Temptations and the Doctrine of the Fall in *Christabel*.
The “Good-Spell” According to S.T. Coleridge

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Coleridge’s religious views changed all through his lonesome life. Despite his reconversion to Anglicanism after an active membership amongst the Unitarians and the Socinians, he was constantly troubled by the thought of the inexplicable entrance of evil in one’s existence and by a piercing sense of guilt for his sins. He sought to find God’s forgiveness and feel His love. Coleridge imbued with such feelings the title characters of some of his works, for instance *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* and *Christabel*. In both cases no chance is given them to repent of their transgressions. They are denied God’s grace, and are led to the point of no return. *Christabel* is the story of innocence and purity violated by sin. In a setting of ambiguity, if not disorder, Geraldine twists Christabel’s simplicity and inexperience, offering false protection. Such apparent truths beguile Christabel and introduce her to carnality. Geraldine’s spell brings spiritual destruction and never-ending misery on Christabel and her father, Sir Leoline. *Christabel* mirrors Coleridge’s views on the doctrine of the Fall. The story itself, the Bible and the author’s consideration of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as a literary mediator are merely a pretext for him to express his theological concerns and spiritual anxieties while giving vent to his heavy-laden vocation as a poet.

“and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil”

*(John 3:19)*

*Christabel* emerged laboriously from Coleridge’s pen and faced great opposition which caused the author much anguish. Scholars debate about the sources and sundry readings behind the poem. Considering Coleridge’s literary and personal experiences might be useful in the attempt to reconstruct his intentions in writing *Christabel*. In “Summary of Introductory Essays”, in *The Friend*, he mentions his reading of Gothic fiction and *The Arabian Nights*; and in a notebook, he recounts the insights he received from the mystical writings of St Teresa of Ávila (Rooke 1969: 148 and Coburn 1973: 3911). In “Opinions in
Religion and Politics”*, *Biographia Literaria* § 10, he mentions the sensations he felt during his night walks in the Quantock Hills with the Wordsworths, his early dreams and childhood sufferings at Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire (Engell and Bate 1983: 196). Finally, in his preface to *Christabel*, the poet states that the first part of the poem was written in 1797 at Stowey, Somerset, and the second in 1800 at Keswick, Cumberland, after his return from Germany.

*Christabel* was published together with *Kubla Khan* and *The Pains of Sleep* in 1816. The poem was meant to be inserted in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. A page of Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal, dated Monday 6th October 1800, reports that despite the original involvement, her brother William decided not to print it in the *Lyrical Ballads* since it would not fit into a volume whose preface is introductory to poetry of ordinary events and common life (Woof 2002: 24). Wordsworth substituted *Christabel* with his own 200-line *Michael*. Such a trick was a fly in the face of a long friendship which was never to be the same again. In a letter to Francis Wrangham, 19th December 1800, Coleridge was deeply hurt and cast down to great depression, to the point of calling himself a “metaphysician” whilst extolling Wordsworth as “the true Poet” (Griggs 1966: 658). *Christabel* was renowned before its publication as Coleridge had circulated the first part amongst his friends and some contemporary poets, who broadly gave it a positive reception. From the last chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, however, one learns that after its publication, with very few exceptions, *Christabel* was attacked in a “spirit of bitterness as though it were the most pitiable of efforts” due to its complexity for a large audience (Engell and Bate 1983: 238-39).

As a matter of fact, Coleridge embeds in the story and in the characters some faded and mythologised echoes of the Middle Ages. He also endows the poem with a supernatural dimension which is constitutive of the Gothic tradition (Ashton 1988: 183-84). As he had already experimented with *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* – so Lord Byron did in *Childe Harold* – he combines stylistic

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1 The poem was read by Crabb Robinson and Robert Southey. It was also given to Percy Bysshe Shelley, who admired it. Sir Walter Scott imitated some stylistic and metrical aspects in his Gothic and balladesque poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805). In a note to *The Siege of Corinth* (1816), Lord Byron points out a close, unintentional resemblance of his lines 521-32 with *Christabel* (Holmes 1998: 258, 293, 414, 579). Crawford’s study expands on the literary debt that the foregoing poets had in relation to *Christabel* (1996: 1-25).
aspects of ballads and folk tales. The true innovation is Coleridge’s metrical change. In the preface to Christabel, he explains that it consists in “the counting in each line of the accents, not the syllables”. In “Origin and Elements of Metre”, Biographia Literaria § 18, he argues that “if meter originates passion, the achieved poem exemplifies the interpretation of passion and will, of spontaneous impulse and voluntary purpose” (Engell and Bate 1983: 65). Christabel breaks with the poetic clichés of the time. The alternation of tenses from past to present is expression of Coleridge’s cry for freedom. In addition, his refusal of received poetic forms is a counterpart of his life-long rejection of the established systems of belief. The purpose of this essay is to analyse the ambiguity of Christabel, Geraldine, and their relationship, and relate it to Coleridge’s multifaceted theological views, considering his affiliation to Unitarianism, Socinianism and his reconversion to Anglicanism.

1. Coleridge’s Church Affiliations and Conversions

Like other Romantics, Coleridge was profoundly distressed by the filth of both secular and religious institutions. He sought any possible escape to search for inner peace. In his days at the university of Cambridge, he was introduced to innovative political and theological ideas then considered radical, including those of his friend Robert Southey, whom he joined in the plan, soon abandoned to found Pantisocracy in the wilderness of Pennsylvania (Allen 1985: 103), where his Unitarian mentor Joseph Priestley had taken up residence following

2 For Stork, Coleridge does not use in Christabel the balladesque style as successfully as in The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere (1914: 322-26). Eilenberg believes that it is part of the binding connection between voice and literary property: “it is essential rather than accidental” (1992: 89).

3 As Russett points out, Coleridge’s innovation is not merely a mechanical issue, its “originality does not consist in the repression of sonic matter, but in its mastery” (2003: 775-76). For Bate, Coleridge’s innovation is just a disaggregation of metrical feet (1968: 67).

4 Coleridge further explains: “this occasional variation in number of syllables is not introduced wantonly, […] but in correspondence with some transition in the nature of the imagery or passion” (Mays 2001: 481-82).

5 For Snell, such “irregularity” is a well-balanced metrical system, since the text mostly alternates iambic and anapaestic meter (1919: 428, 432). See also Snell’s later views on the subject (1929: 93-115) and McKim 1993: 74-8.
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his emigration to the New World (Ashton 1988: 52). Young rebellious Samuel, the last of thirteen children of the late vicar of the Parish Church of Ottery St Mary, Revd John Coleridge, abandoned his family’s plan for him to enter the Anglican ministry. In his essay “A Modest Proposal for abolishing the Church of England” (The Courier: 1 April 1812), he denounced his early discontent in the “toad priesthood” of the established Church (Erdman 1978: 345). He was influenced by the radical William Frend, a Fellow of Jesus College, who introduced him to Unitarianism around 1795 (Wilde 1919: 160 and Perry 2000: 11-12). Coleridge was attracted by the Unitarian orthodoxy and joined it. He became an active member insomuch that, in a letter dated January 1798, addressed to John Cottle, he wondered whether to pursue a career as a poet or to enter the ministry (Turnbull 1911: 143). In Biographia Literaria § 10, Coleridge writes that he was a lay Trinitarian “ad normam Platonis” in philosophy and Unitarian in religion. His stay in Germany and his new approach to philosophy reinforced his Trinitarian ideas.

On the Constitution of the Church and State (Colmer 1976: xli-xliii) reveals how some historical events such as the Union with Ireland, the failure of democracy in France, the rise of Napoleon, and the Emperor’s concordat of 1801, which was negotiated with the Holy See and later signed with the Roman Church in France, led Coleridge to reassess his whole conception of the relationship between State and the Established Church that he had criticised so acrimoniously in his youth. In two letters to his brother, Revd George Coleridge (3 June and 29 July 1802), the poet states that his previous objections to the Church of England were “wholly removed” both in secular and in theological terms (Griggs 1956: 803, 829). And an epistle to George Fricker, believed by Joseph Cottle to have been written in 1807, reads: “I was for many years a Socinian […] I read the New Testament again, and I became fully convinced, that Socinianism was not only the doctrine of the New Testament, but that it scarcely deserved the name of religion in any sense” (Turnbull 1911: 23). Despite this sharp utterance, Coleridge’s defection from both Socinianism and/or Unitarianism was quite painful (McElderry 1937: 416). The answer came in a flash of revelation on 12th February 1805. In The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge by James Gillman, reports Coleridge’s comments on Horsley’s letters in reply to Priestley’s objections to the Trinity: “No Christ, no God! This I now

6 The thirteenth lecture on the history of philosophy (1818) shows the great influence that Priestley had in Coleridge’s early thought (Jackson 2000: 562).
feel with all its needful evidence of the understanding: would to God my spirit were made conform thereto – that no Trinity, no God! That Unitarianism in all its forms is idolatry” (1838: 30). Thus, inspired by the German Trinitarian metaphysics, Coleridge developed his own vision of Christianity (Hedley 2000: 20).

2. A Doctrinal Background

The theological core of Christabel is the doctrine of the Fall as set forth in the teachings of St Paul, with the poetic mediation of Paradise Lost. One should also consider the poet’s obsession with the original sin and the evil which enters one’s existence. These aspects inclined Coleridge’s religious orientation towards “desperatio salutis”. The latter issue and his belief of permanent guilt often turned his life into an ongoing quest for personal forgiveness – at least on a rational theological level. On the other hand, on the poetic level, Coleridge always puts this issue into question and tends to leave his characters to be acted upon by fate – to the point of no return, since they are out of salvation’s reach and God’s grace (Ulmer 2005: 385-96).

When our primeval parents ate of the forbidden fruit, they became subject to sin and death (Gen. 3: 1-24). According to Pauline eschatology, since God knew that the Fall would occur, He sent his Son to Earth to redeem the posterity of Adam. Jesus Christ came in the meridian of time to atone for the consequences brought about by the Fall and for man’s own sins on condition of man’s repentance: “for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). Through his sacrifice, He conquered death and granted mortals resurrection and eternal life. By obeying the teachings of Christ, man can become clean from sin and overcome spiritual death – such aid is given through the Saviour: “by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5: 2). Mortals need God’s grace due to Adam’s transgression and their own sins. Jesus Christ offers his mercy and pays the penalty of the penitent: “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he has saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5). The unrepentant must personally pay the penalty.

In Paradise Lost III.103-111, Milton’s theological position on the Fall is clearly stated: it is a fortunate event in God’s plan. Milton insists on the worth of

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8 All references to Paradise Lost are taken from the edition of Carey and Fowler (1968).
free agency in relation to the Fall of man; without such a transgression, man would not benefit from free agency: “What pleasure I from such obedience paid, / When will and reason (reason is also choice) / Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled, / Made passive both” (ll. 107-11). Adam’s transgression is rather a “felix culpa”.

In Book XII.469-73, Milton explains that, without free agency, Adam and Eve would not know good from evil and could not fall short of perfection before God. So, as Marshall writes in his essay (1961: 15-18), there would be no need of a Saviour and God’s plan would be frustrated: “O goodness infinite, goodness immense! | That all this good of evil shall produce, | And evil turn to good; more wonderful | Than that which by creation first brought forth Light out of darkness!”.

Milton’s theological issues play a key role in *Christabel*. In fact, Christabel and Geraldine’s relationship is based on Coleridge’s play on the veiled ambiguity behind these doctrines. Adam’s transgression, the idea of guilt and the origin of evil are controversial matter due to Coleridge’s faltering amongst the different visions of the original sin of the Christian churches he belonged to. At first, he was influenced by Joseph Priestley, the theologian who introduced him to Unitarianism. The latter refused to endorse the orthodox doctrine of original sin. In *The History of the Corruption of Christianity*, mainly in the fourth chapter, “The History and Opinions concerning Grace, Original Sin and Predestination”, Priestley considers St Paul’s teaching “for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) simply a statement that shows how death is a consequence of Adam’s transgression (Rutt 1818: 158-59). Yet, Coleridge did not follow Priestley unfailingly. In a letter to John Thelwall, dated 13 May, 1796, the poet agrees with the theologian’s denial of vicarious sin and guilt. Contemporary to his writing of the first part of *Christabel*, around March 1798, he tells his brother George that he is a most steadfast believer in the original sin (Griggs 1966: 212, 396).

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9 For further explanations on Milton’s perception of Adam and Eve’s Fall as a “felix culpa”, see Ulreich 1971: 352.

10 Lovejoy’s essay (1937: 161-79) is a complete study on Milton’s views on the fortunate fall.

11 The problem of the origin of evil is a recurring theme. Coleridge was deeply influenced by Milton’s views. For further reference, see DiBenedetto 1988: 813-15.
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3. A Christian Reading

Coleridge’s use of language and imagery is ambiguous; he beguiles his reader repeatedly with apparent truths, and oxymoronic scenarios or descriptions. Coleridge leaves hither and thither some misleading hints as to the characterisation of both Christabel and Geraldine. Like The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere, Christabel leads one into a “visionary” dimension. The poem is characterised by a gloomy atmosphere and deep darkness: both within the characters’ souls and in the environment. The light shines rarely; at sunrise the consequences of evil actions are already in place and characters are already at the point of no return. At l. 1, there are specific time and place references: “‘Tis middle of night by the castle clock”. The stillness of the night is broken and animals start to cry. Something mysterious is about to take place in the lands of Sir Leoline, the rich Baron. Coleridge’s picture of animals is powerful: the owls’ cry awakens the crowing cock; though old, the mastiff bitch has a great sensitivity; she perceives what human beings cannot and, as a result, she is the only one to understand the doomed destiny of Sir Leoline’s family.

Christabel is alone in the wood, pleading fervently to God for her betrothed knight (ll. 23-57). The narrator introduces sweet Christabel as a fair and innocent maid, a Christ-like figure. As in medieval poetry, mainly in ballads, characters are referred to by epithets, titles or formulaic variations to impress a distinctive vice or virtue upon the readers’ mind. Throughout the poem, Christabel is called: “holy”, “lovely lady”, “sweet”. The woodland setting is not accidental. In the Bible, the chief eschatological events take place in a garden: Eden, Gethsemane, or that of the empty tomb where the Lord appeared to Mary Magdalene. Coleridge turns the garden into a wood, olive-trees into oaks, and renders Christabel as a sui generis Saviour in Gethsemane. Both the wood and the night are a symbol of the unconscious and of what escapes the scrutiny of rational understanding – a sort of twilight zone. Besides, if Christ is the Father’s beloved, Christabel is described likewise: “lovely lady, Christabel, | Whom her father loves so well” (ll. 23-24). She is not alone in the wood; she is frightened by the sublime vision of a “damsel bright, | Dressed in a silken robe of white” (ll. 58-59) and calls upon the aid of the Blessed Virgin: “Mary mother, save me now!” (l. 69).

12 All references to Christabel and other poetical works by Coleridge are taken from Mays’ edition (2001).
13 The Virgin Mary is invoked throughout the poem several times (ll. 54, 69, 139). Of course, the Marian cult amongst Anglicans is not as widespread as with Roman
Geraldine is “beautiful exceedingly” (l. 68); she is glittered wildly here and there with gems entangled in her hair. Such glittering apparel recalls the mariner’s “glittering eye” in *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, l. 3. In the Bible, loose hair is a sign of sin and often has an erotic component; the gems entangled in the hair can be interpreted as a reference to lasciviousness (Bach 1999: 507). Thus, the word “entangled” is not a random choice. In the King James Version of the Bible, the stem “entangle” has always a negative connotation; it usually refers to the devil or to sin (Gal. 5:1; 2 Pet. 2:20), or to the Pharisees (Matt. 22:15). If Christabel is a Christ-like figure, Geraldine recalls Lucifer, the Fiend and Tempter. Her radiant beauty fits entirely Lucifer’s etymology: the “shining one”, or “light-bearer”. A new image of brightness occurs at l. 82-85, in the portrayal of the white palfrey and the steeds. It recalls the white horse in Rev. 19:11, 14 – a symbol of Christ’s Second Coming as Lord of lords and King of kings. In the Middle East, conquerors used to ride a white horse for their triumphal entrance after battle (Morris 2002:101-7). Geraldine, the symbol of evil, is chased by five warriors riding white horses – an allegorical clash between the powers of heaven and the forces of evil.

Although initially hesitant, Christabel moves towards Geraldine and stretches forth her hand to help her (ll. 71, 75, 102, 104). At this stage of the poem, Christabel seems endowed with a saving mission. “Stretch forth thy hand” is a recurring formula in the New Testament; it reminds of God’s redeeming love through the healing power of his Beloved Son.¹⁴ Christabel brings the bright dame to her father’s hall. For Cooper, Christabel lugging the suddenly limp Geraldine across the castle threshold is an allegory of sin entering one’s soul (1994: 88-9, 93). One cannot but notice that Christabel performs the act of a bridegroom introducing the bride into their house. The critical debate on this point volves around the representation of Christabel as an innocent character. Woodring reads Christabel’s protectiveness towards Geraldine as an affirmation of her innocence; for Ulmer, such qualification alters any moral interpretation of the poem (1966: 47 and 2007: 338). One ought to consider Christabel’s utterance carefully: “And I beseech your courtesy, | This night, to share your couch with me” (ll. 121-122). Some are inclined to see this as a sexually charged statement and to deny Christabel’s purity. Christabel’s eyes are not yet open

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when she lifts up Geraldine (ll. 131); this event seems a further testimony of her innocence and it confirms the fact that she has not fallen out of grace. Geraldine, due to her weary weight, cannot stand on her feet and often falls or sinks. Such “falls” recall Adam’s transgression in the Garden of Eden. According to Ulmer, “Christabel’s act of stretching forth her hand to Geraldine glances at Milton’s Eve, Coleridge stages a Fall conceived on self-violation, a closed transference of corruption to one aspect of the human personality to another” (2007: 386).

The dynamism of the ladies crossing the castle’s chambers in the dark stops when Christabel sees “the lady’s eye, | and nothing else saw she there” (ll. 160-61). She is completely enchanted by Geraldine’s gaze. Many traditions associate the eye with evil, and the evil eye with the serpent-look. Whether exercised with malicious intention or not, some people have the power to injure others simply by their glance, just as a snake can hypnotise a victim by its gaze (Liggins 1977: 102). Besides, Geraldine’s eyes can see beyond human limits, as Christabel notices: “Why stares she with unsettled eye? | Can she the bodiless dead espy?” (ll. 208-9). Such a rhetorical question finds further confirmation with the side effect the cordial has on Geraldine: “her fair large eyes ’gan glitter bright” (l. 221). Christabel is attracted by both the weirdness and the supernatural powers of the bright damsel who is aware of the fascination she exerts on Christabel. Geraldine’s entrance in the chamber causes “a tongue of light, a fit of flame” (l. 159). The spurt of flame lights up at once both an instrument of enchantment (eye) and one of protection (shield). Liggins reminds that the rushes in the chamber were once a regular form of floor-covering and sometimes were regarded as offering protection against the evil eye (1977: 98). It is worth noting that Geraldine’s eye-look recalls that of William Beckford’s Vathek – whose ferocious glance can make “the wretch on whom it was fixed instantly [fall] backwards and sometimes expire” (§1). The Caliph is an ambiguous, dark figure; he has a supernatural force and a fierce eye no person can behold. McEvoy points out that in Gothic fiction the power of some characters is often found in their gaze (2007: 26). Coleridge read Gothic novels; yet, it has not been proved whether he read Vathek, though it seems likely he did.17

15 As to the evil eye and its origin, see Hocart 1938: 156-57.
16 The description of Geraldine beguiling Christabel recalls Lucifer tempting Eve in Paradise Lost IX.494-503. It is worth noting that there Lucifer is portrayed with “his head | Crested aloft, and carbuncle his eyes” (ll. 500-1).
17 The reference is to Chapter One. See Beckford 1970: 1.
One odd result is that “The moon shines dim in the open air, | And not a moonbeam enters here, | But they without its light can see” (ll. 175-177). This is further proof of Geraldine’s Lucifer-like nature: her own light is necessary to accomplish her mission to bring sin and corruption to those she comes across. But Christabel is seeking another light and tries to trim “The lamp with twofold silver chain which | Is fastened to an angel’s feet” (ll. 182-183). No less than the rest of the narrator’s description, the angel is puzzling. In fact, he can be interpreted either as Lucifer, the fallen angel (Isa. 14:12), who bore the light of the knowledge of good and evil, or as one of the Cherubims that God placed at the east gate of the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve had partaken of the forbidden fruit and were chased from the Garden (Gen. 3: 24). The angelic figure as a heavenly messenger is more likely, since the light he generates by means of the lamp, different from and opposed to Geraldine’s, makes her sink down (ll. 186-186).

At ll. 191-93, Christabel offers Geraldine a drink of wine of virtuous powers that her late mother made of wild flowers. The cordial has a vivifying effect on Geraldine, whose supernatural strength is magnified. Geraldine arises like a phoenix; her faculties to see beyond human limits are now restored and she faces the spirit of Christabel’s late mother – a sort of guardian angel who comes to protect her daughter (Gilbert 1978: 70). Christabel cannot be rescued as Geraldine gains even greater power from the second drink of the cordial and commands the spirit to depart by saying: “Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine! | I have power to bid thee flee” (ll. 205-6) and further on: “Off, woman, off! this hour is mine – | Though thou her guardian spirit be, | Off, woman, off! ’t is given to me” (ll. 211-213). 18 From this point onwards, Christabel’s will-power is paralysed and she is just acted upon by Geraldine’s charms.

Once Christabel’s eyes are open, she realises what has happened but she cannot change her fate in any way. It is noteworthy that the topos of a charm by means of a magic potion is also inverted: the victim offers it instead of drinking of it. Christabel, foreordained to spiritual death, cannot stop looking at Geraldine who, meanwhile, drops her silken robe and inner vest and unfolds herself to her full view. Christabel is also depicted as an ill-fated being in the Conclusion to Part I where she prays with “her face resigned to bliss or blade” (l. 288). This recalls again Christ’s obedience in Gethsemane: “Father, if thou be willing,

18 The repetition of the preposition “off” recalls the formulaic structure of a charm. One cannot but notice the analogy with the prophetic utterance of the first witch in Macbeth 1.3.22: “Shall he dwindle, peak and pine”. All references to Shakespeare’s works are to Wells and Taylor 2005.
remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). By means of the word “resigned”, Coleridge conveys a total lack of willingness and a passive acceptance of her “fate”.

In total submission, Holy Christabel is ready to be offered up like a living sacrifice (l. 228). Geraldine has a mission and she knows her role well: she tells Christabel what to do, lies next to her and takes Christabel in her arms (l. 263). Then Geraldine casts out the spell: “In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell, | Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel! | Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow, | This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow” (ll. 267-270). Once the spell has had the desired effect, and her mission with Christabel has been completed, Geraldine seems free from the burden she felt before and the next morning she “rises lightly from her bed” (l. 363). The fragment of the spell “which is lord of thy utterance” is firmly related to Christabel’s initial invitation to the bright damsel: “I beseech your courtesy, this night, to share your couch with me” (ll. 121-122). For Radley, such “a suspension of fear on Christabel’s part results in an acceptance of the demon lover Geraldine, and the seduction is a fact” (1964: 532, 538). Whether knowingly or not, Christabel works out her own Fall, to which she is doomed, by rescuing Geraldine, bringing her to the castle and asking her to share her bed. The remaining fragment, “Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow, | This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow”, leaves the meaning of “know[est]” open. It might refer to Christabel’s forthcoming understanding of her fallen condition, or to “knowledge” in terms of a physical, carnal union. The line “O Geraldine! One hour was thine” (305) conveys a sense of physical possession. For Spatz, “Christabel dramatises a conflict between Christabel’s two attitudes toward her own sexual being” (1975: 112). Geraldine is the “lovely lady’s prison” (l. 304) – a further reference to carnal sin. Just as Lucifer in disguise of a serpent, Geraldine deceives the victim pretending to be her “mother with her child” (l. 301). One should also relate Geraldine’s behaviour and deeds to Coleridge’s choice to deal with a vampire femme fatale and lesbian eroticism. In Christabel there are some of the clichés that would become a common stock in vampire literature – i.e. the serpent-like glance, the power to hypnotise and make animals uneasy, the faculty to appear in distress, and the spell cast through seduction, rather than physical strength.19

19 Geraldine as both a femme fatale and a Lamia fascinated John Keats who wrote La belle dame sans merci and Lamia, chiefly in terms of “the metaphor of vampire as lover, and love itself as an enervating process” (Twitchell 1981: 95). The figure of the vampire attracted other English Romantics. Lord Byron wrote a fragment
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Christabel has a restless slumber; in the morning she awakens “from out her trance” (l. 312) and feels antithetic sensations. Coleridge describes her in terms of a youthful hermitess.20 Geraldine’s spell had the expected effect on Christabel, as she knows new “joys and woes” (l. 329). Like Eve, her eyes are opened and she understands her own guilt: “Sure I have sinn’d” (l. 381). The poem is, again, somewhat contradictory, as Coleridge gives no lucid explanation of it. In fact, Christabel’s sins are “unknown” (l. 390). Yet, he portrays the sweet lady pleading the intercession of Christ for her transgression (ll. 389-91). At this point, Christabel wholly understands her guilt. In fact, when she sees Geraldine touching Sir Leoline with her charming bosom, she says: “I ween, she had no power to tell | Aught else: so mighty was the spell” (ll. 473-74). This might be the reason why Christabel had called upon the mercy of “He, who on the cross did groan” and “might wash away her sins unknown” (ll. 389-90). Once Geraldine has deceived Christabel, a new victim needs to be found and offered up on the altar of sin: Sir Leoline. The Baron finds out that the bright lady is the daughter of a former friend, Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine. Geraldine seems to have been sent to avenge Sir Leoline’s insult to her father. The Baron admits regret: “I repent me of the day | when I spake words of fierce disdain” (ll. 512-13). Geraldine’s charms instantly bewitch Sir Leoline who embraces her and feels “that bosom old, | That bosom cold” (ll. 457-58) on his chest. Christabel trembles as she realises what is happening and draws “in her breath with a hissing sound” (l. 459). The “hissing sound” anticipates the serpent which comes shortly afterwards. And the “old bosom” stresses Geraldine’s likeness to Lucifer, also called the Old Serpent: “and the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him” (Rev. 12:9).

The Bard’s dream unveils the characters’ religious symbolism. Bracy is a sui generis oracle whose function is to unfold fate and tell the truth to the

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20 For Preston, here Coleridge might refer to the theology of St Teresa of Avila (1964: 138-57). Fulmer thinks that this passage might be a dendritic mythologeme of the sinner punished from on high and cursed to wander in spiritual pain to atone his own sins, as Cain, the Wandering Jew and, most importantly, Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner (1969: 797-815).
In his vision, he saw a dove in danger as “a bright green snake | Coiled around its wings and neck” (ll. 549-50). Sir Leoline misinterprets it completely as he pictures Geraldine as the dove. As May points out, the relationship between the snake and the dove is symbiotic – “Swelling its neck as she swelled hers” (l. 554); it is not predatory, an innocent dove is the helpless victim of a vicious snake’s violation (1997: 713). Sir Leoline recollects what has just occurred. He feels great anger and his heart is laden with cleft and rage (ll. 638-42). Christabel and Christ no longer have common features. On the contrary, if the Father regards Jesus, his Only Begotten, as “my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (2 Pet. 1:17), Sir Leoline has been dishonoured by his only child (l. 643) and his hospitality, “by more than woman’s jealousy” (l. 646), has been brought to such “disgraceful end” (l. 647). The topos of violated hospitality is also present at the end of Part 1 of The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere when the mariner kills the albatross with his crossbow (Modiano 2001: 290, 294).

Coleridge’s choice of the serpent further links the bright damsel to Lucifer and makes her play the role of temptress. In the Bible the symbol of the serpent is ambivalent. It can represent both the devil and Christ. Snakes recall the biblical juxtaposition of priesthood and magic: Moses and Aaron’s rods, by virtue of their sacerdotal authority, turn into serpents and, in the case of Moses’, it eats the snakes made by the enchantments of Pharaoh’s sorcerers. Spatz believes that the original sin was in fact a sexual transgression. He argues that

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21 See note 18. The character-oracle recalls the Weird Sisters foretelling fate to the Thane of Glamis in Macbeth I.3.
22 This association is ambiguous in the Bible. When Christ sends the Twelve Apostles to preach, he tells them: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). These lines also recall Lear’s unfair rejection of his daughter Cordelia in King Lear 1.1.253-56: “[I] have no such daughter, nor shall ever see that face of hers again; therefore be gone without our grace, our love, our benison”.
23 If Lucifer is referred to as the “Serpent”, the Messiah is also associated to such image. At God’s command, Moses made a brass serpent to heal the Israelites who had been bitten by fiery poisonous snakes in the wilderness. The brass serpent was attached to a pole and “raised up that whosoever would look upon it might live” (Num. 21:8-9). Christ referred to the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness as a symbol of himself on the cross (John 3:14-5).
24 Ex. 7:11-12. Moses and Aaron’s rods represent God’s authority, see Ex. 4:1-5; 7:9-12, 17.
the serpent (i.e. Lucifer) is the one who introduced Adam and Eve to sin. Their transgression involved a sexual relation (1975: 113). But from a theological point of view, the “primal sin” is a transgression caused by human pride. Adam and Eve’s understanding of their own nakedness is merely a result of their disobedience. Bracy’s remark “thy sire and I will crush the snake” (l. 571) recalls the curse cast upon the serpent: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Geraldine holds a strong, tempting power over Christabel and Sir Leoline; the former is nearly hypnotised, whilst the latter is mentally hampered. The narrator builds an osmotic transmission of evil features between Geraldine and Christabel. Under the influence of Geraldine’s gaze, “that look askance” (l. 608), Christabel herself appears as a snake by virtue of mimesis (May 1997: 714). The lovely lady completely abandons her condition of holiness and purity; at ll. 602-6, Christabel takes on “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” (Perry 1999: 167). Geraldine’s spell not only brought sorrow and shame, but it also paralysed the victims’ will-power, leaving them in a state of confusion – like a sinful soul laden with the burden of the devil’s grasp and without the faculty to repent and access salvation through the grace of God.

4. Conclusions

Christabel is the result of the most prolific years of Coleridge’s literary production, of his personal growth and maturity, and of his spiritual and religious quest. The poem is ambiguous in many ways. It has been my purpose to show Coleridge’s involvement in both theological and ethical dilemmas. Despite its theological complexity and its literary sources, Christabel is the story of innocence and purity being violated by sin. Geraldine, the deceiver par excellence, twists Christabel’s simplicity and chaste condition, representing herself as mother offering (false) protection and yet as a libidinous figure (Holstein 1976: 119-28). She brings evil and corruption to her victim’s world and introduces her to sexual pleasure (Spatz 1975: 109-13, May, 1997: 708). At the same time, she represents sexual promiscuity or even incest since she lies both with daughter and father. Christabel’s theological essence is found in John 3:19: “and this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil”. Christabel is victim of Geraldine’s deceit. Geraldine embodies Coleridge’s greatest spiritual concern with evil that inexplicably enters one’s life.
The name Christabel has a symbolic significance; Peterfreund splits the anthroponym in two constituents, hence obtaining “Christ-Abel”, two victims who gave up their lives as an expiatory sacrifice to redeem a fallen humanity (1975: 637-41). For Henderson, Christabel is represented like a child – she smiles like an infant. Yet, the result of her action is not simply a felix culpa, rather a true Fall (1990: 885). Cooke reads Christabel’s weakness, simplicity and transgression as a need of expiation for both her own guilt and for the shortcomings of her absent lover (1974: 37 and Kahn 1953: 108). If Geraldine represents Coleridge’s sense of evil (Ulmer 2007: 386), Christabel is Coleridge’s sense of guilt that troubled his soul all through his life. This poem is the extension of the theological concerns and spiritual anxieties that characterise The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere (Gnappi 1995: 24). As the Wedding-Guest in The Rime, the narrator in Christabel mirrors the poet’s search for God’s love and forgiveness. But Coleridge’s characters are deprived of God’s grace since he gives them no chance of repentance or redemption and are left “at the mercy” of “desperatio salutis” since they are not able to find salvation from their point of no return. Coleridge turns to the leitmotif of the spell to put emphasis on the power of words, relying on folklore, orthodox Christianity and his vocation as a poet. The spell stresses the connection between priesthood and sorcery, and the powers of heaven and the forces of darkness, equally embodied by Christabel and Geraldine. Although they stand in antinomy, Geraldine’s “spell” – “Which is lord of thy utterance” (l. 268) – produces Christabel’s Fall and makes her unable to tell the truth about her. On such a Fall, Coleridge lays his theological views according to his self-made gospel – rather “good-spell” – and makes Christabel a mirror of his unsolved issues such as his (Calvinist?) impending sense of guilt which has osmotically passed from his own life to that of his characters.

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