

**Coleridge and Milton: How *Paradise Regained* Inspired *Christabel***

*Ernest W. S. Yuen*

Coleridge's *Christabel* is widely studied for its multifold obscurity and mysteriousness. Its fragmentary state has puzzled and challenged scholars for two centuries, but what is as baffling and enigmatic as its ending is its emergence, or the inspiration for Coleridge's composition of *Christabel*. The excerpt below, vocalized by the poet in the poem, Bard Bracy, invites a specific reading:

For in my sleep I saw that dove,  
That gentle bird, whom thou dost love,  
And call'st by thy own daughter's name

[...]

When lo! I saw a bright green snake  
Coiled around its wings and neck.  
Green as the herbs on which it couched,  
Close by the dove's its head it crouched;  
And with the dove it heaves and stirs,  
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers! (Coleridge 533-5, 551-6)

The dove, named *Christ-abel*, and the snake in Bard Bracy's prophetic dream are unmissable Christian symbols for Christ and the Devil. This excerpt alone from *Christabel* impels us to peruse the poem with a religious lens. The brawl between these two animals recalls the psychological duel between Christ and the Devil in the Gospel. Another poem that famously presents and reimagines the battle between Jesus and Satan, whose composer garnered immense popularity and admiration among the Romantics, is John Milton's *Paradise Regained*.

Critics sometimes consider *Paradise Lost* as the sole Miltonic inspiration for the poem. Robert Siegel puts forth a brief comparison between Geraldine and Satan from *Paradise Lost* (176) to demonstrate Geraldine's evilness in his paper about the ambiguity of evil power in the poem. William A. Ulmer draws similarities between *Christabel* and *Paradise Lost*, for instance, in the stretching of hands, the introduction of Christabel, and the image of the serpent (380-1). Ulmer believes the poem explores the origins of evil and highlights the inevitable consequences of sin in the post-fall world (380).

While some critics read *Christabel* merely as an allegory of the Fall of humanity, there are enough dissimilarities and inconsistencies between the story in *Genesis* and Coleridge's poem to suggest that this interpretation is insufficient. Walter Jackson Bate, for one, considers that the Fall only exists "as a general backdrop" of the poem, for "the castle is far from being an Eden," "Christabel is no Eve," and "there is no Adam at all" (70). (I would suggest that this immediate association between women and sinfulness is rooted in misogyny, and constricts our interpretation of this poem so rich in ambiguities and possibilities.)

Regarding Coleridge's reading and interpretation of Milton, Elizabeth McLaughlin teases out Coleridge's reception of Milton from various perspectives, drawing from Coleridge's lectures and letters. The article primarily focuses on Milton's *Paradise Lost* and does not mention its sequel. Martin Bidney asserts that Milton's *Comus* provides the basis for the characterizations in *Christabel* by closely identifying parallels between the two works. Andrew M. Cooper regards both Milton's *Comus* and *Paradise Lost* as *Christabel*'s precursor, especially for the two female protagonists (88-90).

Complementing previous critical works, this paper aims to suggest yet another Miltonic source of inspiration for *Christabel*, arguing that Coleridge's poem is a subversive rewriting of

Milton's *Paradise Regained*. I will first draw some general similarities between the two texts in terms of their settings and forms and explore how Coleridge subverts them. Then I will zoom in to one character to examine the ways in which Geraldine is a literary heir of the Miltonic tempter. Next, I will compare the plot, and more specifically, the nature and sequence of the temptations, in both poems, which then leads to the subversion of sex and the notion of sexuality that are interwoven with the temptations. I will conclude by identifying how poetic works are perceived as evil by the narrator and by Coleridge the poet to propose yet another reason for *Christabel's* incompleteness and link the poem to Coleridge's time.

### **Invocation and Inspiration**

Milton commences *Paradise Regained* with these lines:

I, who erewhile the happy Garden sung  
By one man's disobedience lost, now sing  
Recovered Paradise to all mankind,  
By one man's firm obedience fully tried  
Through all temptation, and the Tempter foiled  
In all his wiles, defeated and repulsed,  
And Eden raised in the waste Wilderness.

Thou Spirit, who led'st this glorious Eremite  
Into the desert, his victorious field  
Against the spiritual foe, and brought'st him thence  
By proof the undoubted Son of God, inspire,

As thou art wont, my prompted song, else mute,  
And bear through highth or depth of Nature's bounds,  
With prosperous wing full summed, to tell of deeds  
Above heroic, though in secret done,  
And unrecorded left through many an age:  
Worthy to have not remained so long unsung. (1.1-17)

Milton starts by invoking God to aid his poetic creation, and by offering a brief account of the ensuing events. Though divine invocation is absent in *Christabel*, the poem acknowledges its inspirations from its literary ancestors: "Tis the middle of night by the castle clock, / And the owls have awakened the crossing cock" (1-2). Critics concur that the temporal and medieval setting foregrounds the Gothic genre that is so prevalent in the Romantic era. Coleridge starts his poem with representations of the past, as well as the evocation of time with the clock. Additionally, this concept of time and literary tradition are subverted as the midnight owls wake the cock, instead of the other way around. By altering the godly invocation to a supernatural, eerie, and presumably sinister one, the poem forecasts despair and despondence.

Coleridge subverts the narratological structure, such that the summary follows the main events instead of the other way around. Lines 274-78, the end of Part I, give a brief summary of the happenings that night. A striking feature of the poem is its "conclusions" that come after each of the two parts. Perhaps it is due to the lack of divine invocation that *Christabel* is left unfinished. This lack of (divine) certainty and guidance is evident and is directly linked with evil forces such as Geraldine, which will be discussed later.

Among many things, the two poems are similar in the protagonists' introductions that underscore descent. Christ in *Paradise Regained* is introduced as being the "undoubted Son of

God” (1.11), and “the son of Joseph” “from Nazareth” (1.23). Coleridge inherits this emphasis on lineage. He introduces the heroine of his poem with the following line: “The lovely lady, Christabel, / Whom her father loves so well” (23-4). Both protagonists are characterized by their status as descendants of their fathers. Such characterization is expressed through the name *Christ-Abel* as well. Christ is obviously the son of God, whereas Abel is the younger son of Adam and Eve. Milton’s Satan once refers to Christ as “The Woman’s Seed” (1.64). The focus on descent functions on the narratological level as well, since *Paradise Regained* is a sequel, and *Christabel*, bearing two parts, is a descendant of Milton’s epic poem.

The title of the poem already hints at its poetic inspiration from literary predecessors. A year before the publication of *Christabel*, a poem titled “Christobell. A Gothic Tale” was published by an anonymous author. Having a similar name as well as characters and plot resembling that of *Christabel*, some conclude that Coleridge was the author (McElderry 450). Assuming that is the case, Coleridge’s alteration and deliberate use of the name *Christabel* in this poem indicates his intention to underscore the theological aspect and its status as a descendant. Evoking Christ, the naming itself is a literary inheritance from previous (theological) works.

*Christabel’s* preface might be read as an invocation of Milton. In the 1816 preface of *Christabel*, Coleridge states:

The dates [of publications] are mentioned for the exclusive purpose of precluding charges of plagiarism or servile imitation from myself. For there is amongst us a set of critics, who seem to hold, that every possible thought and image is traditional; who have no notion that there are such things as fountains in the world, small as well as great; and who would therefore charitably derive every rill they behold flowing, from a perforation made in some other man's tank. I am confident, however, that as far as the present poem is concerned, the

celebrated poets whose writings I might be suspected of having imitated, either in particular passages, or in the tone and the spirit of the whole, would be among the first to vindicate me from the charge and who, on any striking coincidence, would permit me to address them in this doggerel version of two monkish Latin hexameters. "'Tis mine and it is likewise yours; / But an if this will not do; / Let it be mine, good friend! for I / Am the poorer of the two.'" (214-5)

Though he is mainly referring to his contemporaries in his preface, with the Latin hexameters the "celebrated poets" can be read as poets from the past as well. Coleridge is aware, and by pointing out is also gesturing readers to be aware, of his poem's resemblance to his literary forebearers. He rejects potential plagiarism allegations, but at the same time acknowledges that different poets might share similar ideas, in this case, the Biblical incidents that gave life to these poems. By distancing himself from the possibilities of plagiarism, Coleridge foreshadows the poem's divergence from the epic poem. From his translation of the Latin hexameters, Coleridge is also keenly conscious of his own poetic limitations and inferiority to Milton.

### **Coleridge's Subversion of Milton's Settings**

Moving into the poem, *Christabel* appropriates and subverts the spatial setting of the firmament from Milton when Satan's councils meet. Milton's Satan summons his Peers "Within *thick clouds* and *dark* tenfold involved, / A *gloomy* consistory" (1.41-42, emphases added) as they devise a plan to tempt Christ. Coleridge depicts the setting of *Christabel* with twofold irony:

Is the night chilly and dark?

The night is chilly, but not *dark*.

The *thin grey cloud* is spread on high,

It covers but *not hides the sky*. (14-17, emphases added)

Coleridge explicitly and comically subverts the initial setting from “thick clouds” and “dark tenfold” to a singular “thin grey cloud” and the night that is “not dark”. His peculiar use of questions and answers not only categorizes the text as a parody of the Gothic genre, but also engenders ambiguity, and anticipates the protagonist’s succumbing to evil forces. For Benjamin Woodford, the brief moments between the answers and questions hold “reader[s] in a state of momentary *suspense* and *wonder*” (107, emphases added), which are fundamental Satanic elements. The oddly distinct state of cloud that “hides not the sky” responds to a few lines prior in *Paradise Regained* where “*Heaven opened, and in likeness of a Dove / The Spirit descended, while the Father’s voice / From Heaven pronounced him his beloved Son* (1.30-2, emphasis added). These four lines are deliberately rewritten and reimagined to instigate ambiguity and suspense.

The “thin grey cloud” that “covers but not hides the sky” situates the text in the liminal space between Jesus’s salvation and Satan’s domination. In Milton, the sky occupied by Satan is darkened by thick clouds, whereas the Heavenly sky is open and bright. The liminality of Coleridge’s description thus depicts a world that is in between God and Satan. In Miltonic language, *Christabel* is set in between *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. The deferment of regaining paradise is due to the evil forces of Geraldine who lures the Christly figure.

In terms of the secular spatial setting, Coleridge retains the essence of wilderness in *Paradise Regained*. Jesus is sent to “the Wilderness” (156) by Providence “to conquer Sin and Death” (159) by “humiliation and strong sufferance” (160). He then enters “the bordering Desert wild” (193) and does “his holy meditations” (195). The Desert is, according to Christ, a “woody maze” (246). The entrance to a place of wilderness to pray occurs in *Christabel*. She “pray[s]” “in the midnight wood” (29) which is “a furlong from the castle gate” (26). Karen Swann points out

that the midnight wood is “where innocence is traditionally put to the test, or when spirits walk abroad” (539). Forests have long been a symbolic space of enchantment and wilderness. Its distance from the civilized, orderly castle amplifies its wilderness as well. Interestingly, the forest is “bare” (43), and “naught was green upon the oak” (33), even more barren than the desert in Milton.

Trees, being protective shelters, ironically anticipate evil in both works. Throughout his forty-day stay in the wilderness, Jesus takes cover under “some ancient oak” (305) for protection. Milton’s tree appears in *Christabel* as “the huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree” (42), beneath which Christabel has been kneeling and praying. However, far from protecting, the other side of Coleridge’s oak tree hides the dangerous villain of the poem. In Milton, the oak tree is also mentioned right before Satan and Jesus’s encounter.

The animals that wander in *Paradise Regained* are domesticated and confined in *Christabel*. Book One of *Paradise Regained* ends with “fowls” that are “couched” (1.501), and “wild beasts [coming] forth the woods to roam” (1.502) as the night falls. Incidentally, *Christabel* begins with exactly the same animals, albeit in a contrasting state to the ones in Milton. Readers are introduced to the Gothic poem by the “owl” (2) (the phonetic similarity of “owl” and “fowl” is striking as well) that awakens the “crowing cock” (2). The birds in Coleridge are agitated and restless in “the middle of night” (1), not “couched.” Milton’s “wild beasts” are diminished to one “toothless mastiff bitch” (7). Far from roaming in the woods, this “mastiff bitch” is kept captive in a “kennel beneath the rock” (8) within the castle. It “maketh answer to the clock” (9), a symbol of regularity and (imposed) civilization. Such confinement and subversion, as well as the evocation of the supernatural Gothic, may suggest the state of loss and deviation from holiness, which is the pivot of the poem, as it gradually reveals itself.

### **Geraldine as a Literary Heir of Milton's Satan**

Shifting the focus from the plot to the characters, Geraldine epitomizes the women suitable for sexual allurement according to Milton. Incubus's description of a desirable woman lays the groundwork for Coleridge's portrayal of Geraldine. After Satan's first temptation, one of Satan's council members, Incubus, proposes provoking carnal desires.

Set *women* in his eye and in his walk,  
Among *daughters of men* the *fairest found*.  
Many are in each region passing fair  
As the noon sky, more like to *goddesses*  
Than mortal creatures, *graceful and discreet*,  
Expert in amorous arts, *enchanting tongues*  
*Persuasive, virgin majesty* with *mild*  
*And sweet* allayed, yet terrible to approach,  
Skilled to retire, and in retiring draw  
Hearts after them tangled in amorous nets. (2.153-62, emphases added)

First, Geraldine appears in the form of a woman, though one cannot be sure of her real sex or identity, and she characterizes herself as a "daughter" at the outset of her exchange with Christabel by saying, "my sire is of a noble line" (79) (similar to that of Christabel and Christ). She is "beautiful exceedingly" (68), so that her beauty exceeds human perception, and is said to be a "bright dame" (106), a "lofty lady" (223, 226, 384), and "like a lady of a far countrèe" (225). These ethereal qualities of Geraldine suggest that she is indeed more "like to goddesses than mortal creatures," as Incubus describes. Elizabeth M. Liggins provides a comprehensive list of

supernatural or folkloric beings that inspired the depiction of Geraldine. Interestingly, syncretism is found in both poems. But in any case, all agree that Geraldine is a being beyond ordinary mortal humans.

Geraldine is also “discreet” as she is concealed behind a tree as Christabel prays. Her lengthy and “persuasive” speeches pervade the poem, and most significantly she lures Christabel into bringing her back to the castle with her “enchanting tongue,” comparable to Satan’s seductive words. The narrator repeats and underlines her “faint and sweet” (72, 77) voice, which corresponds to “mild and sweet” in Incubus’s description. Geraldine identifies herself as a “*maiden* most forlorn” (195, emphasis added), and later on the narrator says she “cast[s] down her large bright eyes divine” (576) “in *maiden wise*” (575, emphasis added). “Maiden wise” here means both a maiden-like manner and maiden wisdom (again, Coleridge plays with the double meanings of words). Geraldine is well aware of her own “virgin majesty” and weaponizes it against Christabel and her father to seduce them, just as Incubus and Satan would have wanted for the fall of Christ and humanity. Coleridge illustrates and amplifies Incubus’s (rather misogynistic) description of a desirable female figure, such that Christabel falls prey to Geraldine’s malice.

More generally, Geraldine embodies Satan’s deceptive appearance. Edward Darwin argues that there are “shared traits” between Geraldine and Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* that “range from crimes against innocence to forcing together ‘thoughts so all unlike each other’” (224). Satan at first takes his form as an “aged man” (1.314) to speak to Jesus. Apart from the apparent parallel image of the serpent, Geraldine is frequently read as a malicious shapeshifter. Milton’s Jesus sees through Satan’s deception instantly and rebukes him as “composed of lies” “from the beginning, and in lies wilt end” (1.407-8). He continues:

For lying is thy sustenance, thy food.

Yet thou pretend'st to truth! all oracles

By thee are given, and what confessed more true

Among the nations? That hath been thy craft,

By mixing somewhat true to vent more lies.

But what have been thy answers? what but *dark*,

*Ambiguous*, and with *double sense deluding*,

Which they who asked have seldom understood,

And, not well understood, as good not known? (1.429-37, emphases added)

Pretense and deception are the nuclei of Jesus's reprimand. Coleridge's molding of the antagonist is exactly what Jesus chastises Satan for: "dark," "ambiguous," and "with double sense deluding" (1.434-5). Geraldine's intention is kept "dark" and "ambiguous" to readers, and so are her speeches and subsequent actions. Walter Jackson Bate associates Geraldine with "elusiveness and ambiguities of evil" (68). Robert Siegel claims "the spirit who takes the form of Geraldine is essentially ambiguous" (167). Geraldine's first speech is already steeped in incongruity and portent. She explains that she can scarcely speak "for weariness" (74), but nevertheless launches into a lengthy speech to introduce her lineage and recount her story. Claire B. May points out the puzzling temporal aspect of Geraldine's story, where the ambiguity contributes to the perplexity of narrative time (704).

Geraldine's appearance and speeches are "double sense deluding." Her appearance, as mentioned, is deceptive, and serves to drive Christabel astray. Her speeches are suffused with double entendre from the start. She mentions that she is "choked with force" (83), "tied up" (84) to a horse, a symbol of masculine virility, and there are men "[riding] furiously behind" (86) all

night. All of these statements may be understood in a lecherous sense. Geraldine has even “lain entranced” (92), which again can be read in two ways. Despite Christabel’s innocence, she is affected (and aroused, as discussed later) by Geraldine’s words. This signifies that Geraldine “deludes” Christabel with success using her double-sensed words and veneer.

### **Coleridge’s Subversion of the Temptations in *Paradise Regained***

The council in Milton abandons the idea of a honeytrap as Satan finds it inadequate. In Coleridge, Geraldine successfully seduces Christabel on multiple levels, which corresponds to, but simultaneously subverts, the temptations in Milton. In light of Bard Bracy’s dream, the battle between the snake and the dove symbolizes the psychological fight between Christ and Satan, and is translated and altered in Coleridge’s poem. Hence, Christabel and Geraldine can be read as Christ and Satan in *Paradise Regained* respectively.

Firstly, Christ identifies and unveils Satan’s deception, but Christabel is never able to do so. Upon Geraldine’s first cry for help, Christabel literally and symbolically “stretch[es] forth her hand” (104) to take Geraldine back to the castle, falling into Geraldine’s deception. She cannot discern Geraldine’s disguise. In *Paradise Regained*, Christ rebukes Satan who is “composed of lies / From the beginning, and in lies wilt end” (1.408-9), and rejects Satan. Different from Christabel, he sees through Satan’s lies because of his divine knowledge.

On the contrary, Christabel succumbs to Geraldine’s first sexual temptation. Geraldine twice asks Christabel to “stretch forth [her] hand” (75, 102), and Christabel complies (104). The use of the same words and the lack of hesitation between the two actions convey Christabel’s thoughtless and reckless succumbing to an almost instinctive lust. Jonas Spatz views Geraldine as a projection of Christabel’s sexuality and desire (111). The stretching of limbs can be interpreted

in an erotic light (as a phallic symbol), as Christabel is aroused by Geraldine's beauty. Christabel further carries Geraldine back to her bedroom and satiates her desires. They then proceed to sleep together, and although the story does not provide explicit descriptions, Christabel says, "Sure I have sinn'd!" (381) the morning after.

Similarly, Satan's temptation of Jesus also centers on bodily desires. Cognizant of Jesus's fasting, Satan tempts Jesus to "command / that out of these *hard* stones be made thee bread" (1.342-3, emphasis added). Of course, Jesus desists gratification for he needs to endure suffering. In a subversive sense, Jesus resists temptation by hardening of his heart and keeping the stone hard, but Christabel submits to temptation exactly by *hardening*. Coleridge preserves the core of Satanic temptation and reimagines it in a sexual manner. Satan's council then devises the aforementioned *femme fatale* plan but soon deems it ineffectual. The initial encounter of Christabel and Geraldine corresponds to this temptation in *Paradise Regained*, but instead of rejecting it, Christabel succumbs to sexual temptation.

The episode where Geraldine regains power after drinking the cordial wine germinates from Satan's last temptation. Geraldine yells out, "Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine! / I have power to bid thee flee" (205-6) and seemingly expels the mother by saying "'tis over now!" (219). She drinks the wine and "stand[s] upright," (223) and becomes "most beautiful to see" (224). This brief episode is probably inspired by these two lines from *Paradise Regained*: "With that (such power was given him then), he took / The Son of God up to a mountain high" (3.251-2). Satan physically takes Jesus to the "peak" of the mountain, with the "power to bid [him] flee." After some more transportations, for "his power [has] not yet expired" (4.394), the Son of God ultimately rebukes Satan with the famous "Tempt not the Lord thy God" (4.561). Satan "fall[s]" (4.562). However, Geraldine gains power soon after this exchange.

Christabel exemplifies and subverts this last temptation. She indulges in the Devil (Geraldine) and offers the precious wine and gives Geraldine power. Therefore, instead of falling, Geraldine “stand[s] upright” and regains her beauty (Satan is said to be beautiful as well). Having given the “cordial wine” (191) of “virtuous powers” (192) to Geraldine, the Devil can thus expel the maternal figure. Coleridge bestows more power to the Devil, like how Providence enables the Devil to tempt Jesus. The wine is also an allusion to Christ’s blood. In communion, Jesus’s body and blood are commemorated with bread and wine. Christabel’s mother gives her literal “wine,” which she then gives to Geraldine. The power of the wine and bread, supposed to save humanity, is offered to the Devil figure. Such misdistribution and “misgiving” are Coleridge’s parodic subversion of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The salvation trajectory in *Christabel* does not succeed, or has not succeeded, because the flesh and blood are mis-distributed. Coleridge extends this power so that Geraldine’s power does not “expire” just yet. This struggle to sustain the Devil’s power reflects his composition process of the poem, discussed below.

The suspended ending and uncertainty are conveyed through the battle between the snake and the dove in Bard Bracy’s dream. From the excerpt quoted at the beginning of this paper, the green snake coils around the dove’s “wings and neck” (552). At this point, the serpent, representing Geraldine, has the upper hand as she is physically constricting Christabel’s movements and vocal cords. This represents the initial and temporary triumph of the Devil over Christ, and thus humanity. However, the prophetic dream ends with the following lines: “it heaves and stirs / Swelling its neck as she swelled hers” (555-6). The ambiguity of pronouns and syntax perplexes the reader and blurs the boundary between the two animals. In Milton, it is clear that Jesus wins against Satan. Coleridge deliberately withholds this information to further engender uncertainty

and ambivalence, such that the text is neither a *Paradise Lost* nor a *Paradise Regained*. Coleridge has constructed a space in between.

The consecutive submission to devilish temptation situates the text in a liminal state between Heaven and Hell. Whereas Christ defeats Satan and regains paradise, Geraldine's consecutive attempts to seduce Christabel are all successful. Christabel's inability to see through Geraldine's temptations and falling into them suggests that paradise is still "lost." The text, so abundant in ambiguities and liminality, sets itself within the uncertain and fluctuating times between *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, where humanity is temporarily taken hostage by the Devil.

### **Subversion of Sex and Sexuality**

Coleridge reproduces the multiple veils of temptation in Milton but changes the sexes of the corresponding characters. While Christ refrains from all temptations, Christabel succumbs to each of Geraldine's. Before one censures Christabel and blames the entire female sex for falling victim to evil forces, one must not forget the myriad of Biblical men (and men in real life) who fell because of their lust as Milton has listed. Additionally, the evil force takes its form as a beautiful woman, instead of a man, to lure Christabel, a mortal woman. If anything, this champions female power and proves patriarchy impotent. At the same time, Sir Leoline, the apex of the patriarchal jurisdiction is "weak" (118), and he himself falls into Geraldine's seduction as well.

Following the characters' correlation, Sir Leoline is a parodic subversion of Mother Mary. Mary in *Paradise Regained* knows of her son's disappearance but "meekly" "await[s]" "the fulfilling" (2.108). She believes in Christ's power and leaves him to fight his battles. Sir Leoline's self-absorption, on the other hand, only aggravates the predicament. He misinterprets Bard Bracy's

dream, does not listen to Christabel, and heedlessly “[leads] forth the lady Geraldine” (657). Sir Leoline’s (male) ego exacerbates the plight and aggrandizes Geraldine’s power within this castle.

Coleridge inherits Milton’s bodily description of the parental figure. As Mary finds her son missing, “Within her breast though calm, her breast though pure, / Motherly cares and fears got head, and raised / Some troubled thoughts” (2.63-5). The description of the breast is in Coleridge as well. As Geraldine is embracing Sir Leoline, “Again she saw that bosom old, / Again she felt that bosom cold (457-8).” The peculiar yet deliberate repetition of the syntax and the breast is a clear evocation of the two lines in *Paradise Regained*. Though most critics regard “the bosom” as Geraldine’s, Dennis M. Welch asserts that this “‘old’ and ‘cold’ bosom in Christabel’s vision is as much as her father’s as Geraldine’s” (172). This reading makes even more sense if Sir Leoline is a subversive rewriting of Mary. The feminine innocence and tranquility, as well as maternal trust, are juxtaposed greatly with the “old” and “cold” paternal quality, so much that even the rhyming words seem comical.

Another point concerning the maternal instinct lies in Coleridge’s animals. The mastiff bitch in *Christabel* “sees my lady’s shroud” (13). “My lady” refers to the spectral mother. Right at the beginning, femininity and feminine power to see the supernatural are highlighted. She made an “angry moan” (148) while asleep to warn Christabel (and others) of Geraldine’s danger. The fact that the bitch can detect the wicked antagonist even in her sleep demonstrates the powerful female consciousness that instinctively perceives danger and protects others. The narrator surmises that her groan is a response to the “owlet’s scritch” (152) – a protective interaction between an old female and a young female – which evokes maternal protection. Regardless of whom the dog wants to protect, the poet underlines the formidable and protective maternal instinct and feminine power. Meanwhile, Sir Leoline is fast asleep while peril invades his castle.

Tension between homosexuality and heterosexuality adds another layer of bodily desire onto the temptations. Interestingly, Milton addresses Satan as a “swain” (1.337), which according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “a man,” or “a wooer, especially in pastoral poetry.” Lucifer’s disuse of a honeytrap is commingled with potential homosexual tendencies. Claude J. Summers argues that Satan’s “erotic lure” “includes beautiful males” (53) and is a homosexual temptation. He sees the banquet as an excess of appetite and sexual desires. Indeed, the word “seduction” itself has an immense (homo)sexual connotation. In a sense, the back-and-forth question-and-answer pattern by Satan and Jesus throughout *Paradise Regained* is also a metaphorical kind of penetration and resistance on a narratological level.

Coleridge might have derived this trace of homosexuality in the poem and translated it into the intimate relationship between Geraldine and Christabel. Satan deceptively begs Jesus to “disdain not such access” (1.492), comparing himself to priests who nevertheless tread God’s altar (1.487-8). Christ unambiguously refuses and Satan vanishes. This episode is subverted entirely in *Christabel*. Geraldine asks Christabel to “help a wretched maid to flee” (103) with her presumably fabricated tale. Christabel does not recognize her disguise and brings her back to the castle. Christabel has allowed “access” of evil to enter her space. In fact, Camille Paglia considers the poem a “blatant lesbian pornography” (331). Moreover, both poets play with the “double sense” of the words – “access” in *Paradise Regained* and “[entrance]” (92) in *Christabel* – to suggest homosexuality. Of course, in Coleridge’s poem, the relationship is a lesbian one, unlike that in *Paradise Regained* – yet another subversion. To Benjamin Scott Grossberg, the relationship between Sir Roland and Sir Leoline is a kind of “patriarchal homosociality” (158). Being excited about Geraldine’s relationship with his old friend, it is not unreasonable to think Sir Leoline harbors romantic feelings for Sir Roland. Coleridge’s incorporation of two

homosexual/homosocial relationships in his poem further indicates his recognition and subversion of the subtle homosexual undertones in *Paradise Regained*.

Since the two female protagonists can be read as Christ and Satan in Milton, it would make sense to read the mother specter as Providence. In the epic poem, Providence's sole direct interaction lies in the very moment of Christ's baptism, a *rebirth* in a Christian sense, where He declares "This is my Son beloved, – in him am pleased" (1.85). Afterwards, they do not exist in the same plane together. *Christabel's* mother, likewise, never appears in the same dimension as the daughter. She dies after giving birth to Christabel. She makes a spectral appearance only visible to Geraldine. This distance from parents is found in both texts, and both protagonists are heavily influenced by their parents. Obviously, Christ quotes the Scripture (or God's words) from his mind to reply to Satan. Christabel is constantly reminded of her late mother by the *bell* (which one can say is instilled in her name as well), that "knells us back to the world of death" (333). By portraying the godly figure as female, Coleridge once again empowers women through his creative output and reasserts female power in the literary circle.

At the end of *Paradise Regained*, Jesus returns "home to his mother private" (4.639) after defeating Satan. Ironically, *Christabel* ends with Christabel's father escorting the devil within their home. The patriarchy, much like Satan, fails.

### **Coleridge's Stray and Struggle**

The last section of this paper concerns the unfinished state of the poem and the reasons accounting for it. The narrator's change of tone after Part I is a result of his admiration of and affinity with Milton's Satan. Providence cautions the others that Satan "might have learnt / *Less overweening*, since he failed in Job" (1.146-147, emphasis added), but lets him tempt Christ,

nevertheless. Ironically, the narrator in *Christabel* gains confidence and becomes “more overweening” along the two parts of the poem. The uncertain questions he asks in Part I—for instance, the question of whether the night is chilly and dark—become confident, albeit unreliable, conjectures in Part II, expressed by “I ween” (348, 425, 474). Despite Geraldine’s ambiguity and the puzzling unravelling of events, the narrator conversely grows erroneously certain.

Additionally, the question-and-answer form permeates *Paradise Regained*, where Christ rejects Satan categorically and salvages humanity. The question-and-answer pattern is parodically repeated in a plain and comical fashion in *Christabel*, for instance, in asking whether the night is chilly and dark. In Part I, these questions are immediately answered, but in Part II, as Woodford observes, the “elapsed time between the questions and answers increases as Christabel approaches Geraldine” (107), which he relates to Geraldine’s “growing sense of mystery” (107). As the overall duration of uncertainty lengthens, the narrator and the poem become progressively ambiguous and uncertain. This gradual swelling of over-confidence (“I ween”) but simultaneously dwindling in resolution (in answering the question) are remnants of Satan’s “smooth” words of seduction. Such qualities indicate that the narrator is going astray from Providence’s will in Milton. Jesus chastises Satan for “mixing somewhat true to vent more lies” (1.430), providing ambiguous answers, and leading people astray. The narrator precisely begins to integrate these Satanic qualities in his narration as the poem unfolds.

Integrating elements of *Paradise Regained*, *Christabel* starts with an abundant amount of ambiguous, discordant sounds and imagery. Even the poet within the poem, Bard Bracy, tells an ambiguous dream, and his confusing use of pronouns of “it” and “her” in the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper demonstrates Bracy’s limitation as a poet. Such ambiguity and feeble communication through poetic language reveal the ineffectual nature of poetry. Christian La

Cassagnère categorizes the odd and unpoetic “Tu – whit! – Tu – whoo!” sounds as “the Real”, distinct from the other poetic language belonging to the symbolic order, in Lacanian terms (85). Such distinction between the real and the symbolic/poetic from the beginning shows the poem’s self-reflexivity and cognizance of poetry’s deceptive nature and unreliability. The poem and its descriptions are inherently ambivalent, fabricated, and uncertain, just like Satan’s words in *Paradise Regained*. Satan’s lines are copious, flowery, and misleading, whereas Jesus’s responses are succinct, resolute, and unequivocal.

Bearing the Satanic quality of ambiguity, the poet within the poem must also be an ineffective communicator. Bard Bracy’s prophetic dream leaves readers puzzled by its ambiguity and ominous ambience. He is supposed to foretell perils to protect the inhabitants of the castle, but he fails to deliver his message with clarity. This is exactly the frame narrative style throughout the poem. The narrator exemplifies the ambivalent nature of poetry that provides an array of possibilities for various interpretations, but at the same time, he is aware of the confusion and the inability of poetry to bring forth truth and knowledge as Jesus does. In the course of his narration, he grows conscious of his own inclination to the Devil; but more so, he grows conscious of the deceptive and deluding property of poetry per se.

More than an ineffective communication, the narrator’s inability to finish narrating the poem manifests in Christabel’s muteness. Geraldine mutes Christabel after she falls into temptation with her, and she forbids Christabel to utter words about the previous night. While Christabel cannot vocalize what has happened before, the narrator cannot do so either. Similarly, Claire B. May concludes that Coleridge’s own disturbance and overwhelming feeling led him to abandon the poem and made him unable to bring closure to it (700). Such a disruption is reflected on the narrator’s level as well. Additionally, the muteness per se is derived from *Paradise*

*Regained*, where Satan stands “mute” (3.2) following Jesus’s last response. He “had not to answer, but stood struck / With guilt of his own sin – for he himself, / Insatiable of glory, had lost all” (3.156-8). Coleridge swaps the mute and the *muter* in his poem, where the villain is the one who induces muteness, and the supposed savior is forced into silence after her amazement at the temptress’s beauty after their consummation. The wordlessness of Christabel mirrors that of the narrator. He is fascinated and overwhelmed, but terrified by the sublime beauty of the poetic language he surrenders to, which explains why he can start his narration but cannot bring himself to resume it.

Going astray and growing mute, the narrator calls for help by intruding into the poem. The narrator time and again interrupts to say, “Shield her well” (54, 254, 278, 584) in hopes that Christabel is protected from vicious infiltration (the word “shield” evokes the opposite of sword/spear, which is masculine and devilish penetration, again recalling the homosexual undertones of Satanic temptations). Not only is he wishing for someone to protect Christabel from Geraldine, but he is also crying for help because he fears falling into the grasp of the Devil, since he demonstrates devilish qualities of ambiguities and poetic language. This interjection that puts itself discordant with the lines around it reflects the narrator’s genuine anxiety about going astray and his gradual assimilation with the Devil. Anya Taylor observes that Geraldine’s voices “multiply while Christabel’s go mute” (713) as Geraldine slowly takes over Christabel. Stemming from this reading, the replacement extends to the narrator. The narrator grows mute (because the poem ends there), as if the Satanic forces take command of the entire poem.

At a meta-poetic level, Coleridge inevitably renders poetry itself Satanic. He on one hand admires Satan’s eloquence and poetic language, as many of the Romantics do. But on the other hand, he fears this evil force. He stops his composition of the poem, for continuing means to

indulge in evil, to fall into Satan's temptation, and to go astray from righteous divinity. The irreconcilable struggle between admiration and fear ultimately leads Coleridge to never finish *Christabel*. Kathleen M. Wheeler argues that Geraldine is a pure force of disruption (88). Although she does not see Geraldine as necessarily evil, she agrees that Geraldine inhibits Coleridge's writing (88). The disruption that Wheeler posits is the contradictory intensity that hampers Coleridge's decision of whether to indulge in such Satanic attributes or not.

The poetic structure sheds light on Coleridge's intention for the composition of *Christabel*. *Paradise Regained* has four books. *Christabel*, with "Part I," "Conclusion to Part I," "Part II," and "Conclusion to Part II," also has four sections. Perhaps one of the reasons why Coleridge was unable to finish the poem is the lack of poetic inspiration. In some issues' preface, Coleridge confesses, "I shall be able to embody in verse the three parts yet to come, in the course of the present year" (213). He envisioned five parts in total for *Christabel*, one more than *Paradise Regained*. In the preface, he expresses that his meters and accents are "founded on a new principle" (213). His deviation from the traditional meters may be a sign of his aim to outdo Milton and to rewrite and recontextualize the tale. However, in the process of his composition, he recognized his susceptibility to diabolical attributes. This may be a consequence of his lack of divine invocation (as pointed out previously). He could not finish the poem, for completing it would mean outwitting and outperforming the literary predecessor who manifests great literary power as well as mental resoluteness to not fall into Satanic temptation himself. While Milton can resist Satan's poetic seduction and stay resolute, Coleridge as a poet cannot reconcile the two forces that mold the poem and himself. This is why both his inability to complete *Christabel* and *Christabel* itself rendered Coleridge in tremendous doubt of his own poetic ability.

Previously, I have argued that Christabel's succumbing to Geraldine's temptation is Coleridge's way of depicting the world in the liminal state between *Paradise Lost* and Christ's salvation, where evil dominates the world. This world of vicissitudes and uncertainty may be reflective of Coleridge's feelings about his own time. Having written the poem around 1800, Coleridge felt greatly the impact of the French Revolution and various tumultuous social events. The ambiguous, foggy, unforeseeable future is both evident in *Christabel* and in Britain's socio-political predicament in the late-eighteenth to early-nineteenth centuries.

Bells in the story act as agents of connection. The story starts with the ringing of the bell – it connects readers to the fictional fantasy. The “bell” in the second part of the poem “knells us back to a world of death.” It reminds Sir Leoline and Christabel of Christabel's mother and connects them to her, and it symbolizes the link between the world of the living and that of the dead. The bell and the clock are measurements of time that represent regularity and certainty and connect people's concept of time. Even the name of the heroine Christabel contains the word “bell,” and the evocation of Christ that comes with it suggests humanity's connection to God. The transitions between the fiction and the real can be observed through the back and forth between the actual plot of the poem and the “conclusion” that follows each part, showing the self-reflexivity of the text as a fictional fantasy, but also having awareness of its relationship with the real world. Coleridge, by ringing this “bell,” or Christa“bell,” connects his poetic world to the real world he inhabits. On a metafictional level, *Christabel* signals the connection between the literary world and the unstable times in which Coleridge lived.

The traumatizing uncertainty the poem presents may well be Coleridge's feelings toward the vicissitudes of society that even adhering to the seemingly unmoving literary classics cannot bring solace to him. Instead, it only engendered even more uncertainty and a pessimistic outlook.

Peter Kitson traced Coleridge's attitude towards the French Revolution in the 1790s, pointing out that Coleridge "appears to have become a supporter of the Revolution" (198) when he was at Cambridge. It was only until 1798 when Coleridge "was disillusioned with the French Revolution" and later retreated from politics (205). He might have anticipated a Miltonic redemption at the beginning of the French Revolution and a restoration. However, as the revolution progressed and turned sour, Coleridge lost hope in this regaining. This loss perhaps explains why the composition of *Christabel* ceased. Part 1 of the poem was allegedly composed in 1797 while the second part was written in 1800, after Coleridge felt the great disillusionment. Dissociating himself from politics, he leaves the poem permanently suspended in uncertainty and ambiguity, in turn forever imprisoning the narrator and the poetic world in that liminal space dominated by diabolical forces.

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**Ernest W. S. Yuen** (he/him) is an MPhil student in English Literary Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include poetry in the Romantic era, especially that of William Blake and John Keats, as well as the reception of Dante in Romanticism.