

In her article “Put to the Blush,” Susan S. Lanser begins with a quotation from Lord Byron. In this letter, when speaking of a male companion, Byron writes “Edleston and I have separated for the present, and my mind is a chaos of hope and sorrow...I certainly love him more than any human being”. This is an accurate example of how deep the bond of homosocial desire was during this era. To love a man so profoundly did not mean that it was necessarily coming from a

romantic or sexual nature. However, after examining the following lines, the idea of this interaction instead being homoerotic desire can be sufficiently supported:

Sir Leoline a moment's space
 Stood gazing on the damsel's face,
 And the youthful Lord of Tryermaine
 Came back upon his heart again.
 Oh then the Baron forgot his age,
 His noble heart swelled with rage...
 And he keened
 In the beautiful lady the child of his friend!
 And now the tears were on his face,
 And fondly in his arms he took
 Fair Geraldine... (415-437)

Critics commonly argue that this passage reflects the sexual desire that is bestowed upon those in the presence of Geraldine. What is noteworthy about this passage, when trying to pinpoint homoerotic desire, is when Leoline compares Geraldine's physical appearance to that of her father. This occurs in two instances: "...[Sir Leoline] Stood gazing on the damsel's face, / And the youthful Lord of Tryermaine / Came back upon his heart again" and "...he keened / In the beautiful lady the child of his friend." Wu, the editor of the anthology in which *Christabel* is included, also notes that the usage of "keened" can be translated to "recognized". Coleridge

includes no passages that depict Sir Leoline admiring any other features of Geraldine, and he only refers to her as “the beautiful lady” in line 434 and “thy [Lord Roland de Laux] beautiful daughter” (491). With these instances in mind, it can be concluded that Leoline’s attraction towards Geraldine occurs due to the similar physical features she shares with her father.

Although it is a heterosexual action, this embrace, the motivation behind it is homoerotic desire. Since Lord Roland de Vaux is in Tryermaine, this is the closest Leoline can get to him.

The conclusion to *Christabel* is often conceived in two ways. The first is that Sir Leoline is so bewitched by Geraldine that he is neglecting the warnings from the Bard and the pleas of his only daughter, while the other suggests he was extremely embarrassed by Christabel’s actions and the Bard defying him in front of Geraldine, in turn ruining his chances at reconciliation with Lord Roland de Vaux. Expanding on the latter conclusion reinforces the idea of homoerotic desire, seeing that if Geraldine becomes upset before her father has reached Leoline’s castle, the two men will never reconnect and mend their damaged relationship.

Conclusion

Wayne Booth conceptualized the two-fold rhetorical construct which suggests the idea of an implied author and implied reader. Whereas the implied author “designates that core norms and choice of the narrative”, the implied reader “designates the norms and values necessary for an authorially guided interpretation of a narrative” (Danvoe 57). The implied author is merely a construct, allowing the readers to idealize their own version of the author prior to reading texts. Likewise, the implied reader is the audience that the author is imagining when composing their works. In this, the author is considering how the audience will likely receive, and respond to, this text.

It is not surprising that upon *Christabel*'s original publication, seeing that homosexuality was so concealed from public view, the readers failed to recognize its presence. For today's reader, due to the acknowledgement of such relationships, this interpretation of the text is much more evident. In spite of the centuries that have passed since the publication of this poem, society today, more often than not, is not prominently accepting of homosexuality. Rather Coleridge's inclusion of queer presence in *Christabel* was intentional, or is a result of the implied reader in modern society, it is prevalent once the reader sheds the blinders of the male gaze. In a time where the number of those who identify as queer is at a steady incline, texts including characters with similar identities and experiences that they can sympathize with supplies them an identity other than just an object of society's gaze.

Works Cited

- Baumeister, Roy F. "Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality." *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp.166-203,
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/26cf/592c500860d43ceab39d21816654e53e9c6c.pdf>.
- Danove, Paul L. *The End of Mark's Story: a Methodological Study*. E.J. Brill, 1993.
- Dixon, Anne Campbell. "Wales: A Tale of Two Ladies Ahead of Their Time." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 4 May 2002,
www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/uk/wales/724170/Wales-A-tale-of-two-ladies-ahead-of-their-time.html.
- Elfenbein, Andrew. *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*. Columbia UP, 1999.
- Houston, Larry. "Homosexuality in Great Britain Section Two: Legislation." *Behavior, and Not a Person*, 21 Mar. 2017, www.banap.net/spip.php?article156.
- "Llangollen, The Ladies of." *The Bloomsbury Dictionary of English Literature*, edited by Marion Wynne-Davies, Bloomsbury, 2nd edition, 1997. *Credo Reference*,
https://marshall.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/brit/l/llangollen_the_ladies_of/0?institutionId=3309.
- Lanser, Susan S. "'Put to the Blush': Romantic Irregularities and Sapphic Tropes." *Romantic Circles*, University of Maryland, 01 Jan 2006.
- Sisman, Adam. *The Friendship: Wordsworth and Coleridge*. Penguin Books, 2008.

Soloway, Jill. *On the Female Gaze*. *YouTube*, TIFF Talks, 11 Sept. 2016,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I.

Sutherland, Sherman. *Understanding Literary Theory*. Sabino Falls Publishing, 2016.

Teke, Charles N. "Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes: Prefiguring Modern Sexuality in S.T.

Coleridge's *Christabel*." *ResearchGate*, Jan. 2008,

www.researchgate.net/profile/Charles_Teke/publication/259977819_Deconstructing_Gender_Stereotypes_Prefiguring_Modern_Sexuality_in_S_T_Coleridge's_'Christabel'/links/53f6f5e70cf2888a74975c39/Deconstructing-Gender-Stereotypes-Prefiguring-Modern-Sexuality-in-S-T-Coleridges-Christabel.pdf.