

Unnatural Feminine, Feminized (Un) Nature: A Study of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* through Ecofeminist Lens

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Abstract

As one of three major representative works in his oeuvre, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* has been subjected to multifarious readings over the next two centuries, most of which revolve around the poem's one of two major characters Geraldine. That the poem's treatment of supernatural and Geraldine's role in its invocation is irrefutable, there can be no doubt. The other women characters, *Christabel* and too a large extent her dead mother also evince a clear streak of supernatural, which in the light of Ecofeminist thought makes for a different yet timely reading. This present paper focuses on all three women characters and their roles in the poem's natural 'unnaturalism'.

Keywords: Women, Nature, witchcraft, Spiritual Ecofeminism, Religion, Pre-Patriarchal.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's '*Christabel*' was written in 1797 and over the years, the poet kept working on his opus, adding another part to its planned five part scheme. The poem which remained unfinished was eventually published in 1816. By then Coleridge's poetic output significantly diminished. Nevertheless, the poem's reputation has endured and along with '*The Rhyme of The Ancient Mariner*' and '*Kubla Khan: A Vision in a Dream*', '*Christabel*' has been regarded as the high watermark in Coleridge's literary career. The poem is famed for being the last of Coleridge's three 'visionary poems', in Harold Bloom's words, the last of his 'Daemonic poems' and the first of his poems to feature women as the principle characters.

Indeed, it is the women who dominate the majority of the poem's narrative (Part 2 does feature a male character in Sir Leoline). *Christabel*'s encounter with the mysterious Geraldine and her subsequent violation form the crux of the poem, as does the vivid description throughout the first part of the poem, in typical romantic vein, of nature- albeit unnaturalized. The present paper attempts an approach to read the linguo-visual markers embedded in the poem through an Ecofeminist lens and argues how Coleridge's poem, yet another in the long line of romantic works that essentialize both women and nature, sometimes women in nature and vice-versa, becomes problematic in and of itself.

The term 'Ecofeminism' can be traced to French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne who in 1974 coined the word to describe the violence inflicted on women and nature by male domination. Ecofeminism was seen as a response to Eighteenth century enlightenment's culture/nature debate that relegated women by devaluing their position the same way nature had been devalued. Naturally an association was established whereby women were likened to nature while men to culture. Val Plumwood calls this a 'Chain of Signification' where the idea of "nature as body, of nature as passion or emotion, of nature as the pre-symbolic, of nature as primitive, of nature as animal and of nature as the feminine" works against women's favor (qtd. in Rangarajan 111). In response to earlier assumptions, Ecofeminist writings focus on works that have undermined women's position as they have, nature by demonizing them often in sexually charged prose. In her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It is and Why It Matters* Karen Warren lists eight types of connections between woman and environment, one of which namely 'Symbolic' connotes an association between women and nature in literature and art. Warren calls for a critique of these associations which "devalue women by describing them in animal terms or sexualize nature by likening it to a women" (113).

It is evident from these lines that there has been something of an affinity between women and nature. Nature has always been seen as something to be conquered in its capacity of being fundamentally different from human beings. John Stewart Mill speaks of nature thus, "what takes place without the voluntary and intentional agency of man" (Mill 68). Man attempts to control what he has no control over. Nature is thus everything human being is not. This antithesis to us is what separates nature and those primordial beings who are given the epithet 'inhuman'. Kate Soper has aptly categorized the groups she says has been deemed as other in "their function and attributes that place them nearer to nature and render them not quite fully human" (Soper 74). Barbarians, Slaves, Negros, Savages, Witches, Sorcerers, Dwarfs fall in these categories (74).

Going by Soper's definition, any reading of *Christabel* then has to account for these markers, namely 'nature', 'women', 'witches'. Just as nature has been unnaturally feminized in the poem as will be discussed later, the women too have been (un) naturalized to the extent that calling their actions witch like would not be such a misnomer. Witches and other supernatural beings have always been a staple of English culture. One might say they are purely an English invention. Historian Ronald Hutton in his *Triumph of the Moon* calls modern pagan witchcraft the only religion England has ever produced. He also says, modern paganism, "if it is the child of any single phenomenon, then it is the belated offspring of the romantic movement" (qtd in Leadbetter 117).

Coleridge's unnatural feminine in *Christabel* thus makes Ecofeminist emphasis on female/nature all the more evident especially, when in the context of the character of Geraldine, her witchlike behavior makes her seem closer to nature as opposed to say, someone like Christabel with all her Christian goodness. But I propose to make an argument that not only Geraldine but Christabel also despite being otherwise exhibit a witchlike quality in her action even association with Geraldine.

Geraldine's appearance in the first part of the poem, the manner of her discovery in the woods late at night by Christabel has unnatural implications. Coleridge repeatedly emphasizes the unnatural circumstances regarding Geraldine throughout the poem, not the least of which her discovery beside the oak tree-

A damsel bright,
Drest in silken robe of white,
That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
The neck that made that white robe wan,
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
Her blue-veined feet unsandal'd were (Coleridge 46).

The presumed innocence of the lady is evidenced by the whiteness of her robe (white, being the color most closely associated with purity, chastity- traits which at first glance Christabel might have thought her to have). Her beauty was such that white silk wans under the moonlit night. Her 'unsandal'd feet' signals at the distress she might have experienced beforehand. Coleridge rightly calls her a 'damsel'- a woman in distress.

That the discovery of a young woman late at night in the middle of the forest is highly unlikely, and quite unnatural is suggested by the fact that Coleridge calls the situation 'frightful' (Coleridge 47). The scene with Geraldine at the forest is thus riddled with suggestions that hints at her association with witchcraft. The color symbolism in *Christabel*, echoed throughout the poem's first part hints at the unnatural feminine and feminized nature. Geraldine's white dress finds similarity with the balladic and folkloric traditions in which the color white was primarily associated with the supernatural, namely witches and fairies (Liggins 93).

The return to the castle is yet another instance of unnatural feminine. Geraldine's distress at crossing the moat, entering the castle through the iron-gate further complicates her ambiguous nature and associates her with witchcraft. In ballad and folklore, the moat, keg, iron-gate serve as protection against supernatural beings notably witches (97). However, more than anything it is the scared household headed by an overbearing Christian father figure that serves as protection for Christabel from Geraldine, who represents a Pre-Christian pagan one.

The binary between Christianity and a Pre-Christian pagan, nature based religion is at the core of Coleridge's philosophical understanding in *Christabel*. If Christabel symbolizes the manifestation of Coleridge's Christian faith, then Geraldine stands for the ultimate evil that corrupts good (Ulmer in Bloom 180). From an Ecofeminist perspective, the poem's Christian undertone serves as yet

another justification for domination of women/nature by their male counterparts.

Spiritual Ecofeminism, one branch of Ecofeminism looks at the way patriarchal religions like Christianity has perpetuated the male-female binary by relegating women further back into a chain of hierarchy. Elizabeth Dodson Grey, one of the first Spiritual Ecofeminists calls this a "pyramid of dominance and status" whereby women are "subordinate and inferior on the ground of spirit" (qtd in Warren 30). Just like women, nature too has been relegated at the bottom of everything. And for that both women and nature become subjected to repeated violence and domination. Grey calls this "a hierarchical order of *being* in which the lower orders- whether female or child or animal or plant- can be treated, mistreated, violated, sold, sacrificed, or killed at the convenience of the higher states of spiritual being found in males and God. Nature being not only at the bottom of this pyramid but being the most full of dirt, blood and such nasty natural surprises as earthquakes, floods and bad storms, is obviously a prized candidate for the most ruthless "mastering" of all" (30).

Both Geraldine and Christabel have directly or indirectly been subjected to indoctrination in the poem's larger scheme. If for Christabel the indoctrination is near complete, Geraldine represents a break free/liberation from Christian indoctrination.

Geraldine's account of her capture by 'five warriors' is one such instance in which male Christian figures impose their will on female 'nature' by 'force or fright' (Coleridge 47). Geraldine recounts how the warriors after riding all day and night leaves her in the forest under the oak tree-

"One, the tallest of the five,
Took me from the palfrey's back,
A weary woman, scarce alive.
Some muttered words his comrades spoke:
He placed me underneath this oak" (Coleridge 47).

'the muttered words' it can be argued, here stands for Christian prayers that the warriors chant for Geraldine as they leave her there. The words 'warriors', 'palfrey white', 'comrade' could very well mean noble, Christian warriors and not barbarians, who have captured Geraldine. For the warriors, Geraldine figures as the representative of what Warren calls 'a revival of Pre-Patriarchal religions', one who

is more close to nature in her association with witchcraft and goddess/nature worship.

For Christabel however, Christian piety in her has long been nurtured by her religious father Leoline who is the principal male character and through whose actions the poem's Male/Female, Christian/Pre-Christian, Good/Evil binaries finally come into the fore. It is after the death of his wife that Leoline indoctrinates Christabel into an idealized wife/daughter substitute (Ulmer in Bloom 181)- even forces her into a planned marriage- yet another instance of male-on-female domination. The male centric religions in Carol Christ's words "keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority" (qtd in Merchant 129). This is why Christabel attempts to fall back on an ancient, nature based, Pre-Patriarchal religious practice- one which has long been associated with witchcraft- by going into the forest at midnight.

Coleridge's account of Christabel's visit in the forest has striking parallel to what Carolyn Merchant calls 'Pagan Spirituality or Old Religion' (124). Christabel goes into the forest late at night to pray for her 'betrothed knight' (Coleridge 45). The forest lies outside the confines of the castle ground. If the castle stands for the Male/Christian space, then the forest represents a Female/Pre-Christian/Pre-Patriarchal one with which Christabel feels a close affinity, so much so that she chooses the 'midnight wood' to pray for the 'weal of her lover' (Coleridge 45).

Spiritual Ecologists emphasize the need to be at one with nature through religious practices. Only through a deep spiritual consciousness can people forge what Merchant calls 'a partnership with nature' (Merchant 118). This partnership is not one of subjugation but one of deep reverence towards nature. Christabel's visit to the forest and her prayer under the oak tree is one such example. From a folkloric standpoint, the oak has always been venerated as a sacred tree- a tradition that harks back to ancient tree superstition (Liggins 94). Cultural feminists assert how female figures, trees have been symbolized as nature and attributed with regenerative and restorative qualities (Merchant 202). Christabel's prayer follows an ancient Pre-Christian/ Matriarchal tradition where instead of being subservient to a patriarchal religion, her actions embrace a different route- a more natural/ matriarchal/ancient one.

One such instance is her appeal to Geraldine in the bed chamber that she drink the 'cordial wine'- a restorative that Christabel says will cure the lady's ailments. Apart from her prayer in the forest, perhaps the closest Christabel comes to her affinity with nature is her account of her dead mother-It is a wine of virtuous powers; My mother made it of wild flowers (Coleridge 49).

Not only Christabel but her mother too have been unnaturalized. The same tradition that makes Christabel go into the forest late at night, makes her resort to the use of cordial wine- a well-known drink renowned for its healing abilities in folkloric accounts (Liggins 98). Both these instances are far cry from the male, Christian view espoused by Leoline.

Just as women have been unnaturalized, nature has been feminized, that too unnaturally. The time 'the middle of the night' in which the poem's action unfolds already gives it a negative connotation. The 'crowing cock' is one instance of the poem's unnaturalism, crowing in the night as opposed to morning. Leoline's toothless mastiff dog has been given the crude moniker 'bitch' and her being able to sense the spirit of Christabel's dead mother emphasizes the poem's unnatural atmosphere.

The forest itself has been unnaturally feminized in typical romantic vein. However, Coleridge's landscape lacks the Wordsworthian optimism in that, in *Christabel*, the feminized nature is much more dangerous, deceptive. The oak tree, the site of Christabel's prayer is feminized in its description of 'huge, broad-breasted, old', as opposed to its masculine frame. Just like the parasitic mistletoe that deceives by growing on the oak tree, the forest site deceives Christabel's senses by confusing her. The 'moan' that breaks Christabel's prayer leads her to her discovery of Geraldine, the poem's ultimate deceiver.

Using Ecofeminist tools, the present paper has attempted to understand how and why Coleridge has played around the idea of an innocent, Christian heroine corrupted

by an unnatural force. Geraldine's paganism, her witchlike behavior may have seemed as evil to Coleridge's Christian faith, but from an Ecofeminist perspective, she can be seen as rescuing Christabel from a Male/Christian bondage. Christabel too, it can be argued finally reclaims her identity, an identity not of her father's but of her mother's, an ancient, nature based matriarchal identity, even at the price of her own modesty.

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