

A Queer Theory Reading of *Christabel* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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Elizabeth Susan Wahl suggests that during the eighteenth century, homosexual relations between women became an 'open secret' that was 'embedded and even coded within a multiplicity of ... medical, literary, and pornographic discourses'.¹ In Coleridge's *Christabel*, the homosexual relations between Geraldine and Christabel are 'embedded' within the literal 'bed' of consummation. It is in this 'bed' that the 'secret' of homoerotic desire becomes 'open' to the reader. However, whilst Coleridge allows the reader inclusion to the 'open secret' of homosexual relations, it remains just that, a secret.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her essay 'Epistemology of the closet'² names this idea of 'secret' homosexuality 'the closet'. The concept of 'the closet' delineates a social construct of homosexual repression which subjugates and conceals homosexual instincts. The image of a 'closet' is an apt metaphor as a literal closet conceals items of clothing, removing them from sight with a physical surrounding structure. Sedgwick applies this literal structure to the social structure of homosexual repression, stating: 'The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century.'³ However, examining Coleridge's eighteenth-century poem *Christabel* and its homoerotic undertones suggests that the figurative 'closet' is applicable not only 'in this century'. In *Christabel*, Coleridge presents an alternative item of furniture, the 'bed', that ironically serves to produce an antithetical effect. Whilst Sedgwick's 'closet' serves to repress homosexual

transgressions, the 'bed' Christabel shares with Geraldine actively brings these repressive and subconscious impulses to fruition. The 'bed' is therefore the 'closet' Christabel enters unknowingly. Entering the bed sparks her sexual awakening and acts as a catalyst for her homoerotic desires, juxtaposing the function of the 'closet' in which an individual knowledgeable of their homoerotic desires must repress them.

And thus the lofty lady spake—
'All they who live in the upper sky,
Do love you, holy Christabel!
And you love them, and for their sake
And for the good which me befel,
Even I in my degree will try,
Fair maiden, to requite you well.
But now unrobe yourself; for I
Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie.'

Quoth Christabel, So let it be!
And as the lady bade, did she.
Her gentle limbs did she undress,
And lay down in her loveliness.⁴

The rhyming couplet of 'I' and 'lie' at the conclusion of the stanza disrupts the ABCACBC rhyme scheme and attracts the reader's attention to the rhyming relation between the personal pronoun 'I' and the intransitive verb 'lie'. ('But now unrobe yourself; for I / Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie.') The stanza takes the form of Geraldine's direct speech, meaning the 'I' is in reference to herself and the 'lie' is in reference to the 'bed' in which she will 'lie'. The syntax ensures that the word 'I' visually surrounds 'lie' both atop and preceding,

1 Elizabeth Susan Wahl, *Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press 1999) 14 (as cited in Catherine Craft-Fairchild, 'Sexual and Textual Indeterminacy: Eighteenth-Century English Representations of Sapphism' (2006) 15(3) *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 408, 409).

2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Epistemology of the Closet' in Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (eds), *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (Columbia University Press 2003).

3 *ibid.*

4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Christabel' (first published 1816) in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Christabel & Kubla Khan* (e-artnow 2019).

5 *ibid.*

forcing the reader to associate the 'bed' with the image of Geraldine lying on it. This image of Geraldine following her imperative speech 'But now unrobe yourself'⁶ gives the bed sexual connotations, as the reader becomes aware that the 'unrobe(d)' Christabel and Geraldine will 'lie' in 'bed' together. The imperative but flattering rhetoric of Geraldine 'Fair maiden, to requite you well. / But now unrobe yourself',⁷ where 'fair maiden' and 'unrobe yourself' are in close conjunction, leads the reader to suspect that the impending relations within the 'bed' may not be platonic. Whether Christabel herself is aware of the suggestive nature of Geraldine's rhetoric is unclear, but her exclamatory 'So let it be!'⁸ implies her eager responsiveness and unchallenging coercion to Geraldine's commands.

Sedgwick notes the conceptual inseparability between knowledge and sex, suggesting that 'ignorance' becomes 'sexual ignorance'. The 'wide eye' trope the poem associates with Christabel within the narrative 'her fair large eyes 'gan glitter bright'⁹ and 'raised to heaven her eyes so blue'¹⁰ implies her innocence and thus lack of 'sexual knowledge' to the reader. The reader, according to Sedgwick, is therefore placed in a position of power. 'The position of those who think they know something about one that one may not know oneself is an excited and empowered one.'¹¹ The combining suggestive factors of Geraldine's rhetoric forewarn homosexual relations within the 'bed' that Christabel seems 'sexually ignorant' to. If the now sexually charged 'bed' acts as a symbol for Christabel's homoerotic sexual awakening, the ease of her coercion to 'undress' and 'lay down in her loveliness'¹² by an unknown woman advocates an already present but subconscious sexually transgressive desire, meaning despite her 'sexual ignorance' the 'bed' is able to awaken this desire within her.

But through her brain of weal and woe
So many thoughts moved to and fro,
That vain it were her lids to close;
So half-way from the bed she rose,
And on her elbow did recline
To look at the lady Geraldine.

Beneath the lamp the lady bowed,
And slowly rolled her eyes around;
Then drawing in her breath aloud,
Like one that shuddered, she unbound
The cincture from beneath her breast:
Her silken robe, and inner vest,
Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side—
A sight to dream of, not to tell!
O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!¹³

A volta occurs when Christabel becomes active in the sexual exchange, warning the reader to her sexual awakening: 'So half-way from the bed she rose, / and on her elbow did recline, / To look at the lady Geraldine.'¹⁴ Christabel begins to observe Geraldine through the male gaze in place of being the one observed, the disruption of the poem's prosody by the spondaic foot "To look"

disrupts the reader's iambic meter and focuses on the observational quality of the rhetoric. This volta, Christabel's interest in observing Geraldine's form, occurs once she physically places herself on the bed: 'So half-way from the bed she rose'.¹⁵ The 'bed' thus acts as a catalytic symbol for the emergence of sexual awakening, bringing forth the sexual desires of Christabel, not repressing them as Sedgwick's 'closet'. The effect is not immediate however, with the compound 'half-way' suggesting a transition between 'sexual ignorance' and 'sexual knowledge'.

Sedgwick's 'closet' does become relevant however once Christabel's homoerotic yearnings are brought to fruition. The final stanza deconstructs the female anatomical form—'eyes', 'breast', 'feet', 'bosom'¹⁶—whilst employing plosive alliterative 'b's, rhyming couplets, and the continuing bounding iambic tetrameter to accelerate the readerly experience of the stanza. The repeated female anatomical language and hastening readerly tempo mimics Christabel's visual digestion of the female form and subsequent overwhelming sexual desire. The consequent acceleration bounds the reader towards the poetic climax, mimicking in the prosody the acceleration towards Christabel's sexual climax. The deconstruction of the female form insists that the female body is viewed through the male gaze, despite the lack of any male presence. The newly discovered 'sexual knowledge' of Christabel as a result of the sexually charged 'bed' insists an entry into patriarchal attitudes towards the female body as a sex object. Coleridge's text further suggests that this sexualised attitude of the male gaze is corrupting to the feminine and virginal 'sweet Christabel', who must be 'shield(ed)' from sexual discovery.

Despite this, Christabel's sexual desire becomes evident through exclamatory language: 'Behold! her bosom and half her side'.¹⁷ This connotes exuberance, and the plosive alliterative 'B' of 'Behold' couples this exuberance with the 'bosom' of Christabel's female counterpart. Now that Christabel's sexual desires are plain, being brought to the forefront by the catalytic 'bed', Sedgwick's social 'closet' becomes relevant. Christabel now must 'not to tell'¹⁸ of her sexual transgressions, 'shield(ing)' and repressing them socially in order to uphold her socio-normative 'sweet' and heterosexual appearance. Therefore, although the 'bed' brings Christabel's repressed sexual desires to the forefront, the realisation of these desires ultimately forces her into Sedgwick's inevitable 'closet'.

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.*

8 *ibid.*

9 *ibid.*

10 *ibid.*

11 Sedgwick (n 2).

12 Coleridge (n 4).

13 *ibid.*

14 *ibid.*

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.*

17 *ibid.*

18 *ibid.*