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Geraldine from Coleridge's *Christabel* as an Image of an Early Vampire

Since Geraldine's origin remains a subject for speculation among scholars, to pronounce her as being a vampire may provoke initial doubts. Depending on different opinions, she is respectively identified as a witch, a fairy, a projection of Christabel's personality or even a devilish force (Liggins 1977, Strickland 1977, Spatz 1975, Ulmer 2007). Even if Geraldine cannot be called a "vampire" in the sense of the word understood from the 20th – and 21st – century perspective, it appears feasible to provide enough evidence from the text to distinguish her as an entity possessing some features of a vampire (Strickland 1977, Senf 1988, Henderson 1990, Davenport-Hines 1998, Lecouteux 2007, Smith 2008).

As suggested above, the image of Geraldine should be investigated first in relation to the folk tradition. Undoubtedly, Part I of the poem abounds in supernatural details typical for the folklore not only of England and Scotland but also of other European countries (Liggins 1977). They create the atmosphere of anxiety and unease as well as denominate Geraldine as a supernatural creature. The most obvious starting point for the analysis is to study the time and place of her appearance:

> 'Tis the middle of night by the castle clock
> And the owls have awakened the crowing cock;
> […] [A] toothless mastiff, which
> From her kennel beneath the rock
> Maketh answer to the clock,
> Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour;[1]
>
> (lines 1, 2, 7-10)

Night, with its supernaturally-prone hour of midnight, appears the favourite operation time for all kinds of "preternatural" forces. As Liggins (94) points out, owls hooting, a dog howling and a cock crowing at this unusual hour, "presage an untoward event, and this feeling of uneasiness is increased by the references to the shrunken form of the full moon and the late spring":

> The moon is behind, and at the full;
> And yet she looks both small and dull.
> […] 't is a month before the month of May,
>
> (lines 18, 19 and 21)

Although spring is typically perceived as the time of fertility and rebirth, Liggins argues that April was considered an unlucky month in general. The description of the moon also deserves a thorough

[1] All quotations from *Christabel* come from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Sixth Edition*.

examination as its full shape obviously refers to the menstrual cycle of a female body (Heller 1996) and to the approach of a new cycle – bringing a change of things. This evokes a direct link with blood and bleeding that, in turn, leads straight to the image of a vampire. What is more, the moon shrinks before Geraldine's entrance, as she dismisses the restorative influence of moonlight (Auerbach 1995) and glows with her own light (lines 58-60).

Geraldine appears in a forest, a hotbed of fairies, Devil and departed spirits, under an oak – a tree sacred in English folklore (May 1997); additionally, it is covered in green moss and mistletoe, parasites, of which the latter was traditionally attributed with magical properties. Even the use of colours, green standing for fairies and white – for ghosts and the dead, establishes strong connection with the supernatural (Liggins 1977). Christabel views Geraldine as:

> […] a damsel bright,
> Dressed in a 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;
>
> (lines 58-62)
>
> I guess, 't was frightful there to see
> A lady so richly clad as she –
> Beautiful exceedingly!
>
> (lines 66-68)

Her beauty appears so excessive and disturbing that it seems unnatural or even uncanny, stressed with the exclamation mark in line 68 and by Christabel herself, who instinctively summons the Virgin's protection: "Mary mother, save me now!" (line 69) at the sight of the lady. Consequently, this allows perceiving Geraldine as a female vampire, since one of the most important features of a she-vampire is her alluring, "lofty" (line 384) and statuesque beauty that poses an irresistible temptation to a future lover (Zwolińska 2002). The next thing that draws readers' attention in the stanza depicting Geraldine are her "blue-veined" and "unsandal'd" feet (line 63), which sound suspicious in her generally whitish description. According to May, they remind of "the custom of burying the dead without shoes" (703). Additionally, the term "blue-veined" suggests the "blue blood" – the noble ancestry, dignity and delicacy. Still, being a cold colour, blue echoes the quality of deathly coldness.

The moat, the iron gate with its key and the threshold represent typical barriers for all kinds of evil forces (Lecouteux 2007). Since Liggins puts forward an idea that Geraldine passes the moat only because Christabel accompanies her, or that Christabel literally has to carry Geraldine through the gate as she faints just in front of it (lines 129-132), then it seems reasonable to argue that Geraldine manifests potential vampiric qualities. For vampires, being the living dead, cannot pass over water by themselves and, being damned by God, they cannot cross the threshold of a house guarded by the "holy spell" (Liggins 1977: 97, Davenport-Hines 1998, Lecouteux 2007, Smith 2008). Interestingly, after finding herself inside the castle, Geraldine mysteriously and immediately recovers.

Coming back to the damned nature of vampires, it should be symptomatic of them to resent Christianity in all its forms. Subsequently, Geraldine declines to pray with Christabel to the Virgin,

supposedly due to "weariness" (line 142). She also faints again, this time in front of a burning lamp "with twofold silver chain" (line 182), a material protecting from evil (Lecouteux 2007). Here it is also necessary to mention the fact that the lamp's light may as well exert negative influence on Geraldine as she belongs to the creatures of the night (Liggins 1977).

Furthermore, the lady's ambiguous deformity revealed by the shocked narrator in lines 252 and 253: "Behold! her bosom and half her side- /A sight to dream of, not to tell!" may correspond to witch's bosom marked by the Devil (Liggins 1977), as well as display marks of her vampiric initiation – the bite, since Auerbach suggests that both in *Christabel* and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* it is the bosom that becomes the primary object of blood-drinking ritual.

The angry moan of "the mastiff bitch" (lines 148-150), the sudden outburst of dying fire (lines 147-151) or the mesmerising snake eye of Geraldine (lines 160, 575-578) intensify the estrangement from the human world. Dogs were believed to respond aggressively to the presence of vampires and other evil spirits (Liggins 1977), whereas bursting flames induce connotation with the fire of hell. As far as Geraldine's curious gaze is concerned, an analogy may be established between her faculty and a tradition of vampires hypnotizing and so paralysing their victims (Janion 2002). Amongst all the evidence of Geraldine's vampirism, data located in lines 370 to 380 is the hardest to reject:

> And Christabel awoke and spied
> The same who lay down by her side-
> O rather say, the same whom she
> Raised up beneath the old oak tree!
> Nay, fairer yet! and yet more fair!
> For she belike hath drunken deep
> Of all the blessedness of sleep!
> And while she spake, her looks, her air,
> Such gentle thankfulness declare,
> That (so it seemed) her girded vests
> Grew tight beneath her breasts.

To compare, let us take a look at Christabel during her sleep in Geraldine's arms:

> Her face, oh call it fair not pale,
> (line 289)
> And, if she move unquietly,
> Perchance, 't is but the blood so free
> Comes back and tingles in her feet.
> (lines 323-325)

We may easily spot changes that occur almost simultaneously in the appearances of both heroines; Geraldine becomes even more stunning, whereas some sort of sickness befalls Christabel, just as if her bed companion were feeding on her and "hath drunken deep/ Of all the blessedness of sleep!" (lines 375, 376). So much did Geraldine use the poor girl that now her vests seem too narrow.

Although no vampire kiss is explicitly stated, the use of the verb "to drink" and the description of Christabel's blood *again* flowing freely and coming *back* to her body are here essential and quite persuasive.

Christabel and Geraldine may be alleged as binary oppositions of good and evil, of innocence and corruptibility. However, this interpretation proves too narrow and stripping the poem of its symbolic meaning. Even the fact that Coleridge himself was unable to finish his work seems to confirm his indecision about the plot's further development, about Geraldine being either a demon or an angel (Strickland 1977) and about the story's final significance (Taylor 2002). The two parts of the poem may disclose this last hesitancy. While in Part I the stress falls on the two heroines' complex relationship and on the atmosphere "full of ambiguities" (Henderson 1990: 886), Part II is characterised by the "use of a relatively straightforward imagery" (Henderson 1990: 886), where Christabel becomes for Geraldine nothing more than a means to reach her father, Sir Leoline, "if any […] inner motivation can be ascribed to [Geraldine]" at all (Taylor 2002: 720).

Bringing to a close the analysis of folk elements in *Christabel*, it becomes essential to return to the moment of her appearance to explore its possible psychological meaning. As Spatz (111) observes "Christabel first meets Geraldine in a sexually charged atmosphere"; Christabel steals to the forest to pray in the middle of the night for her absent lover. Liggins sees in her behaviour reference to folk traditions of love rituals, but Taylor (711) emphasises the apparent anti-familial escape from the protection of the father:

> [A] young woman on the verge of puberty venturing forth, defying her father, his walls, his guards, his rules, and his morbidity, acting on her own, inviting a young and unknown woman hospitably to her castle chamber, and making all the moves that will accomplish her own suddenly upsurging sexual desires.

Then Geraldine materialises as if in response to Christabel's prayers (Spatz 1975). Both Spatz and Henderson indicate that Geraldine fools her victim into intimacy by letting Christabel identify with her. She evokes confidence mixed with compassion and immediately tries to establish her power over Christabel by physical contact (line 102) (Liggins 1977). Astonishingly, the title heroine seems impatient to consummate their relationship, disregarding ominous signs of Geraldine's origin. She proposes the lady a shared bed (lines 121, 122), carries her across the threshold (lines 130-132), revives Geraldine with cordial vine (line 191) and excitedly watches her disrobe (lines 239-244) (Spatz 1975). Thus, until the moment of undressing it is Christabel who takes an active role in seduction.

Nevertheless, one should not be misled by Geraldine's initial reluctant passivity. In the forest her powers lie hidden to entrap the unsuspecting victim. According to Henderson they reveal themselves in Geraldine's narrative about her kidnapping: "Five warriors seized me yestermorn," (line 81) and "And they rode furiously behind." (line 86). She had been captured by warriors, i.e. by those who arrive to disrupt the established order. Paradoxically, the line 86 suggests that instead of being escorted she leads them, thus she is the one who instigates changes. Although Geraldine's "revolutionary energy" (Henderson 1990: 883) sounds rather vague for the moment, later it shall be enhanced in line 225: "[l]ike a lady of a far countree", where Geraldine personifies the ideas of

oddity, unusual and forthcoming unknown that shall invade Sir Leoline's dominion. Needless to say, these three qualities appear to be constituents characterizing vampires and the chief motif that accompanies them – the invasion.

Until entering Christabel's chamber Geraldine may possess some features of a Gothic double; to a certain degree she may embody the projection of Christabel's silent repressed desires. However, after a victorious but exhausting duel with the ghost of Christabel's mother (lines 211-219) the mysterious guest acquires as well the place of the mother's protecting spirit (Spatz 1975, Taylor 2002):

> And lo! the worker of these harms,
> That holds the maiden in her arms,
> Seems to slumber still and mild,
> As a mother with her child.
>
> (lines 298-301)

What is more, May proposes a reading that views Geraldine's deformity as a sign of degeneracy, further enhanced by Geraldine personifying Christabel's mother with her bosom as "a perversion of the nourishing breast of the mother" (710). In other words, Christabel becomes tainted and infected with Geraldine's corruption; the unspoken sexual act combines with death and disease (May 1997, Zwolińska 2002) – a classic recipe for vampires and their deadly kiss.

Although this fragment may suggest Christabel's capacity to feel sexual fulfilment exclusively through her mother's figure, I would rather incline towards the interpretation of a more dominant and mature woman guiding the younger girl from innocence to experience, possibly through an unspoken sexual act, but also overpowering her with the force of authoritarian will (Taylor 2002). Yet, shortly before the scene of Christabel's subjection, in an unequivocally erotic scene of undressing, Geraldine furnishes the readers with an opportunity to leave her ruthlessness "open to question" (May 1997: 704):

> Yet Geraldine nor speaks nor stirs:
> Ah! what a stricken look was hers!
> Deep from within she seems half-way
> To lift some weight with sick assay,
> And eyes the maid and seeks delay;
> Then suddenly, as one defied,
> Collects herself in scorn and pride,
> And lay down 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:
>
> (lines 255-266)
>
> This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow;
>
> (line 270)

Spatz (111) argues that "Geraldine is the projection of [Christabel's] sexuality, with its desire, fear, shame, and pleasure. The 'witchcraft' that makes her beautiful or ugly, inviting or menacing, depends on Christabel's changing attitude towards herself". To my mind, this analysis slightly diminishes the figure of Geraldine, for Spatz puts the stress on the figure of an absent knight, who might be mentioned barely to indicate the stage of mental development Christabel reaches at the beginning of the ballad. Taking into consideration the vampiric interpretation, the above-quoted passages may indicate a moment of hesitation, when it becomes visible that Geraldine does not necessarily accept her state. Maybe she foresees that her actions will lead Christabel to destruction and this produces in her revulsion towards herself, staining her body with the "seal of sorrow and shame". Following this mode of thinking, Geraldine appeals to Christabel:

'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 befell,
Even I in my degree will try,
Fair maiden, to requite you well.
(lines 227-232)

Her speech tastes bitter and cynical and indicates that the speaker does not have purely bad intensions towards the fair maiden; it is Christabel who will have to find strength to cope with the "revolutionary energy" (Henderson 1990: 883) and it only depends on her if she will survive or fall under the burden of the new knowledge. In this light Geraldine should be regarded as a force of changes, a female sexual potential that transgresses limits set by the patriarchy and alters a girl subdued to the male order. Geraldine passes the "female knowledge" (Heller 1996: 79) to Christabel, but the maiden proves too feeble to embrace the message. The narrator's naïve reassurance sounds ironic "that saints will aid if men will call: / For the blue sky bends over all." (lines 330, 331). The world, including the forces of good, is to watch indifferently what happens to Christabel (Taylor 2002).

Together with the touch of Geraldine's bosom a spell is cast on Christabel – she shall be unable to reveal the truth about her guest; in that second Geraldine irreversibly takes control over "the lovely lady" (line 38). The disturbed sleep of Christabel (lines 292-296, 311-326), which displays sexual connotations, and the two comments made by the narrator during the sleep sequence signal the apparent negative change that is taking place in Christabel:

[…] Can this be she,
The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree?
(lines 296, 297)
A star hath set, a star hath risen
(line 302)

Christabel's star sets when she subsides and loses her will, while Geraldine's rises as she grows in strength. Although this ineffective transmission of female power has sometimes been interpreted

positively, as "a successful recapturing of the lost mother, the recuperation of neglected infancy, or a bland peace following initiation into mature sexuality, in my view the descriptions point to a sinister overtaking: the resigned obedience" (Taylor 2002: 713). Following Taylor's reception of the poem, we may regard the process happening as the absorption and obliteration of the innocent young female by the older one. The seduction of Christabel is not sexual but mostly psychological, which may be deduced from her aftermath behaviour; Christabel's "impulse […] of sudden sexual quest […] misfires, and she is absorbed by the (M)other she has lured to her bed" (Taylor 2002: 718). Here, it seems appropriate to once again recall the image of a vampire, since Geraldine sucks life out of Christabel, even if it is understood as Christabel's sense of identity rather than her blood. One should also acknowledge Ulmer's analysis of the two heroines' names to grasp the inevitable doom of Christabel. Ulmer underlines the fact that "Geraldine" is the anagram of "Dire Angel", while "Christabel" combines the names of Christ and Abel, the two most prominent victim figures in Christian culture.

As Geraldine takes what she wants, a new day rises and the heroines are joined by two other characters. Christabel is already devastated not only by her personal experience, but also by the realisation that she has let "a sexual predator" through the back door (Smith 2008: 55):

> 'Sure I have sinned!' said Christabel,
> 'Now heaven be praised if all be well!'
> (lines 381, 382)

These lines may indicate the mechanism of displacement that took place when the experience with Geraldine turned out to be too traumatic for Christabel (Taylor 2002). Here also Geraldine's focus changes, as though she admitted her failure with Christabel and moved to the next point on her vampiric schedule – Sir Leoline.

As Spatz (113) indicates, Christabel's relationship with her father is "extremely complex, [as] the Baron's love for his daughter is distorted by the knowledge that his wife died in childbirth". Additionally, Sir Leoline grieves over the breach of friendship with Sir Roland. Once again, Geraldine uses the method of insinuating herself into her victim's favour by evoking sympathy and sense of identification and familiarity (Henderson 1990, Auerbach 1995) (lines 427-430). Interestingly, Leoline's desire to reawaken his friendship with Sir Roland using Geraldine soon becomes accompanied by an erotic lure:

> And now the tears were on his face,
> And fondly in his arms he took
> Fair Geraldine who met the embrace,
> Prolonging it with joyous look.
> (lines 447-451)

In his arms, Geraldine replaces Christabel as well as takes place of the diseased mother, a thing Christabel could have never done (Spatz 1975, May 1997, Taylor 2002). For Spatz this incestuous rivalry between two heroines evokes in Christabel the horror of repressed oedipal feelings towards her father:

She shrunk and shuddered, and saw again-
(Ah, woe is me! Was it for thee,
Thou gentle maid! such sights to see?)
(lines 455-457)

This results in bringing back the remembrance of "that bosom old, / […] that bosom cold" (lines 457, 458) – the repulsion of sexuality, but also signals the "final abandonment" (Taylor 2002: 717) that ultimately obliterates the mute and enchanted Christabel. The further loss of free will and personal identity are implied (Taylor 2002) for instance in lines 589 to 593, but especially in:

The maid, alas! her thoughts are gone,
She nothing sees – no sight but one! […]
So deeply had she drunken in
That look, those shrunken serpent eyes,
That all her features were resigned
To this sole image in her mind:
And passively did imitate
That look of dull and treacherous hate! […]
As far as such a look could be
In eyes so innocent and blue!
(lines 599, 600, 603-608, 613, 614)

Christabel turns into a mere puppet, the only thing she is capable of is to imitate her silencer, "out of her vacancy of person" (Taylor 2002: 718).

While in the first part Geraldine has been waking Christabel's sexuality suppressed by the oppression of a distant father, by the estrangement from other women and by a sense of guilt typical for orphaned children (Spatz 1975, Taylor 2002), in Part II she transforms into a wave of destructive female force. Thus Geraldine may be perceived as remaining in conflict with patriarchal culture. It becomes the goal of this unstable, elusive femininity to destroy the patriarchy from the inside, personified by Sir Leoline whose "unwillingness to change […], ironically, leaves him unable to resist change effectively" (Henderson 1990: 896).

To complete the analysis, it is necessary to summon Bard Bracy's dream of a dove and "a bright green snake / Coiled around its wings and neck" (lines 551, 552), where respectively the serpent symbolises Geraldine and the dove – Christabel. May (713) points out that

> the dream imagery associates the snake with the healing power of greenery and herbs, fertility and health. The relationship between the snake and dove is symbiotic – '[S]welling its neck as she swelled hers!' (line 554) – not predatory, with an innocent dove the victim of the snake's violation.

Yet this view stands in opposition to Spatz's (113) interpretation of the snake representing "the primal sexual sin, death's origin and […] phallic potency that frightens the young girl". Perhaps,

it is possible that May's reading may be appropriate to Part I only, whilst Spatz's belongs directly to Part II – their interpretations interchange just as Geraldine changes.

Christabel in its fragmentary form may appear more enthralling than it would ever have been as a finished piece, most likely due to Geraldine's indeterminacy. Still, on the basis of the evidence specified and analysed above, her origin may be called "supernatural". The given arguments also allow for looking at her as an early representative of the vampire motif in literature, whose features yet remain undefined and unstable, even though she proves to be tightly connected with the folk world of the preternatural.

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STRESZCZENIE

W artykule przestudiowano postać Geraldine z *Christabel* Coleridge'a jako wczesny przykład wampira w literaturze angielskiej. Przeanalizowane zostały elementy folkloru obecne w utworze, które definiują ją jako postać nadprzyrodzoną o potencjale wampirycznym. Ponadto nakreślona została potencjalna interpretacja bohaterki jako wampirycznego źródła ekspansywnej kobiecej seksualności czy destrukcyjnej siły wymierzonej w patriarchat.