



**HAL**  
open science

# Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes: Prefiguring Modern Sexuality in S.T. Coleridge's "Christabel" (1797-1800)

Charles Ngiewith Teke

► **To cite this version:**

Charles Ngiewith Teke. Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes: Prefiguring Modern Sexuality in S.T. Coleridge's "Christabel" (1797-1800). *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2008, *Dilemmas*, 30, pp.9-24. hal-02343091

**HAL Id: hal-02343091**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02343091>**

Submitted on 1 Nov 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## ***Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes: Prefiguring Modern Sexuality in S.T. Coleridge's "Christabel" (1797-1800)***

This essay grapples with a lesbian reading of Coleridge's "Christabel." This modern perspective with regard to gender differentiation and sexuality shows that the poem deconstructs the heterosexist culture that considers homosexuality as a psycho-somatic disorder and socially unacceptable. By gender we are generally referring to the social and cultural distinctions between men and women. Sexuality is seen from the perspective of eroticism, that is, desires or practices which have an erotic significance. It is connected with, but distinguished from sex, which refers to the biological distinction between men and women and the activity associated with sexual intercourse. One of the main questions here will be to know if the use of gender to describe sexual behaviour guarantees clarity of definition, and if same-sex relations are necessarily equal to gender infraction.

This poem has continued to impose its enigma on criticism. The present investigation is therefore not a finite statement on reading and interpreting the poem, nor is it an altogether new approach to understanding the main arguments. But the reading is certainly innovative within the paradigmatic stance adopted in the analysis proposed. The poem is irresistible to questions on gender and sexual identification and orientation. Most of the readings of the poem, as indicated in this study, have been based on heterocentrism, psychoanalysis and Deconstruction.

It should be noted that "Christabel" hardly received positive appreciation when it was published and it also looks likely that later criticism was inspired from the initial reactions in Coleridge's time. William Wordsworth, William Hazlitt, Lord Byron and Thomas Moore did not at all provide any favourable reading to the poem. *The Edinburgh Review*, *The Quarterly* and *Examiner* only helped in aggravating the situation. Most of the views about the poem centred on its structure,

considered incoherent and incongruous and problematically incomplete. The conventional notions of evil and good, captured in the nightmarish and "obscene sexuality" (its implicit lesbian and pornographic atmosphere) of the poem was not left uncommented. They were all considered as damaging to the poem; if at all it were even to be taken as successful. Later critics like G. W. Knight, John Beer, Kathleen Wheeler, Karen Swann and Ash Tekinay have followed similar trends of early criticism. G. W. Knight interprets the nightmarish experiences of Christabel under Geraldine's spell, the instances of horror which are intensified by the recurrent serpent-image in Part Two as an expression of fear of some nameless obscenity that permeates the poem. He argues further that the implied erotic and sexual nature of the poem is perverse and horrifying, representing the hellish side of human experience.

Ash Tekinay perceives the poem in the same vein as Knight. He contends that "Christabel" transcribes Coleridge's fear and anxiety about a chaotic and ambivalent universe. Christabel and Geraldine represent innocence and evil respectively (2). Universal benevolence is absent since the cosmic presence of evil embodied in Geraldine prevails and triumphs. Tekinay's interpretation of the erotic and sexual in the guise of lesbianism falls within the framework of unbearable evil and horror.

Kathleen Wheeler discusses the poem from a deconstructionist perspective. She asserts that the poem leads to serious difficulties in establishing meaning. The narrative, she accentuates, undermines any authoritative meaning and the reader is confronted "with his own reductive, moralising habits by saturating the narrative voice in a double reflection with ambiguities, avowals, disavowals, questionings, uncertainties" (90). She continues that the introduction of Bracy and his unfinished and desperately ambiguous dream only complicate the poem. She is of the conviction that the two rival interpretations of this dream as to who of the two girls represents good and evil, reflect the paradox of the poem as a whole, and the unfinished nature of the poem is also a structural problem that is added to the undermining of narrative authority and the ambiguity of its core-content.

John Beer reiterates Wheeler's contentions, highlighting the deconstructionist poetics of fragmentation and irony. To him, the unfinished nature of most Romantic poems is an extended metaphor of fragmentariness in meaning (237). "Christabel" is one of the poems that display ambiguity, irony and undecidability. Beer concludes that no optimistic interpretation of Coleridge can be said to be authoritative or plausible.

The most remarkable observation with these critics is that they do not really focus on the question of sexuality, unless in certain cases where it is related with evil and obscenity. But this poem points to the reshaping of a hegemonic male-centred tradition into a feminine voice. The reason may be obvious. The patriarchal and phallogentric mentality has often presented the male as determining gender roles, both male and female. The question of challenging stereotypes therefore reactivates the modern debate concerning gender representations and sex-roles against the background of traditional or stereotypical notions. The expression sex-roles sounds slippery, but can be interpreted as the behaviour of partners in sexual consummation, whether in heterosexual or homosexual relationships, and also as the male and female distinctions that are attributed to individuals by culture.

Stereotypes are either negative or positive attributes that are given to individuals or groups, and at times with a strain of exaggeration, false prediction and false generalisation. The observation, differentiation, identification and categorisation of individuals, groups of people, or even societies as fixed or inflexible images (for instance with regard to race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, national identity), do not usually take into consideration the complexity of exceptionalism and the multidimensional character of attributes. Prejudices and biased considerations have always led to false assumptions, necessitating, at times, misunderstanding. It becomes very problematic, for example, to simply or reductively judge someone based on a stereotype without proper knowledge of facts pertaining to the uniqueness or distinctive features he/she has that may not adhere to the stereotype. While stereotypes may be accurate and even necessary, there should be allowance or space for complexity and flexibility. That is, they

should not be reductively seen as absolutes, but as dynamic and modifiable. Some undesirable, damaging or dehumanising stereotypes may even be completely challenged and, if possible, wiped out.

Gender stereotypes are a specifically complicated issue that this work cannot satisfactorily handle, given that it focuses on the dimension of maleness and femaleness with regard to eroticism and sexuality as portrayed and interpreted in literature. It will therefore focus on the central notions that have traditionally shaped the concept, and show how moving away from their created centre gives the opportunity to re-define and re-conceptualise the notion in a modern mind-set. In fact, gender stereotypes bring into the question differential sex-roles with regard to the complexity of heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality and transsexuality. Gender has had such a huge influence on sexual behaviour that the appropriate answers as to what is masculinity or femininity are not always easy to come by, given the variety and at times irreconcilable clash of opinions.<sup>1</sup>

While all four stated orientations are not new to humanity, convention has dominantly favoured the first, seeing the man as masculine and the woman as feminine. Appropriate sexual behaviour has to be based on such stereotypical categorisation, and most of what characterises the remaining three has always been very problematic, even if accepted. But as already stated strict stereotypical attributions can be very unfavourable and unnecessarily biased, especially when an individual is considered as acting contrary to the gender and/or sex-role which they have been attributed. Not every individual can be

---

<sup>1</sup> Most criticism related to this section is based on Romantic studies, with the background of previous views, that is, seventeenth and eighteenth century gender and feminist views. They include: Marilyn Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (1996), Sonia Hofkosh, "The Writer's Ravishment: Women and the Romantic Writer" (1988), George Haggarty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (1999) and Andrew Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (1999). Haggarty's introduction for instance tackles the very sophisticated understanding of different sexualities. The inherent complexity of sexuality, he contends, leads to several critical questions, How should it be called? Queer studies? Queer theory? Lesbian and Gay studies? Sexuality studies? Upon whom to focus? Homosexuals? Gay men and Lesbians? Queers? Sodomites? Sapphists?

a representative of a group. So the question of what we can call a metonymic function of an individual sounds unfairly reductive. The issue of differential sex-roles in the specific discourse of English Romanticism is what will enable our understanding of stereotypes and how Coleridge's creative imagination and hetero-lesbian consciousness tackle the problematic in "Christabel."

If we closely examine some of the extant literature on this poem since it was written, we realise that most interpretative stances are somehow connected with the problem of conventional and stereotypical orientation. Lesbianism is generally conceived as female homosexuality, which, like its gay counterpart, is dichotomously regarded as a normal way of life, or as a psychosocial disorder or psychiatric distortion. The term however is very inclusive, having diverse discourses, because there are female relationships which are homosexual without a sexual dimension.<sup>2</sup> It is not a new sexual phenomenon, nor was it unknown in Coleridge's time. But there has been an evolution in the apprehension of the term since Coleridge's time, and as we shall see, Coleridge's text does not treat the concept within the meaning of the time the text was composed, justifying the question of prefiguring and futurity. The resistance to see the poem positively as an expression of sexual freedom and orientation may be a result of societal imprint on the basic sex-types into which males and females must fit themselves. It becomes easy to say that the homosexual undertones of the poem are a delineation of evil as Knight and Tekinay would assert, or to dismiss the poem's worth on deconstructive grounds as Wheeler and Beer do.

---

<sup>2</sup> For further reading see general works on lesbian theories like Bettie Worsor, *The Lesbian Myth* (1974). In fact, she is not concerned only with theory, but addresses literature as well, Chapter Six "Lesbianism in Literature" (190 – 256). David H. Rosen's *Lesbianism: A Study of Female Homosexuality* (1974) also provides an insightful reading to lesbian theory. See particularly Part Three, "Female Homosexuality as a Way of Life" (65 – 78). Here he tries to debunk the myth that has seen lesbianism as an abnormal, deviant or pathological problem. There is also Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) and Susan Watkins's *Twentieth Century Women Novelists: Feminist Theory into Practice* (2001). She discusses "Lesbianism Feminism and Queer Theory" (146-164).

Karen Swann, from a typical stereotypical perspective in "Literary Gentlemen and Lovely Ladies: The Debate on the Character of *Christabel*" (1993), asserts that the greatest scandal of the poem is that Geraldine is a woman. Such a stereotypical critical view, against the background of what Adrienne Rich calls compulsory heterosexuality, brings in the very important questions as to whether same-sex practice is a betrayal of gender role, or an overlooked issue in stereotypical categorisation. Another question is whether sex differentiation and orientation are simply a biologically or culturally or religiously determined issue, or whether it is the physical feature or an interiority characteristic of an individual that necessarily determines their sexual feelings. All these questions can help in the understanding of the reading we propose here.

"*Christabel*" is certainly not a reposition of the myth of masculine self-possession, and should not be seen as having a specifically targeted gender audience. Its presentation of same-sex eroticism and or sexuality is another dimension in which Coleridge portrays and into which he translates the female image. So it is neither self-referential nor self-representational, it neither betrays nor veils any facet about Coleridge's life in this direction. But it is socially contextualised, and it is clear that modern readings and interpretations will largely vary in terms of the sexual orientation of the reader. That Coleridge, a heterosexual, was interested in a lesbian oriented story shows the complexity of his imaginative engagement in different fields of experience. In fact, he is concerned with another unavoidable, even if considered disturbing psychosomatic reality about human sexuality. We can thus say that the Coleridgean imagination is engaged in a constructive deconstruction of hitherto uncritically received patterns, affirming the previously held view that he is decentring male chauvinism and heterosexism in his imaging of the woman.

Andrew Elfenbein's *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (1999), to which this essay is indebted, has carefully pointed out the different conceptions of lesbianism prior to Coleridge's

time.<sup>3</sup> In the section dedicated to Coleridge, "A Sight to Dream of, Not to Tell: Christabel, Pornography, and Genius" (177-202), Elfenbein holds that Coleridge unyokes lesbianism from its patriarchal context, for he does not really represent a heterosexual background. The traditional conception of lesbianism had always seen it as attached to a heterosexual framework, since lesbian representations always showed the insertion of a hidden male, not indifferent to eroticised females. He is therefore of the strong conviction that:

Christabel, for the first time, made lesbianism sublime. What had been a mildly amusing or shocking topic became a matter of almost sacred mystery. In Christabel, sex between women loses the characteristic corporeality of eighteenth-century representation. Instead, a black space in the text marks an event so burdened with sublime horror that it cannot even be spoken. Like a cultic rite that remains unknown only to initiates, lesbianism in Christabel points to mysteries forbidden to ordinary mortals. (177)

Though Elfenbein associates lesbianism with the conventional concept of genius and the sublime purification of art, asserting that the poem assumes an aesthetic autonomy, he provides a modern background to interpreting the poem. It is this background that inspires the need to attempt an interpretation of the poem as a challenge to

---

<sup>3</sup> Elfenbein uses extant literary works to contend that they serve as an unacknowledged background to Coleridge's revisionist attitude to eighteenth-century lesbian representations. The obscene works that he holds to have inspired Coleridge include M. G. Lewis, *The Castle Spectre* (a gothic drama), Bishop Percy, "Sir Gauline" (a ballad), *The Frisky Songster, Being a Select Choice of Such Songs, as are Distinguished for their Jollity, High Taste and Humour*, and above two hundred *Toasts and Sentiments of the most Delicious Order* (a collection of obscene songs, two important ones being "The Dispute" and "The Crab-Tree"). The critic also holds that Coleridge must have read "Christabess," published by John Duncombe. Providing textual detail with "The Dispute" and "The Crab-Tree," Elfenbein argues that they are set in a heterosexual atmosphere because the ladies involved here undress themselves, their defined intention being to determine who would please a man's sexual desire, and for the erotic excitation of a gazing male respectively. So the scenes are not strictly same-sex consummation, but the all-female company suggests lesbian undertones.



stereotypical sexual concerns, and to re-examine Coleridge's productive imagination.

In *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (1996) Marilyn Farwell advances a contention that can set the pace for our analysis of the erotic and lesbian implications inherent in "Christabel":

Traditional lesbian theory treats the lesbian narrative as a text determined by the shared experience among identifiable lesbian authors, readers, and characters and treats narrative itself as a relatively neutral tool into which lesbians can be written; postmodernism treats lesbian as a fluid and unstable term and narratives as a powerful if not closed ideological system into which lesbians enter only to be entangled in a heterosexual, male story. (5)

Farwell's argument is very delicate, but she clearly distinguishes between lesbian narrative and narrative itself. But it would appear that she inverts or rather complicates the understanding of the relationship between lesbianism and literary representations. She is very clear with her categorisation of lesbian authors, readers and characters, that is, whether they are themselves lesbians or not. Any person with interest in lesbian theory or fiction can fit her categorisation, depending on whether he/she is a writer or a reader. She therefore grapples not only with lesbian writers, but also with non-lesbian writers whose writings treat lesbian themes. The second part of her assertion, referring to postmodernism's favouring of text and treating lesbianism as fluid, furthers the depth and complexity of the debate that cannot be pursued here. This notwithstanding, one of her main arguments that a given narrative must disrupt, historically, conventional heterosexual master plotting in order to qualify as lesbian, is important in the framework of the argument here. We have already pointed out the fact that Coleridge is heterosexist, though his poem delineates a lesbian atmosphere, and reading the poem as a text from a modern perspective as proposed here, does not see lesbian representation as a fluid, but as a seriously treated issue that does not fall into or is entangled in a heterosexual story.

There is no doubt that Part Two of the poem involves a male narrative, but it is a male narrative that is more of a flashback and/or an

accompaniment to a homosexual female story. Most interesting is also the nature of the bond between Sir Leoline and Lord Roland. They have children, no doubt, but it can be suggested that they once shared a kind of psychological and homo-social bond, if not physical homosexual relationship. The poem can therefore be interpreted as a struggle to resist and efface signs of phallic male power, to use Elfenbein's words, or to disrupt conventional heterosexual master plotting from Farwell's perspective. In fact, the all-female encounter in Part One is clearly non-heterosexist in nature, and the lasting bond between the two fathers does not look heterosexual. In what follows, we are going to address the basic issues here with a series of questions and attempt at answers to demonstrate Coleridge's presentation of lesbianism.

The events in the poem begin at midnight, and the first question is what should Christabel be doing out at such a time in the woods. Does she really represent good as conventional readings attest? If Geraldine on the other hand is evil, why is she attributed qualities pertaining to good? Does Coleridge implicitly or explicitly answer all the questions that he poses? Does the wine that awakens Geraldine's erotic and sexual desires represent evil, or is her act actually diabolical or a repository transgression of sex-roles? Does Christabel's reaction to Geraldine's dominant and overpowering nature prove her innocence? What are the implications of Bracy's story, and how can we interpret it through dream theory? Is Sir Leoline to blame for his bitter attitude towards his daughter? What does the unexplained gap in the poem signify, and how can we interpret the poem's open-ended nature with regard to the argument?

We cannot really say whether Christabel is definitely innocent or not, for she remains mysterious. But her being outside at midnight does not stand favourably as a sign of innocence. She is concerned with a kind of ritual performance, which she could as well undertake in the chapel in her father's castle. The attributes of Geraldine only complicate the matter. Her description does not portray her as evil incarnate, unless her good qualities are a veiled expression of her so-called evil and the evil and sinister atmosphere she perpetuates. All through the poem, the poet does not seem to be concerned with evil

per se. Rather; interpretation has created the myth of evil as the most inherent issue of the poem. We have the following qualities, "A lady so richly clad as she – / Beautiful exceedingly!" (L. 67-68), "And her voice was sweet and faint" (L. 72), "Bright dame" (L. 106), "She was most beautiful to see" (L. 224), "Nay, fairer yet! and yet more fair!" (L. 374), and "Yet he, who saw this Geraldine, / Had deemed her a divine thing" (L. 474-75). These are not qualities to be simply dismissed because of her behaviour towards Christabel. In fact, they point to a voluptuousness of Geraldine, which connects with the erotic and sexual urges that push her to consume them with Christabel.

One of the unanswered questions that the speaker poses further helps to understand the nature of Geraldine, "And what can ail the mastiff bitch? ... / For what can ail the mastiff bitch?" (L. 149; 153). It may sound too reductive to simply say that the old bitch "an angry moan did make" because Geraldine embodies evil. Dogs usually react like this to people with whom they are not familiar. It can be argued that this may as well be the case of the scene. The question of the wine and Geraldine's supposed strange behaviour is very central in the lesbian reading. Christabel associates the cordial wine with her mother and Geraldine's reaction is captivating:

And will your mother pity me,  
Who am a maiden most forlorn?  
Christabel answered – Woe is me!  
She died the hour that I was born.  
I have heard the grey-haired friar tell,  
How on her death-bed she did say,  
That she should hear the castle-bell  
Strike twelve upon my wedding day.  
O mother dear! that thou wert here!  
I would, said Geraldine, she were!  
But soon with altered voice, she said –  
'Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!  
I have power to bid thee flee.'  
(L.194-206)

The questions that immediately follow are very intriguing, "Alas! what ails poor Geraldine? / Why stares she with unsettled eye? / Can she the bodiless dead espy?" (L. 207-09). We can add ours, why is Geraldine so disturbed with the mentioning of Christabel's mother's dream and wish for her wedding? This is where Coleridge brings in the complexity involved in the dismantling of heterosexual inclinations. Christabel's expected marriage is unquestionably within the conventional and heterosexual frame, which is incompatible with Geraldine's same-sex desire. Her attitude is therefore a challenge to stereotypes, "Off, woman, off! this hour is mine – / Though thou her guardian spirit be, / Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me" (L. 210-13). She seems to be overcome by a strong sexual urge. This again is justified when she further drinks and makes an appeal to Christabel to undress herself, which she does without any resistance (L. 220-38). After undressing herself as well, Geraldine creates a very erotic and sexual atmosphere, with no suggestion of a male presence. Two excerpts convey this:

Then suddenly as one defied  
Collects herself in scorn and pride,  
And lay by the maiden's side! –  
And in her arms the maid she took,  
    Ah well-a-day!  
And with low voice and doleful look  
These words did say.  
In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,  
This is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!  
Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know tomorrow  
This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow;

.....  
A star hath set, a star hath risen,  
O Geraldine! since arms of thine  
Have been the lovely lady's prison.  
O Geraldine! one hour was thine –  
Thou'st had thy will!  
(L. 260-70, 302-06)

The atmosphere is very suggestive of a lesbian erotic encounter. It is a kind of ritualised performance of female bodies, a kind of "loss of virginity" or an introduction or initiation rite of Christabel into womanhood, though from the viewpoint of a decentralisation from a heterosexual into homosexual act. We cannot really tell whether it is Geraldine's first encounter, but she is the dominant partner in this same-sex consummation, and does not seem to be innocent in this direction. Her self-conscious expression of anything abnormal in the act must be seen from the ethics and stereotypes that convention has struggled to implant in the consciousness of society. Geraldine is therefore not an undesirable Other because she defies conventional sexuality. She manifests some of the important inborn traits which stereotypical categorisation in heterocentrism does not take into consideration.

Christabel's reactions are not very clear, but there is every indication that a kind of awakening is in her. This is discernible in the ambiguity with which the poet narrates the events after the trance, (sexual act or erotic activity?):

[She] 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!  
And soft the while she seems to smile  
As infants at a sudden light!  
Yea she doth smile, and she doth weep,

.....  
No doubt she hath a vision sweet.

(L. 312-19, 326)

Christabel's mixture of joy and sweet vision and her consciousness of the act as a sin (again captured in lines 381-86) shows that she does not completely reject it. And even when she refuses to tell the truth to her father, she is afraid of his reaction rather than actually expressing remorse over the performed act. So far, we can understand from a lesbian perspective that there is no real scenario of hor-

ror or evil that lurks in the mind of Geraldine, nor is it clearly expressed by Christabel. Rather, we could talk about Christabel's fears and anxiety in the face of a new experience.

Part Two, as already indicated, involves the presence of, and allusion to male figures. But they pose no problem to Coleridge's homosexual scheme. This part is an unravelling of the all-female scene in Part One. The proposed questions on this part may shed more light on the constant resistance to a heterosexual stereotype or framework. Bracy's story of the dove (which the Baron calls by the name Christabel) and the green serpent (L. 530-63), has been taken by structuralists and Deconstructionists as one of the subversive and resistant accounts to any deeper structure or meaningful context in the poem. The lesbian perspective here does not even necessitate a hermeneutic and phenomenological paradigmatic framework. While Sir Leoline's interpretation of the dream, "Sweet maid, Lord Roland's beauteous dove, / With arms more strong than harp or song, / Thy sire and I will crush the snake!" (L. 569-71), may be wrong or sound ironical to the reader, it is textually justified. It is the same case when he is very bitter about his daughter's appeal to send away Geraldine.

Sir Leoline is obviously not aware of what has happened between his daughter and Geraldine, and given Geraldine's account of the story, and the fact that she is the daughter to his greatest friend, there is no need for unexplained irony or irresolvable aporia. Reading and interpreting this way will certainly involve the creation or re-writing of a new text from a deconstructionist position. The present stance resists this position. The serpent image rightly suggests a phallic interpretation, obviously not in a heterosexist frame. A psycho-sexual perspective suggests that it can represent the androgynous or hermaphroditic quality in Geraldine. The Baron's anger is also suggestively connected with the question of his child's supposed jealousy of Geraldine, or defiance to his authority. Strands of the Electra complex in Freudian psychoanalysis can also be discerned from the text, accounting for the almost excessive attachment of the Baron to his daughter.

Coleridge's display of imaginative energy rescues a multiplicity of references to the poem. This is paradoxically done with what we can

call the large non-narrated space(s) that he creates, and the poem's open-ended nature, which leaves even the credibility of the present stance only as long as the narrative lasts. In other words, the gap/space that Coleridge creates or leaves unfilled in the narrative, gives possibility to diverse elliptical inferences. This is related to what the German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser in "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" (1988) calls "gaps of meaning" and the creative stimulation engendered by "unwritten" parts or implications of the text (213, 216). But it is clear that Coleridge employs his creative imagination to advance a question of great and important consideration, the dismantling of prejudiced and biased sexual stereotypes (for example sexual intercourse must involve opposite sexes), which have been overlooked. If he is not conscious of this, the text at least urges reading and interpreting in this direction. This is where the strength of the poem lies. That is, implied meanings depend on interpretative contexts. The incomplete or fragmentary nature of the poem is fascinating and significantly contributes to the open-ended nature of different critical pursuits. This is another mark of the poem's strength and aesthetic value. It could be a deliberate technical measure that accounts for the multiplicity of critical discourse. Our analysis, though based on the text as narrative, struggles all the same to depart from the narrative as a structural reading to the poem. The fundamental issue is the unchallenged theme of sexuality that pervades the poem. Coleridge's hetero-lesbian consciousness does not imply that he had any homosexual inclinations. It implies that, though he was a heterosexual, he carefully explored, through the prefiguring power of the imagination, a theme that gives prominence to the changing patterns involved in the re-conceptualisation of sexual and erotic orientation. Though this poem neither implicitly nor explicitly points to the question of spirituality, Coleridge does not explicitly nor implicitly present it as anti-religious or anti-spiritual. The poem clearly engenders a careful examination of lesbian theory that is gaining much ground today.

Charles Ngiewith TEKE<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Charles Ngiewith TEKE (PhD), Chargé de Cours, Department of English, Higher Teacher Training College (ENS), University of Yaounde I - Cameroon

## REFERENCES

- Beer, John. "Fragmentations and Ironies," *Questioning Romanticism*. Ed. John Beer. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 234-64.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Complete Poetical Works*. Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1912 [1966].
- Elfenbein, Andrew. *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Farwell, Marilyn R. *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.
- Haggerty, George. *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Hofkosh, Sonia, "The Writer's Ravishment: Women and the Romantic Author," *Romanticism and Feminism*. Ed. Anne Mellor. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988. 93-114.
- Iser, Wolfgang, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. London and New York: Longman, 1988. 211-28.
- Knight, G. Wilson. "Coleridge's Divine Comedy," *English Romantic Poets: Essays in Criticism*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. London: Oxford University Press, 1975. 202-13.
- Rajan, Tilottama. *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs*, 5. 1980. 631-60.
- Rosen, Daniel H. *Lesbianism: A Study of Female Homosexuality*. Illinois: Charles T. Thomas Publisher, 1974.
- Swann, Karen, "Harassing the Muse," *Romanticism and Feminism*. Ed. Anne Mellor. Bloomington and Indianapolis. Indiana University Press, 1988. 81-92.
- "Literary Gentlemen and Lovely Ladies: The Debate on the Character of Christabel," *Romantic Poetry: Recent Revisionary Criticism*. Eds. Karl Kroeber and Gene W. Ruoff. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993. 204-20.
- Tekinay, Ash. "Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel': Doubts About the Universal Order", *Dogus University Journal*, # 1, 2000, 184-92.



Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. Routledge: New York, 1999.

Watkins, Susan. *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists: Feminist Theory into Practice*. Palgrave: New York, 2001.

Wheeler, Kathleen "Coleridge and Modern Critical Theory," *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today*. Ed. Christine Gallant. New York: AMS Press, 1989. 83-102.

Wysor, Bettie. *The Lesbian Myth*. New York: Random House, 1974.

---